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Building critical citizenship through community theatre?

Case of theatre group *Natya Chetana*

Abstract: Democratic training is often lacking in India. Instead of democratic means people internalise the joint functioning of 'class-race-state' power and the brutality and terror of it; those at the margins are reassured of their own marginality (e.g. Spivak 2008). *Natya Chetana* is an Orissan theatre group performing to both rural and urban audiences about the problems of ordinary people. Based on the belief that people are capable to assess their situation and think for themselves, *Natya Chetana* intends to create awareness by 'disturbing the minds of the audiences'; giving food for thought, not any ready-made solutions or action models. Much of the group's work can be seen as efforts to cultivate critical citizenship. The paper, related to my on-going PhD work (ethnography) on *Natya Chetana's* theatre as social work, discusses *Natya Chetana's* work from the perspectives of citizenship and marginality from the angles suggested by Pandey (2006) and Spivak (2008).

1. Starting points

In this paper I am interested in citizenship at the margins. The paper is grounded on my on-going social work doctoral study with the theatre group *Natya Chetana* (Theatre for Awareness) in Orissa¹. *Natya Chetana* is an Orissan theatre group founded in 1986 in Bhubaneswar by a group of local drama students. Since its foundation the group has done well beyond 50 plays as well as developed into a theatre group with a particular social and political agenda doing **people's theatre**,

¹PhD-project "Theatre as Social Work in Orissa, India: the Theatre for Awareness of *Natya Chetana*" (to be one day defended at the University of Tampere, Finland).

loko natya. The group conceives its theatre in addition to theatre also as social work. The group has drawn inspiration for its theatrical style and process from three main sources: the theatre processes of Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA), participatory approach trainings provided by a Delhi-based NGO Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), and contact with well-known Bengali playwright and director Badal Sircar (born 1925) since early 1990's. As discussed in more detail in chapter three, *Natya Chetana* performs to both rural and urban audiences about the problems that ordinary people face in today's Orissa. Based on the belief that people are capable to assess their situation and think for themselves, *Natya Chetana* intends to create awareness by 'disturbing the minds of the audiences'; giving food for thought, not any ready-made solutions or action models. In my view, much of the group's work can be seen as efforts to cultivate critical citizenship.

My original aim and interest was to study work that is identified as social work both by its doers and the local people in India, but which is nevertheless outside "the modern professional project" (see for instance McDonald 2006) of social work. Moreover, I was convinced that theatre, which is often an integral part of social work and welfare programs in India, contains possibilities to discuss issues and work on levels that are difficult to grasp by other forms of work. *Natya Chetana's* work, once I got to know of it², matched to my fairly unarticulated ideas about theatre as a tool for cultural or political sensibilization or awakening, which could be essential also for social work, at least to social work seeking to be political.

Over the years *Natya Chetana's* theatre work as well as my observations about their and other people's lives in Orissa have led me to one of the core teams of social work, namely marginalization. In my research set up marginalization has multiple dimensions. For instance, from the perspective of academic, professional social work voluntary social work (that also *Natya Chetana* represents), is often counted as not quite social work, while from the perspective of theatre *art* socially committed theatre is easily claimed to lack artistic value. (Both practices are part of the fight for

² I have been in contact with *Natya Chetana* since autumn 2000, when I first time visited the group in Bhubaneswar. The study is ethnography, relying on fieldwork with *Natya Chetana* (main period September 2001-June 2002, plus either my shorter trips to *Natya Chetana* or meeting *Natya Chetana* members in Finland).

recognition and thereby resources; I am not claiming that they would have discouraged *Natya Chetana* in its aspirations, quite the contrary.) Furthermore, in India Orissa is in many aspects far away from the national centres of power, a peripheral state lacking metropolitan cities or universities esteemed in all-India scale. Rather, the state is known as a place of pilgrimage (Puri), poverty and natural calamities. However, because of its minerals and other natural resources the state is not insignificant at the map of global capitalism; both national and global mining companies are present at the state.

In Orissa as everywhere else certain people and communities are marginalized more than others. For *Natya Chetana* “the suffering” and “the oppressed” represent “the people”, about whom, with whom and to whom it attempts to do its theatre. In other words, the people whose plight and occasional joys *Natya Chetana*’s people’s theatre deals with are farmers, lower class and caste people, tribal people, slum dwellers or migrant workers, not forgetting women in these communities. While majority of *Natya Chetana* members (“volunteers”) come from relatively high caste and middle class backgrounds, the group invites local participants to join its theatre processes from the communities whose issues it discusses in its plays. Furthermore, as discussed later, the group has various strategies to localize or authenticate its performances.

When thinking in the following about citizenship at the margins, I have in my mind what I have learned from and at *Natya Chetana* about the lives and struggles of the poorer sectors of people in contemporary Orissa. However, as my study is in general an attempt for a cultural translation or conversation between two at the outset very different social work approaches, in the paper I have not resisted link-seeking remarks outside India either. By the two social work approaches I mean that of *Natya Chetana*’s voluntarist theatre work which is from the doer’s point often condensed as making sacrifices for the sake of art and society, as well as my own home base, academic, professional social work in one of the Nordic welfare states, Finland. Indeed, one of my realizations is that despite the differences in culture, climate and affluence, at the margins of Eastern India or North-Eastern Europe³ for example the

³ I came to these terms after having an opportunity to learn, even if due to the shortness of time rather superficially, some of the experiences of both the indigenous *Saame* people as well as the few social and youth workers in Northern Finland in May 2007 as part of the excursion organised by the summer

problems of the indigenous/ aboriginal people can be named in strikingly similar terms such as land rights, survival of culture versus short term income opportunities, remoteness and arbitrariness of the state. (This naming of course takes place from my perspective, which is not a particularly disadvantaged position in either location. Still, I feel the realization has political significance.)

In this paper I back up heavily on remarks and analysis in recent work by **Gyanendra Pandey (Routine Violence, 2006)** as well as **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Other Asias, 2008)**, both authors connected to the subaltern studies collective. In my view, these texts resonate well with various directions, including social work concerns, both local and global. As in their writings, also from the perspective of social work social work (and citizenship, and marginalization), one of the key terms is state. In the following I will therefore first discuss the state, thereafter *Natya Chetana* and its work, trying finally to look at *Natya Chetana's* work in connection to the issues of citizenship and marginalization as suggested by Pandey and Spivak.

2. “State” as the framework for citizenship, education, and social work

school ‘Social Work from a Global Perspective’ by Stanley Witkin from Vermont, USA, and the University of Lapland. In brief, despite all the welfare state history and talk, citizens get different social services depending on where they live in Finland. In most northern/ north-eastern parts, social and health services are reduced to the minimum, as municipalities providing them are poor after changes in local taxation of companies, decided at the parliament far south in Helsinki. Things are not totally black and white, though. It seems that at least some of most active *Saame* people have today, after centuries of oppression in the form of racism and structural violence finally also something positive in the identity position of indigenous people to cling to and networks to engage with. For few who have been able to align themselves in such a new way, this can be seen even as a sudden relative privilege that their non-indigenous neighbours equally at the margins lack. Whether indigenous or not, at the edge of Europe many live to some extent in a form of subsistence economy in which hunting, fishing and berry picking add to diet or bring little extra income. Many state and welfare facilities have withdrawn to the bigger centres, young people leave for better opportunities, and the elderly and those who remain are connected with the state mainly through their (often minimum) social security benefits, though also basic services in some form are still present. When Northern Lapland may make an extreme case to the extent that the idea of keeping Lapland populated in the first place has been challenged from the Helsinki and Southern Finland -centred political perspective, also the rest of Finland is conceived as either developing or regressive areas.

State and citizenship go hand in hand. State is also the determinant context of both educational and social work structures. Moreover, teaching and social work are forefronts where the state is articulated and explained to people. For example in European borders social workers are among the professionals who deal with border crossers such as refugee seekers or illegal immigrants, enforcing on their part the procedures that allow some in and deny the entry form others to the nation state grounds of Europe. As political collectives states are negotiated and contradictory constructions. Democratic nation states, in contemporary world seen by many as the most legitimate form of state, are not without problems. In the South Asian context for instance Ashis Nandy (2001) has criticised that the European originated idea of a nation state matches neither with the South Asian experiences of history nor with present reality. Nevertheless, with all its deficiencies, nation is *the* modern political community (e.g. Pandey 2006, 154), a process of the political negotiation whose participants “are recognized only through politics”. However, in a country like India (as elsewhere?) “the communities involved in these national political debates are neither seamless nor obviously and easily identified.” Moreover, the negotiations in which “people with very different kinds of commitments and interests have to make concessions” “are almost always between *unequals*.”(Pandey 2006, 173-4.)

The role of the state as the legitimate (or better say legitimized?) user of violence concerns both the issues of citizenship and marginalization. As Pandey (2006, 1-8) writes, “violence is a general and continuous aspect of modern life”. Spectacular acts of brutal aggression are only one aspect of the violence; much of the violence takes place in a more disguised form, in “everyday exercise of power over women and children, politically disadvantaged communities, and the poor”, “the production and reproduction of majorities and minorities”. Moreover, violence occurs “in the construction and naturalization of particular categories of thought, in history and politics.” Commenting in my view more or less the same issue from the angle of human rights, Spivak (2008, 20) claims that “the usually silent victims of pervasive rather than singular and spectacular human rights violations are generally the rural poor.” In sum, we are speaking of structural violence, as manifested in everyday practices. Though Pandey writes in the context of India, from social work perspective his views can be signed also in the welfare state Finland. The long-term poor, whose number has increased and condition severed in spite of recent years of

good economic development, or people at the margins for other reasons, are easily, in the cover of bureaucratic practices, treated in ways that further marginalize or silence them⁴. All in all, those at the margins are disciplined in ways that the better-off need never face.⁵

Pandey (2006, 186) reminds that the colonial state (in India) was “marked by a clear and sharp distinction between subjects and citizens”, the subjects being educated and disciplined to obey law and order and have “increased productive capacity”. Not unlike the colonial state, also present neoliberal regimes conceive their populations as if they would consist of roughly two categories, the productive citizens on one hand and those lacking resources on the other hand. While the productive ones are kind of model citizens running the economy and worth of investing and incentives, those lacking behind with their inadequate education and level of initiative are not accorded worth the privileges of citizens “proper” but there is no escape of them either. As my comparisons between India and Finland hopefully showed, the latter is the position available to the poor and disadvantaged everywhere. To Spivak (2008, 21) the name of the game is “class apartheid”.

The more the lifestyles and shared realities of the model citizens and others grow apart, the greater the danger that also the solidarity and understanding by the better-off in relation to the more disadvantaged crumbles off. (E.g. Raunio 2004). In Spivak’s terms (2008, 8), the “other is not simply a matter of imaginative geography but also discontinuous epistemes”. To simplify a bit, once the better-off class has diverged from the less fortunate others, it often constructs “the state” and “the nation” according to its own interests, disguising them as mainstream and nationalist. In Pandey’s (2006, 18-19, 48) view, in India

“a minority viewpoint and culture (that of a get-rich-quick, consumerist, Brahmanical, ruling class) is being foisted on the rest of

⁴ For instance the mentally ill homeless may be outright abandoned from health services, especially if they have substance abuse problems, the explanation being that their problems are too severe or that there is a lack of matching services for them (e.g. Kärkkäinen 2005). According to law, they nevertheless should have same rights and access to health care as anyone else.

⁵ Noteworthy in these developments is that they have taken place in a country that has entertained a self image of being one of the most egalitarian in the world. The somewhat late-started Finnish welfare state development was not, however, an obviousness to start with, but a result of determinant political work: The well-off did not surrender to the welfare demands of the whole nation that easily.

the country as the viewpoint and culture of the community as a whole”
– “as *the* national culture.” (Pandey 2006, 18, 48.)

Modern nationalist historiography has by and large further reinforced such an idea of Indian national essence “and elevated the nation state (...) to the end of all history”. Those who do not agree can be labelled simply as anti-modern or anti-national⁶. (Pandey 2006, 18, 44.)

Spivak 2008, 39-40) writes that the joint functioning of ‘class-race-state’ power and the brutality and terror of it is internalized at every level of the society, which “makes the subaltern subaltern and keeps the indigenous elite feudal”. In villages, the relatively dominant Hindu culture alike its others such as tribal cultures “*share* a lack of democratic training”. As a result, “votes can be bought and sold”, “and electoral conflict is treated by rural society in general like a competitive sport where violence is legitimate.” For Spivak all this tells about “poverty and class prejudice existing nationally”. In addition to politics, the class apartheid is renewed also through education. What divides the schools of the middle class children and above from the schools for the poor is that in the former the “primary use of a page of language is to understand it”, whereas in the latter the idea of teaching is based on mere spelling and memorizing. That is, while the better-off kids are trained in intellect and self-expression, with the poorer children suffice if they learn to write their names and little more. The lack of greater vision and ambition with the poor kids suggests that they are not expected to need more as if, after all, what they need to learn is obedience. Spivak claims that the feudal authorities see any effort at remedying this situation “as a threat to their own power and authority”. (Ibid. 53.)

Thinking of citizenship and its possibilities at the margins, the challenge is how to reach and understand the experiences of those who are marginalized, oppressed, submissive, ignored: the by now classical question “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1993). As Pandey reviews (2006, 59-60), “subaltern classes and disadvantaged or marginal groups do not leave behind institutional accounts of their endeavours. They appear in the institutional archive only as traces, as fragments, as

⁶ The history of Finland would allow interesting comparisons starting from the construction and building up the idea of Finnishness at the time of Russian rule, and the developments that have taken place since, including the economic recession and bank crisis in early 1990’s. Today the keyword is national competitiveness, making sacrifices for which should, from the perspective of capital, motivate also and especially those at the margins.

echo.” “The narratives that are preserved by the state (...) and other public institutions (...) originate for the most part with the ruling classes, and owe their existence largely to a ruling class’s needs for security and control.” In the Finnish context, the editors of the book *Toinen tieto* (Other Knowledge, 2006) have come to similar terms: “official knowledge” is a fruit from the union of power and knowledge. Produced by authorities as part of the intricate “truth game”, in which the authorities establish and validate their version of the state of affairs as truth, the aim of official knowledge is control over issues and people. Its mode of knowledge production is from the beginning till end defined and agreed upon by the authorities. Such knowledge about the underprivileged tends to be general and cross-sectional rather than detailed, experiential or wondering. (Hänninen, Karjalainen & Lahti 2006, 3-4.) The point is not that official or state sponsored knowledge production would be purpose-oriented or untruthful, but that it should be viewed keeping in mind that such knowledge is produced for the purpose of social control (Karjalainen 2006, 321). Karjalainen (ibid. 319) reminds that poverty, marginalization, as well as the terms under- or disadvantaged are political concepts, and those guarding “the official” view want to tune them so that they match with the official agenda⁷. As long as those at the margins are made and kept invisible and anomalous to the extent that they appear only through fragments, they are literally others. Such others are not expected to have anything to say, or, would they say something, their say to have any impact on anything. (Helne 2002, 118, 115, in Karjalainen 2006, 333.)

When the subaltern appear only as fragments (Pandey 2006), such fragments are important. Strictly speaking, also in the case of the subaltern, no-one has a particular mandate to speak but in his or her own name (Karjalainen 2006, 333) (– a fact that should of course hold also to the more privileged). Karjalainen’s (ibid., 321) suggestion is that situations of vulnerability and marginality should be studied in detail, paying attention to their complexity and multiformity; vulnerability is usually a consequence of various events.⁸ Naturally, such minute research is both laborious

⁷ Therefore (?), in Finland for instance the existence and calibre of the poverty problem that arose in 1990s is under constant dispute. Interestingly, Pandey (2006, 186) marks that in India “terms like *poverty*, *the poor*, and *economic democracy* (or *economic and social justice*) have largely disappeared from the ruling-class discourse”.

⁸ In Finland for instance social workers have plenty of experiential knowledge about the life situations of their customers face, including the power of poverty and structural marginalization. However, they have seldom power and energy to articulate these matters outside their bureaucratic-professional

and possible only with a limited number of cases. Tarja Pösö further reminds that going to the spot and getting close to those one wants to know more of is no shortcut to “knowledge”; trying to learn differently and directly from the very people is not free from expectations or norms, or attempts to resist them in an appropriate manner. Still, for instance the force of silence feels different from near than far. (Pösö 2006, 119-120, 127) Knowledge of the other/ marginalised, or “learning from the below” is anyhow needed. Other’s knowledge is important among other things for the “work of an epistemic undoing” of the self-image of those in power (that they are not, after all, the indispensable end-products of history, righting wrongs...) (Spivak 2006, 23) and thereby creating possibilities for “democratic civility” and uncorrupted responsibility.

After these stage-setting elaborations on state, citizenship and marginality, it is now time to shift *Natya Chetana* and its work, and return back to the above themes in the end of the paper.

3. Natya Chetana’s theatre

Over the course of its more than 20 years of existence *Natya Chetana* has done dozens of topical plays dealing with the problems and tensions that local Orissan people face in their everyday lives. Usually the plays do not offer any solutions to the problems handled in the plays, on the contrary the intention is to “disturb the minds of the audiences”. Therefore, despite its social and political orientation and careful examination of the matters that make the plays, *Natya Chetana’s* theatre is not primarily educative. Rather, it is directed towards awareness rising, illumination of the causes and effects, trends and aspirations behind the problems, and making the audiences to think their own situation and its entanglement with the issues at the stage. *Natya Chetana* tours in towns and countryside performing to all kinds of audiences, for the rural poor as well as for the urban middle class. The aim of the performances is to create awareness of topical issues and to activate people to reflect

practices, and do not therefore often appear as concerned citizens cum professionals in public discussions or at other civic political fronts.

their own position and scopes of action to change their own, as well as other people's lives.

In the course of the years I have known *Natya Chetana*, the size of the group has varied from 3-15 full-time involved individuals, the number of the people reflecting the financial situation of the group. For instance the group's leader-director Subodh Pattnaik is these days supported by his wife Mamata, a physician and a public health consult. *Natya Chetana's* funding has since late 1980s depended mostly on foreign project-based development cooperation support. However, *Natya Chetana's* success to get funding has been random with the consequence that the group has faced several severe financial crises that have forced it to limit its activities. In addition, the group local income consists of ticket sales and training remunerations, as well as selling materials it has produced, such as scripts or puppets. Lately the group has received small scholarships also from Indian sources. While majority of the team members are men, the group has had regularly 1-3 women participants, who also have a visible position and plenty of responsibility. Belonging to the team takes place on voluntary basis and brings no income, but when possible, full timers are given housing in the group's office premises and a small monthly "scholarship" (worth 20 - 30 Euro per month) by which they cover their food and other small costs. In addition to the team of full-timers, the group can be quickly expanded by part-time or temporary volunteers for at the time of making a play or other programs like festivals. Realizing the limits of the paper, in the following my aim is to give an overall picture of the group's work and then discuss selected issues that in my mind are relevant to the themes of citizenship and marginality.

Cyco and Intimate Theatre

Over the years *Natya Chetana's* has developed two theatrical formats of its own, "cyco" and "intimate" theatre. In short, cyco theatre is theatre carried by bicycle tours to rural villages, whereas intimate theatre is the term used of theatre made and performed for urban audiences, sometimes at relatively "intimate" settings such as at rooftops. Though different from each other, the two forms have plenty of aesthetical similarities. *Natya Chetana* wants to do "modern Indian theatre" which is grounded on Indian resources, and has therefore been keen to study and adapt local folk theatre

idioms, musical tunes, and other cultural elements into its own aesthetics. The aim is to “create food for the eyes” and not only for ears. *Natya Chetana's* theatre is physical and symbolic, and many of the plays can be understood without understanding the language. This is important in a state in which more than 60 languages are spoken. The plays are accentuated by live music played by traditional instruments. *Natya Chetana* believes that theatre has to be portable, which means that in cyclo theatre the stagecraft is reduced to minimum, whereas in intimate theatre the group used basic light and sound technology and simple, portable sets.

In cyclo theatre, the original reason for touring by bicycles was lack of money. Though it was not really thought of much, in rural areas cycling generated a positive attitude towards the group. This was realized only when the group was once able to afford a car. Instead of being interested in *Natya Chetana's* performance, the villagers were curious about the car and the group's funding, assuming the group to be a mouthpiece of the rich and their vested interests. This was not helped by the fact that quick as a flash, the local politicians saw the incident as a chance to claim, without any grounds, that their party has invited and paid the group's performance. The experience was enough for *Natya Chetana* to arrive at the conclusion that cycling is conducive for a favorable image. It has also plenty of other justifications: it is cheap, matches to the general ethos of the group, gives an adventurous feeling, is good physical training, ecologically justified, and does not rely on too complicated technology.

In the beginning *Natya Chetana's* rural performances did not meet the expectations of the local people, for they were used to all night shows. Though people appreciated *Natya Chetana's* plays, they considered them to be starters for the actual performance, and were not happy to learn that the whole thing was over. As whole night entertainment was not *Natya Chetana's* intention, the group had to develop a new strategy for performing in the villages. To break the conventional ideas of theatre shows and entertainment, they started to perform at odd hours early in the morning or daytime. The performances were timed to match the rhythms of village life so that the villagers were able to stop and see the play for instance on their way to work. Presented in this way, the plays needed to be relatively short (25-35 minutes) “to suit the patience of the audience”. The strategy was successful: *Natya*

Chetana could feel that the plays caught the attention of the audiences and gave them food for thought. In sum, *Natya Chetana* found a way to enter the villages to perform the kind of plays it considered important but in a way that did not leave the villagers unsatisfied despite their different expectations for theatre. The approach has remained the same till today. Not to cause any expectations, the audience is not informed beforehand. The actors put their costumes on already on the way, and enter the village fully prepared, making the arrival a scene in itself. Once in the village, they call the villagers to see the play by singing, drumming and dancing. (E.g. *Natya Chetana* 2000, 10–11.)

Despite the surprise attack nature of the rural performances, *Natya Chetana* anyhow works always in partnership with local organizations. When having a cyco theatre tour in mind, *Natya Chetana* identifies the area where it wants to do a play, as well as local village level organizations interested to collaborate, if the demand did not come from their side in the first place. The role of the local organizations is important in many ways. They provide volunteers to participate in the play making and host the cycle expedition by organizing places to stay overnight as well as food for the touring troupe. Moreover, at the beginning of each show local hosts usually introduce *Natya Chetana* “as a group of volunteers from a distance who have come to put up some performance relating to the life“ (*Natya Chetana* 2000, 11). After the show the local organizer commits follow up action and facilitates discussions or events the play may initiate. (*Natya Chetana* 2000, 15; 2001, 7.)

Both the issues as well as the aesthetics of each cyco theatre play are grounded on a method that the group calls survey, a name for an expedition to a local village or villages on the area where *Natya Chetana* aims to perform. The survey is usually done by a named survey team that consists of a handful *Natya Chetana* volunteers, not the whole performance team. The team stays in the village for a few days or longer, observing and discussing with the people, but not making any big noise about themselves. The survey is systematic. According to *Natya Chetana*'s book on Cyco Theatre, the survey team wants to learn about economy, politics and social structures on the area, as well as possible problems relating to them; important characters of the area; myths and traditions; folklore; local music; daily life of people; local accent, vocabulary and idioms; habits and customs, use of colors, costumes and ornaments;

symbols and local and typical utility goods (Natya Chetana 2000, 7). In sum, *Natya Chetana* is interested in anything and everything that can be useful in creating a play. The results of the survey are then discussed with local people or members of local organizations to get feedback and comments for the playmaking.

When starting to do a play *Natya Chetana* has often, though not necessarily, a broad thematic interest in mind, that directs the choice of the area and development of the topic, like a concern on impacts of industrial pollution or a desire to discuss the position of women. Simultaneously or after the survey the group goes for a workshop to develop a play on the basis of the matters learned through the survey. The performing team consists of a mixture of local participants and *Natya Chetana* full-timers, sometimes also other interested volunteers and/or amateur artists. Starting for instance by dramatizations on the basis of the survey material, the group then improvises the play at the course of the workshop. The script, the set and the characters are built up collectively. As the emphasis in the theatre making is in the process, outside the earlier described practical and aesthetic framework no-one, including the group's director, knows what the end product will be.

From 1986 till the end of 2005 the group did around 40 plays in cyco theatre form, which makes thousands of kilometres and hundreds of performances. Usually the distance covered and shows performed is between 200 and 300 kilometres and 20-30 performances, but the group has done tours that have extended up to 700 kilometres and 70 shows. No wonder, cyco theatre has proved to be a good brand for *Natya Chetana*'s. Cyco theatre is the theatre form by which the group situates itself, which is central to the group's identity, and which catches the fundamentals of the kind of theatre work *Natya Chetana* flags for. Despite *Natya Chetana*'s other activities and theatre work, cyco theatre as awareness work is also understandable, attractive, and easily motivated for people interested in *Natya Chetana*'s work, including donors and well wishers.

When cyco theatre is *Natya Chetana*'s formula for rural performances, intimate theatre is targeted to middle class urban audiences, the ideology and aesthetic principles behind both forms being largely the same. When compared to cyco theatre plays, intimate theatre plays are longer (1,5-2,5 hours) and built into the proscenium

form. Dramatically, the plays usually explore contemporary problems or tensions familiar to the audience through stories that have “a climbing action”, the tension of the drama growing as the play proceeds. The peak of the crisis in the storyline is also where most of the intimate theatre, like cyco theatre plays end. Intimate theatre plays are rehearsed, depending on *Natya Chetana*’s situation and the consistence of the crew, either in a workshop-setting at a specific camp or at the course of other daily duties in Bhubaneswar. The partakers are not only *Natya Chetana* full timers, but also part-timers and other volunteers. As intimate theatre is made to cover major cities of Orissa, the need is basically for volunteers who can donate their time and effort, not so much for local volunteers from some specific cultural area like in cyco theatre. In the workshop, time and effort is put on creating trust and community spirit within the group. When cyco theatre play scripts are always made as part of the process, in intimate theatre plays *Natya Chetana* has occasionally dramatized certain Oriya novels or used scripts of local authors. Anyway, the texts should be from Orissa, and the language of the plays is always Oriya; *Natya Chetana* is not interested in translations. Mostly, however, the plays are prepared collectively from developing the script, creating the stage, composing the play on the sets, designing properties and costume, and finally evaluation of the whole process after the performance tour is over. When the play is ready, the team tours from town to town by an inexpensive bus or lorry making 15-30 well-announced, prime time performances can be staged open air or indoors. *Natya Chetana*’s local contacts help to organise the show, and advertise it beforehand by posters and sometimes by door-to-door circulation, and usually the audience is expected to buy tickets.

Sometimes *Natya Chetana* uses the same play with both rural and urban audiences, dramatizing it in both forms. Also the theme of the play may then be posed little differently according to the audience, with the aim to weigh up the issue from an angle relevant for the audience. For example the play “Suicide for whom?” dealt with consequences of deforestation for tribal people. In villages, for partly tribal audience, the question posed was for whom are they cutting the trees as so doing they are just destroying their possibilities to keep up their traditional livelihoods, causing problems for themselves as if making a suicide for someone else’s sake. In cities, the same question was posed to make the audience to reflect their own role, how the flow of timber to towns ultimately deprives and even dispossesses the tribal

people.

Authenticity as the test of the performance

According to theatre maker and researcher Baz Kershaw, “to have any hope in changing its audience a performance must somehow connect with that audience’s ideology or ideologies”. In his view, the connection happens through authenticating conventions that facilitate identification with the community. At simplest the authenticating conventions mean that the theatre makers model the social conventions of the community they work with. At the level of a single performance the claim is that the theatrical signs describe the “real” world outside the play. The authenticating conventions have worked successfully when the audience can decode the play’s significance to their lives. However, authenticating alone is not enough. To be truly effective, the performances must “facilitate crisis” in the audience: In addition to being believable, the performances need to create also discomfort, to disturb the ideology of community. Kershaw’s point is that the art is how to do this “in ways that do not cause a riot/ inseparable schism”. (Kershaw 1992, 21-32.)

In *Natya Chetana’s* case, the authenticating element is essential and constructs to great extent the credibility of the group. This credibility has a polymorphous nature. Several aspects in the group’s people’s theatre method, such as the survey and the participation of local volunteers (in particular in cyco theatre processes) verify the authenticity of the plays both for the audience and the group itself. When performing to middle class audiences, the claim is the same: *Natya Chetana’s* is thoroughly familiar with the issues and the aesthetics of “the people” to whom the audience is supposed to identify or to feel sympathy for. In addition, the demand for credibility and authenticity at the stage sets demands for the team members also outside it: the group has to live as it preaches, just like it has to cycle if it wants to be taken seriously.

Though no-one in *Natya Chetana* talks about facilitating crisis per se, in my view the group’s aim to disturb “the psychological status of the viewers” is an attempt towards same direction but in a more moderate form (e.g. *Natya Chetana* 2001, 5). *Natya Chetana* is strict that the primary aim of its performances is neither entertainment nor

passing information or advising solutions. Rather, the audiences should get “mentally disturbed, start talking about it and in best cases take united actions to search solutions by themselves” (Natya Chetana 2004, 7). By abstaining from happy ends the group tries to cause emotional discomfort, perhaps similar to what Finnish director and dramatist Kaisa Korhonen calls vacuum (*alipaine*). The performance is successful when the spectators leave the place troubled but with a personal urge to search solutions.

Though *Natya Chetana*’s strategy to facilitate crisis or discomfort seems relatively moderate and bearable, it may be wise and justified for several reasons. First of all, the group is strictly of the opinion that the intelligence of the audiences should not be underestimated, people can think for themselves. If one really wants to be intimate with the audience, “One is to be careful not to show up “directions”, dictations” or demand” at the audiences when behaving with theatre” (Pattanaik 2003, 12). In other words, socially committed theatre has to practise its persuasion with full respect towards the audience members, leaving them the option of interpretation and thinking⁹. Secondly, the performers have to be alert and sensitive with the possible after-effects of the performance both for themselves and the audience. As a group, the aim is to be able to continue the work; whereas the wish for the audience is that they will get together and find a constructive way to deal with their problems. Raising aggression or violence would threaten both ends. The challenge is real and delicate. *Natya Chetana*’s team of performers has occasionally been threatened or beaten up while touring when a section of spectators has got furious about the handling of the topic in the play. One such incident took place when the group took critical stands towards industrial pollution in its play, and performed it also in area where the main source of employment is an aluminium factory¹⁰.

The attempt of ensuring identification of the community can cause conflicts also at the level of the community, the viewers. In communities of location sub-groups may

⁹ This is in line what Spivak (2008, 4) writes about teaching: “One cannot coerce while one teaches” (...) “Whatever happens, happens in spite of scrupulously intended teaching. That something (...) is the assurance and constraint in view of which one makes the attempt for a collective rearrangement of desires.”

¹⁰ No wonder, *Natya Chetana*’s relationship to some big local factories in Orissa is ambiguous. Though recreational clubs of some factories like to invite *Natya Chetana* to perform at their premises, offering also a good audience for the group, the plays can be severely contradictory to the ethos of the employee.

have conflicting interests, with the consequence that identification of needs and desires of some section of the community can work against efforts to achieve identification with the whole community. As Kershaw states, at root the identification sought between the theatre group and the community is an ideological one, an acknowledged recognition that certain values can be shared by both groupings. (Kershaw 1992, 29-31.) Kershaw further writes that in drama and theatre it is common to nurture idea of community as a process of ideological meaning-making. As a practice, theatre inherently assumes a possibility of collective response. However, though community theatre aims to empower people through encouraging them to regenerate the spirit of their community, the practitioners are “notably silent about what such empowerment might be for in practice, or what kind of community the new inter-relatedness might produce”. (Ibid., 60.) One reason why certain inexactness of the definition of empowerment in relation to community seems to be common to the community-oriented theatre approaches is that after all the audiences remain diverse. While *Natya Chetana* hopes for coherence in community-orientation, it does not claim that coherence readily exists. At the level of the plays, both the protagonists and antagonists are usually presented in such a way that their motivations and actions are intelligible if not always excusable.

Who are the people of *Natya Chetana*'s people's theatre?

Especially in the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century *Natya Chetana* emphasized, at various fronts, the people's theatre quality and motivation of its theatre work. However, despite all the talk about people and people's theatre, it remained for long partly unclear to me who “the people” at the bottom of the rhetoric are. Are they the ones I have seen coming to performances by walking, silent women carrying their children and finding their place on the ground on women's side for the play's time? Or the 10 to 12 year old boys who have already needed to replace their fathers at the stone mines? What about the well paid engineers at the Nalco (National Aluminium Company) recreational club? Does everyone in a rural village belong to the category of “the people”? If not, who does not? One of the answers I got is that the people “are those who are suffering. For any cause, any way, the suffering people.” (Subodh 7.9.2005) Though this definition does not exclude members of any particular class or profession, in *Natya Chetana*'s common talking style “the people”

refers to “ordinary people”, antithesis for whom are for example politicians, industrialists or moneylenders. Though there can be oppressors and oppressed in every community, it is a different thing to die because of starvation than partake a dinner in which the choice of the menu and its design are dictated by someone else. After all, *Natya Chetana*’s theatre is made for “the mass” and not for “the class”. Moreover, as relatively speaking those who suffer tend to be economically, socially and culturally oppressed, the category of people refers “the oppressed”, in South Asian context named often as “the subaltern”.

On the other hand, *Natya Chetana*’s category of the people has also more nuanced qualities. For instance, an anti-people person or an oppressor is considered as someone who is no longer community oriented, but is opportunistic and feels no compassion for the plight of others. In this sense “the people” represents the realm of community, sense of belonging to collective. *Natya Chetana*’s suggestion is that such a community spirit with a living touch to traditional livelihoods and culture can be found from the countryside, if at all. In this sense “the people” refers clearly to the people of rural villages, or on occasions to small tribal communities. Urban life as such is not the focus of *Natya Chetana*’s work. On the contrary, the lifestyle and livelihoods of town dwellers are considered problematic. At worst, urban life is seen prone to cause alienation, loss of identity and suffering. However, while nurturing the idea of communal, traditional life, *Natya Chetana* is not denying present realities. For instance the fact that in lack of other options for survival many a member of a village or a tribal community now struggles as a migrant worker, or that rural or tribal communities are not free from corruption and opportunism, are issues dealt in *Natya Chetana*’s plays.

As the village India is seen as the source community spirit, also those embracing modern life still have their chance: They can find their own inherent villager quality. This search holds also to *Natya Chetana*. Looked from this angle, for instance *Natya Chetana*’s conviction to have its own theatre village, *Natya Gram* (purchased with a bit of luck and the group’s savings in 1991 and developed little by little ever since) that serves mainly as a place for intensive trainings, offers an option of a villager-like lifestyle that could be realised at some point in the future. Moreover, if asked, most of *Natya Chetana* volunteers locate their home in a village even though they might

have lived in Bhubaneswar or other towns or Orissa substantial parts of their lives. Though this can reflect an understanding of life as a *Natya Chetana* volunteer as temporary, also those who are city dwellers by birth know where their village is, referring to a place of ancestral family land and heritage, to which the family still has connections and where it still may have land or other property. On occasions like this, “the village” an identity position and belonging to a certain location. It is an integral part of the story the family has constructed of itself¹¹. Consequently, as almost everybody can name a village of his or her own, almost everybody can have some kind of connection to “the roots” and traditional way of life with its communal responsibilities. The thing is to get aware of this connection, and to enliven it as a valuable cultural resource.

In brief, as discussed already, for *Natya Chetana* “the people” present the roots, the source of indigenous knowledge and talent. Thus, at both the fronts of cyco and intimate theatre, *Natya Chetana*’s work can be seen both as a defence and a celebration of local people and their culture in Orissa. They are also the articulated source and inspiration of *Natya Chetana*’s theatre work. Reciprocally, *Natya Chetana*’s theatre has also something to contribute: By sensitizing, disturbing the minds of the people it can¹² help them to analyse their own lives and to understand their rights. Same token, and not in contradictory with the above, the interpretation the group offers for locality or localities in Orissa, as well as their people, is both populist and leftist. Populist, because who the people are remains sort of open, and leftist, because they are the people who are non-privileged and who suffer. The approach is in unison with *Natya Chetana*’s understanding of India and Indianness. This is what most of India is; majority living lives at the margins, shadowed by the cultured, affluent and powerful. *Natya Chetana* wants to be a mouthpiece for this downtrodden, not so cosmopolitan India, and prove its value and beauty. Demanding legitimacy for its view, *Natya Chetana* participates in the discursive fight over who can represent, and whose experiences are relevant in defining what is Indian. Here

¹¹ In my eyes, this is not a condition unique to Orissa/ ”third world”. For instance in Finland, where large scale urbanization happened late in European scale, in 1960s and 1970s, most of the urban people are still connected to places in countryside where their parents, grandparents or grand grandparents used to live and earn their livelihoods in agricultural work. The connection is kept for instance by having the family house as a summer cottage, or constructing one nearby to inherited or bought land.

¹² *Natya Chetana*’s posture as well as the group’s connection to the ideas of folk and inventing the folklore and the true peasant, as discussed for instance in the case of Bengal by Korom (2006, 31-41), could be discussed further but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Natya Chetana's understanding of the people gets also romantic and cultural nationalist tones.

Finally, as Kershaw (1992, 5) states, “theatre is not independent of its social and political environment. Performance is a cultural construct and a means of cultural production.” Moreover, “All culture serves someone’s interest” (e.g. Tax 1972:15 in Kershaw 1992, 41). Not unlike community theatre makers elsewhere, *Natya Chetana* works to create its own context. In this project it is expansionist and populist, and does not limit itself only to the realm of theatre but is ambitious also at social and political fronts. In a way *Natya Chetana's* work can be seen also as reactionary. Though the group works hard to formulate and realise its own visions, it is also bound to prevailing reality and its dominant discourses. To quote Kershaw once more, “critical and historical discourses are as much a part of the grand ideological struggle of history as the practises they analyse and describe”. In relation India, tradition and “the people”, *Natya Chetana's* posture reflects necessarily the post-colonial situation with all its ambiguities.

Social work reputation as a burden

Despite *Natya Chetana's* sincere efforts to uplift the value of the people and its own creative work at the grassroots, its approach is time to time used as a demerit for instance in Bhubaneswar’s theatre circles. Though *Natya Chetana* volunteers themselves discuss their work mainly within the framework of theatre, the social aspects of the work are equally definitive: *Natya Chetana's* work is guided by social work ideology. The method of carrying the work, the issues discussed and the stands taken mark the work as social work, as does the commitment to the suffering and the oppressed. These commitments as well as their practical realizations in the aesthetics or the spots chosen for having a performance make it easy to label *Natya Chetana's* work as “mere” street theatre. Subodh Pattnaik reflects the issue in his book on Intimate Theatre in following way:

Natya Chetana (NC) has been many a time only interpreted as a ‘social work organization’ because we did not limit ourselves to a proscenium stage. The ‘process of developing’ theatre was very important to us. Again some theatre groups criticised us as ‘a message passing, propagandistic, street theatre group’ as our priority was to address the

village audiences who are our target mass. (...) But NC never dumped messages for propaganda. We were also motivated to do theatre for the 'mass' not for a 'class'. The available scope with the voluntary organizations and the financial supports from human rights groups were the enforcing factors to be a part of the larger social movements for a change in the society. (Pattanaik 2003, From the Director's Pen)

Though the content of the blames targeted to *Natya Chetana* are seldom singled out in detail, the inherent claim is that theatre which can be performed to whoever wherever lacks artistic value. Possibly, the stand can imply that *Natya Chetana's* theatre is too closely connected with people whose lives and art do not really matter, at least not in the sense of being significant and providing meaning in the modern world. Moreover, as a reference to caste system and poverty, the "dirtyness" of street theatre can still today be connected with ideas of the impurity of the street and some of its users. Therefore, the pro-people and social work reputation is not only an advantage, but also a burden to an ambitious theatre group like *Natya Chetana*, even if the burden is carried proudly and determinately. Tight roping between different realms, be it "the people" and the artistic elite, populism and radicalism, incorporation and resistance, or art and social work, is neither easy nor unproblematic.

4. Citizenship at the margins – how far can a community theatre group like *Natya Chetana* get?

Theatre's role in witnessing and representing marginality and oppression

Returning back to the themes of marginality and the subaltern experience far, if not beyond the experiences and episteme of the well-off who utilize the state and official narratives to affirm their posture in the world, what chances *Natya Chetana* or likeminded theatre groups have in reaching and representing the subaltern experience? In *Natya Chetana's* case, though trying decidedly to extend their being and understanding to reach those at margins, including lifestyle choices that further accentuate the effort, the group is, despite its often minimum financial resources, on the other side. It is, after years (decades) of determinant work, a recognized actor in

the local, sometimes even the global, civil society and theatre field (which is not to say that running things in practice would be any easier). Even if *Natya Chetana's* finances are meagre, the group has plenty of symbolic resources to rely on. The issue of understanding could be further discussed from the angle whether social work can, on the whole, get close with the people for or with whom it works, but that is not my choice here. Rather, I prefer to think for a while the specificity of theatre, as done by *Natya Chetana*, in this attempt. With the former topic, suffice to say that though relatively speaking in a better position than the people whose destinies it stages, living a theatre life in contemporary Orissa does not leave one untouched by experiences of marginality, oppression and structural violence. Choosing social work-oriented theatre as one's career does not open every door, rather it closes many, and means choosing a financially scanty and insecure lifestyle and whatever follows from it. But it is a voluntary choice.

Pandey (2006, 62) writes that “neither folksongs nor truncated statements of the kind (...) can give us direct access to the authentic voice and history of the subordinated and marginalised groups.” Like with the stories that construct the nation, the languages of the dominant and the privileged tend to blend in with folk forms and lower-class articulations and transform them. Danger of such a turn over is evident in the kind of theatre work that *Natya Chetana* does, as the groups picks, borrows and retunes local cultural elements in order to make modern Indian theatre. However, I find that to counter the danger of “middle-classing” the culture and experiences of the subordinated, *Natya Chetana's* theatrical approach and in particular the practice of seeking background information and material for the script through “the survey” are of crucial importance. So is the programmatic involvement of new people from the communities/ localities dealt in the plays.

Depending on success in authentication (as discussed earlier with the help of Kershaw), *Natya Chetana* play makers have to be sensitive and curious to the whole cultural fabric into which the central themes of the plays are twined. This has similarities with the ideas that researchers have concerning the possibilities to reach the knowledge of the other or the subaltern (as discussed at the end of chapter two). The aim of the *Natya Chetana* survey team is to hear, to witness, to learn. As the intention is to do theatre, the survey makers have at least a possibility to supply

themselves with notes, sensations, body language and so forth, that need not reach verbal or even fully conscious form. Though all of these do not survive till the final play, the chance is that something does. Such an approach, multi-sensual and widely interested rather than issue-oriented, carries also the possibility to enrich the actual verbal narratives. Namely, according to Pandey's experience (regarding narratives of communal violence) (2006, 27) people's narratives of their suffering tend to assume a set form, filling the assumed expectations and tasks of "authorized statements" in particular when people are made to talk on behalf of their communities. Instead of suffering only, *Natya Chetana* is interested also other aspects of the life of the people it meets. In theatre, also the feedback is immediate. If the authentication fails, so does the play. "The people" do not feel that it is their story, a fact that can be also recognized from the audience behaviour.

The people at the margins need public narratives of their suffering. If such narratives are missing, "the victims (...) find themselves outside history ". (...) (Pandey 2006, 27-29, see also Das 1995). Actually, as for instance many social workers and therapists know, if one is not able to narrate one's suffering, one is easily also without keys to one's inner self. Being able to tell one's story, including its painful parts, and to get it heard and recognized, is one of the most important steps of recovery on the way to more undivided personality. As Das (2005) writes, at collective level, if the community only bears to hear the stories it wanted neither to hear nor to recognize in the first place, such hearing can give an opportunity to learn of the community's very own shared, collective cruelty. At best, acknowledging the wrongs done can make way reconciliation and give an important learning for future. Furthermore, Spivak emphasises the "importance of mourning": those who have suffered should have the opportunity to lament the unlamented. In the context of wrongs done by colonialism and latter-day marginalization, denying the possibility to mourn will all too easily lead to "a troubled and alienating modernity". (Spivak 2008, 145-147.)

I conceive *Natya Chetana's* as well as likeminded theatre groups' plays as attempts to give both voice and form for mourning and narratives of suffering. Done at the theatre stage, these are stories that help those who can recognize themselves or their experiences from the story both see and think themselves from a distance. Among

other things, this is an opportunity to realise, that their unique experiences have parallels, that there are others who have suffered like them. On the other hand, those who act on the stage, and who have been through the trial and error to give the stories an authentic form, are indeed practicing self-expression but, if the play and the process behind it have gone as they should, not without some form of personal connection to the topic and the people in the audience. In my mind, all these elements carry political possibilities. Spivak (2008, 3), commenting the role of education and the ethico-political tasks of humanities, names the issue as engaging the imagination of the student to the rearrangement of desires.

Why to make theatre for the middle classes?

The question that has kept troubling me is why a people's theatre group should do and target theatre for relatively well-off middle class audiences, who form only a part of the population in towns. Same token, it has to be noted that despite targeting intimate theatre plays consciously to middle class audience, many of *Natya Chetana's* intimate theatre plays, in particular when performed open-air, do collect audiences from diverse backgrounds. When the show is put up in the middle of a town square, as it especially in smaller towns lacking a theatre auditorium often is, those who cannot afford tickets can follow the play standing at the sides of the ticketed seats area.

Natya Chetana's director's answer to my inquiries on what kind of awareness *Natya Chetana* thinks to bring to middle class audiences is that the middle class people should become aware of

“their responsibility in the part of exploitation, in the part of suffering.” (...)
“We are picking up stories, picking up cases or improvised stories which is relevant to the middle class people, to find themselves in a channel of exploitation. Becoming the victims of some processes which is causing a lot to other people down to them. And we believe that, many times, the revolutionary spirit is in the middle class.” (Subodh 7.9.2005)

In Subodh Pattnaik's view, the relative benefit that the middle class people have is that in spite of being less engaged in bare survival, “they are exposed to the up, exposed to the down”, and have therefore a wider view to the exploitation that takes

place throughout the society. The aim of intimate theatre is to catalyse self-reflection among the middle class audiences, so that they could recognise and admit their own part in the chains of suffering and exploitation, maybe also to question their “received truths”¹³. In this sense, one aim of the plays is to encourage the middle class spectators towards being more jointly and severally liable. Moreover, bothering middle class minds is important for the reason that because of their position, they have the capacity to dream different dreams than for instance slum dwellers. One of the favourite examples of Subodh is that if there is a rickshaw driver, who lives in a slum and whose father was also a rickshaw driver, quite likely he will remain as one and use his extra income to have some fun. If a middle class rickshaw *wallah* manages well, in all likelihood he will do his best to sift from a rickshaw to a minibus, and so forth.

Also my understanding is that one’s background can limit the vision of possible options, perhaps to either direction. *Natya Chetana*’s interest is to encourage middle class spectators to dream about fairer play and better world for all, as well as to work for realising their dreams. Spivak (2008, 26), however, warns about the notion of “responsibility as the “duty of the fitter self” toward less fortunate others”. She fears that such an identification as the one who can right wrongs results in nothing but upper class counsellors of self-help “with great supervisory benevolence”, unaware of the discontinuity between them and the objects of their supervision. Instead, Spivak puts her hopes on the prospects that gaining insights into the life of the Other can give. If only one is able to “read” texts of Others (I believe performances do as well) suspending one’s convictions of superiority (... as indispensable, as the one who can right wrongs), one is already on the way of an epistemic undoing. (Ibid. 23.) In my view, this is also one of the possible routes to learn responsibility that is not self-admiring but fragile and feeling; knowing that do-gooders are not immune to self-delusion. All this suggests that simple as it may sound, for a better-off listener or conveyor of a subaltern story allowing oneself to be moved and changed by a the story is far from a matter of course. Elevating exceptional subalterns to lead South-

¹³ By received truths I mean locally and culturally bound ways of knowing which to me can contain for instance caste and class. I have learned the term from Diane Mary Hosking who talks also about “received view of science” in a similar manner. I was able to enjoy her teaching at a doctoral course “The Social Construction of Inquiry- The making of Organization Studies” organised by Kataja doctoral school in Ilkko, Kangasala, Finland 16-18 June 2003.

based global movements is not an adequate solution either, as such figures “are no longer representative of the subaltern stratum in general”; “we must be on guard against both positive and negative subalternist essentialism”. (Spivak 2008, 33.) Nevertheless, mediators willing to connect the life worlds of the disenfranchised populations and the better-off with the aim of generating more responsible and communicative politics are admittedly needed.

Finally, as *Natya Chetana* is part of the social and political environment, I consider the middle class audiences to be important to *Natya Chetana* also for other reasons. Being a theatre group, *Natya Chetana* lives not alone from commitment, but longs for recognition and understanding for its work, notwithstanding that ‘name and fame’ would not be the number one priority. Artistic recognition matters a lot and has been at times difficult to achieve. Though “the people” and their feedback are the main criteria to estimate the group’s success or failure, in the long run *Natya Chetana* would like to have its say on what kind of theatre is done and appreciated in Orissan artistic, middle and upper class theatre circles, and to be appreciated for the work it has done. Among other things, this is important for *Natya Chetana*’s programmatic people’s theatre agenda. As a missionary of people’s theatre and the talent as well as the aesthetics of “the people” of Orissa, *Natya Chetana* would like locally influential middle classes to approve to its stand. Perhaps paradoxically for a people’s theatre group, but telling of the complexity of postcolonial situations, an important step towards local middle class appreciation has been the tours and trips *Natya Chetana* has done abroad, in particular to Europe. In addition, *Natya Chetana* has been active in initiating state-level discussion concerning theatre and its role and tasks in contemporary Orissa, and been successful too. Among other things, its concept of people’s theatre, *loko natya*, is widely known among Orissan theatre circles, and strongly attached to *Natya Chetana*’s work.

Imaginative regionalism instead of mainstreams?

Returning once more to Spivak (2008) and Pandey (2006) to get insights to think about citizenship at the margins, both have their suggestions for the kind of steps to be taken in the attempt to let the people at the margins matter and influence on the

processes that define their lives. In Spivak's vision the possible strategy is a combination of critical regionalism and nurturing the subaltern (children's) capacity to imagine. Pandey's message is that all communities should be recognized as they are, minorities, after which there is no place for a natural mainstream (or natural nation).

So far, despite the (universally) common centrality of images of the peasants as embodiment of "nation" and "tradition" at the construction processes of nationhood, the "rural", is often brushed aside from contemporary nation-think (e.g. Spivak 2008). In Spivak's observation, however, in contemporary world "the rural is a direct front of the global in virtual terms", the place of contest for games such biopiracy, genetic engineering, seed-patenting, or violent industrialization. What used to be trees and fields is now the way to data. The suggestion for critical, persistent regionalism rises from this perspective. (Ibid. 169-173.) In addition to recognizing and emphasizing the importance of the rural and regional, also the rural poor must be part of the agenda unless we want them to remain for ever as the objects of our benevolence. Unlike the typical social and health care oriented approaches of poverty and disease eradication as the way to change, Spivak signs, like many postcolonial thinkers before her, the importance to change the minds of "the now poor and diseased". Such a change hardly happens overnight. If one wants to participate in this kind of process of mutual learning as a facilitator or educator, his or her task is to learn from the below. Among other things that means learning local language and giving up one's convictions of superiority. Changing of minds requires capacity to imagine, and if that no longer exists, training and reviving it. Furthermore, and these are no concerns of critical regionalists or the rural poor only, we need to nurture and cultivate the "habit of democratic civility". However, activating an ethical imperative may require "distancing from the narratives of progress" to which also colonialism and capitalism belong to. Finally, teaching all these habits is different from indoctrination of people into nationalism, identitarianism and resistance-talk. (Ibid. 42-44).¹⁴

¹⁴ As I obviously think that there are people at the margins everywhere, reading Spivak and Pandey in Finland, despite their main focus on South Asia, has felt relevant also for thinking marginality in the Finnish context. From social work perspective the (common) idea of the well-off as the mainstream is easy to challenge but different to get through. The elderly poor, the mentally ill, the ones with severe problems with alcohol make much of the nation. On the other hand, those who have made a conscious choice to consume little and earn less are seen strange.

Thinking of *Natya Chetana* and Orissa in light of Spivak's and Pandey's messages, the group's determination to keep up the approach of people's theatre and do theatre with and for rural people, in rural villages, is significant. It is also possible to claim that in the case of urban audiences and intimate theatre, the group participates in the process of negotiating democratic civility. *Natya Chetana's* aesthetic choices and willingness to cherish traditional performance idioms (and encourage their practitioners, though it has not been a topic of this paper) are hard-headed political choices. So is the decision to stick to Oriya language¹⁵. However, Spivak's caution about identarianism and nationalism, as well as the temptation to instil pride in the form of pseudo-historical narratives (Spivak 2008, 53) about the magnificence of the area/ community are, though not exactly matching with *Natya Chetana's* at times populist rhetoric, not very far from it either. By its tone *Natya Chetana* is openly patriotic, at the side of the broadly defined "people". As much as *Natya Chetana* is an example of creative critical thinking and representation, the group's eagerness to highlight the beauty of local culture and its rural up-keepers may occasionally result in a fairly uncritical and simplified, yet messy construction of ideas attached to India and Indianness which can also turn against the group's intentions. *Natya Chetana* looks at India and Indians from its own location and through its own lenses, and uses its understanding of India and Indianness as part of its political and practical rhetoric. On the other hand, the group's commitment to people's theatre *Natya Chetana's* contains several elements that mark a clear point of departure from "traditional" "Indian" ingredients. Such elements are for instance the participatory process of building up the plays or the tendency not to give happy endings. In *Natya Chetana's* view, these borrowings are, however, not problematic, as they help to highlight the standpoints of "the people" the plays are made for. All in all, it is obvious that *Natya Chetana* is an active participant in the attempt to cultivate critical citizenship, encouraging its audiences to dream with imagination and engage themselves in civic discussion.

¹⁵ Despite the state's population of close to 40 million people, I am at times wondering the future of the language. On the basis of my limited exposure to local lives, it seems that from lower middle class "upwards" everyone who can put their children into English medium schools and train them to think, argue and write in English. Though we are talking about millions here, I see it likely that, if the present trend continues, in the longer run the only ones who talk and write in Oriya, are the poorer people who cannot afford other kind of learning.

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