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Jeetrai Hansda's 'Fevicol' talks of tribals and displacement

Theatre | Hullabaloo in the hinterland

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[Pallavi Singh](#)

Fringe groups from small towns are revving up the theatre scene with themes that have mass appeal

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In the summer of 2005, the quiet village of Manakody in Kerala's Thrissur district woke up to the sound of drums and dance. A group of six people, including Chilean musician [Claudio Clavija](#) and fledgling theatre director [Martin John Chalissery](#), who is from the same district, had come visiting the village, seeking the help of paddy workers in staging plays. "It was new to them. The fact that someone would stage a play next to them and ask them to participate in the process of staging it," says Chalissery, popularly known as Martin.

The villagers collected donations in coins and cleared their fields, fresh from the harvest, to erect a stage. Soon, the plays, mostly in Malayalam, were being staged more frequently, with themes centred on local issues that affect the farmers directly—the labour of harvest, the precariousness of the monsoon, and the inequalities in society.

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Satyabrata Rout. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

Close

That changed with the response his experimental plays received in Manakody. Martin moved back from Chile, and to the village, in 2008.

One of Martin's plays, *After the Silence*, which talks about the chaos of life and the human urge to escape from it, travelled to Delhi in March as a nominee for the best play at the Mahindra Excellence for Theatre Awards (META), which has been awarding theatre groups for excellence since 2006.

But today he is not the only one taking theatre to its rustic roots.

Other groups from small towns are also revving up the theatre scene with productions that not only touch upon local socio-political issues but also employ the traditional art forms of their regions to revive folk traditions.

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Developing social life and provoking people to think about relevant issues is also a function of art.
- Martin John Chalissery, theatre director

Martin John Chalissery, theatre director

Many such groups are now making their way to Delhi to stage plays, says Dhingra. It can be a long haul, with production units travelling with their props in buses and trains to reach airports to board flights to the Capital. The NT Theatre from Manipur, for example, brought along bamboo poles from Imphal to Delhi for the palanquin they would use in their play.

META shortlisted 10 theatre groups for its awards in 2013—most of them productions from small towns. “The very fact that some of these plays won over many glamorous theatre productions from big cities shows the impact that grass-roots theatre can have. These plays talked about real issues that have a connect with the masses,” says Dhingra.

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Eklavya Uvach

The play, Rout explains, is a myth redefined by time—a retelling of the Mahabharat where lower-caste Eklavya, a disciple of master-archer Dronacharya, refuses to sacrifice his thumb as dakshina (fee) to benefit the upper-caste Brahmin Arjuna, the favoured disciple, a theme that received a thundering response not only in the caste-divided regions of Kolar but also in Delhi and Bhopal, where the play was staged in January. “In the play, Eklavya never thinks of himself as Arjun the Pandav prince’s competitor; rather, he insists on acquiring knowledge irrespective of his birth, caste and religion,” explains Rout.

Adima Rangtanda, the theatre group behind the production, has its origins in the Dalit movement in Karnataka during the late 1980s and early 1990s led by noted Kannada lyricist and playwright K. Ramaiah.

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For years, Ramaiah and a few others saved a rupee a day for the establishment of Adima Rangatanda, envisioned as a cultural response to address the roots of social exclusion in India. “Adima has since been active in developing theatre practices through understanding oral tradition and narratives, and experimenting in pedagogy with numerous tribal communities,” says Rout, a product of the NSD and a native of Jajpur village in Orissa’s Cuttack district, where his grandfather worked as an artiste of the indigenous jatra form, a folk tradition of storytelling. He joined the group in 2010; he was teaching scenography at the University of Hyderabad at the time.

“Working in Delhi helped me realize that the urban landscape is false, superficial. People have no time for true social commitment and there is an excessive emphasis on the craft, which sucks truth out from theatre,” says Rout. Adima Rangatanda is now raising money to revive the arts and crafts of villages in Kolar and support the education of tribal children.

These groups are not only changing the artistic landscape, but also the lives of the people involved in the plays. Martin’s SCCP functions as a space for farm labourers

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In Jeetrai Hansda's Maida's Artist Association of Tribal (Maat) in Bagbera, a village in Jharkhand, the performers are all children of colliery workers, rice-beer sellers and farm labourers. Most of them work as shepherds during the day and do theatre after sunset.

Hansda, himself a Santhal tribal, grew up in a time when industrialization was evident all around him. At the NSD, in his mid-30s, he would read newspaper reports on plays in languages such as Oriya, Bengali and Hindi. He felt the tribal plays from his roots remained invisible, unsung. "Tribals have a lot to teach. They don't kill girls, they respect nature, they don't go animal hunting, they don't rape women," says Hansda. In 2007, he went back to his village, in the tribal region of Kalhan in Jharkhand, and founded Maat, named after the Jharkhandi dramatist Maida Hansda.

Fevicol, the most celebrated play written and directed by Jeetrai Hansda, talks about the issues of displacement, identity and migration faced by a family in eastern India—a recurring conflict in tribal-dominated Jharkhand. The technique and design of the play employs a narrative in the Singrai tradition—a sensual folk dance especially popular among the Santhal tribe in Kalhan, accompanied by Brechtian music, joyous songs set to Adivasi instruments with lyrics that talk about the deception and the bizarre and unjust system heaped upon the Tribals.

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Imphal's NT Theatre, formed in memory of local theatre director Ninthounja Tombi in 1998, produces plays written by local playwrights focusing on the state of Manipur today—the conflict over the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (Afspa) and the agitation led by its popular activist Irom Sharmila. NT's most popular play *The Priestess*, written by Budha Chingtham, shows the protagonist suffering at the hands of "invisible powers", raped and forced to drink liquor. "The play thrives on indigenous techniques of martial arts and Maibi dance to weave its narrative," says Ningthounja Ronika, managing director of NT.

The use of traditional art forms is the strength of such plays, says Rout. In contrast with the glamorous, form-oriented European influences in many Indian plays, drama from the hinterland thrives less on the claptrap of special effects and technology and more on folk traditions to bring to the stage the realities of Indian life.

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