

Commentary

JOURNEY TO THE MARKET PLACE: CONTEMPORARY NEPALI THEATER IN A CROSSROAD

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Success Stories

The resources required to produce theatrical performances in Kathmandu were in direct control of the government during the Panchayat regime (1960–1990). Independent theater artists had had hard times producing their works on a regular basis during the period and also in the times after the 1990 political change, the restoration of democracy. It was in this context that theater artists took the coming of the Arohan Gurukul, a theater center established by a group of independent theater artists in 2003, as an important event in the history of contemporary theater in Nepal. Located at Old Baneshwar and run by theater director Sunil Pokharel, in no time the Arohan Gurukul became a common platform for theater artists of both professional and amateur stature. In a few years the Gurukul managed to construct two theater halls: Sama and Rimal named after Bal Krishna Sama (1903–1981) and Gopal Prasad Rimal (1918–1973), the first generation modern Nepali playwrights. On top of that, it constructed another theater hall in 2010 at Biratnagar named after Sushila Koirala (1924–2007), the artist and wife of Nepal’s first democratically elected prime minister and leader Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala (1914–1982). The Gurukul then had dozens of talented artists working for it. It ran regular performances and publications, and also held theater festivals of national and international order. The Kathmandu International Theatre Festival held every two years from 2008 to 2012 was very instrumental in connecting Kathmandu with the theater of the world outside. The Gurukul also published books and journals, and organized seminars on theater. In 2006, I wrote a short book *Nepālmā Raṅgamanc: Srot, Sādhan ra Srjanā* (Theater in Nepal: Resources, Medium and Creativity) arguing: “Access to resources required for producing plays

has become easier for theater artists now” (Rijal 2063 v.s.: 85).¹ Nepali media provided enough space for news and the reviews of the performances held in this center. The Gurukul became a very significant public sphere at a time when Nepal was going through political turbulence.

During this period the Arohan Gurukul worked with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and bilateral donor agencies such as MS Nepal and the Norwegian Embassy, and offices of the Government of Nepal such as the Election Commission. It remained busy training theater groups based in Kathmandu and across the country on Kachahari, the Nepali version of Forum Theatre developed by Augusto Boal. Developed by Sunil Pokharel of the Arohan Gurukul, Kachahari plays became a favorite medium to raise awareness about human rights across the country among stakeholders: donors, theater creators, the public, and government authorities. Collaborations with donors made the Gurukul one of the busiest art centers in Nepal. Artists from the Gurukul toured around the country staging social message oriented developmental plays. This brought income to the Gurukul and also to the artists. In the meantime, the Gurukul kept on staging modern plays for its city-based audiences. This also brought it income on a small scale.

The 2065/66 v.s. (2008/09) annual fiscal report states that the Gurukul had earned Rs. 19,94,503 through selling tickets for various performances held during that year. Importantly, the same report further states that to reduce the Gurukul’s dependency on donors, it had set a target of earning Rs. 60,00,000 through selling tickets for the next fiscal year 2067/68 v.s. (Bhatta 2067 v.s.: 83). Though reducing dependency on donors through holding or increasing regular performances was a correct realization, because of its financial burdens the Gurukul stopped functioning by early 2012. This fall of Gurukul stunned theater audience and artists alike. Kathmandu audiences did not see any fresh plays for several months. The Gurukul tried to woo concerned government authorities to provide it a piece of land on a lease basis somewhere near the city center. Sunil Pokharel reported on several occasions that the ministerial cabinet was about to make a decision or pass a bill. But neither he nor his center has had any such luck to date.

Interestingly, five different theater centers sprang up in just the two years following the fall of Arohan Gurukul. Mandala at Anamnagar, Sarwanam at Kalikasthan, Shilpee at Battisputali, Theatre Village at Lazimpat and

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the original Nepali are my own.

Suskera at Kathmandu Mall have been operating their activities on a regular basis. Since artists who had worked in the Gurukul have found association with these active theater centers now, one way or the other, this happening in the Nepal theater world has been taken as change and continuation of the same energy that had created the Gurukul. These theater centers remain busy, thereby increasing the number of artists, directors, and performances. Moreover they have offices, staff, and programs to run. They have budgets to operate their plans. These centers are found bringing seniors and juniors, professionals and amateur artists together. This time too free media has been disseminating news, reviews, clips, and profiles of artists associated with these theater centers. The amounts of money that individual theater groups have invested to run their theater halls and other activities has become the news for the first time in the history of modern theater in Nepal. Figures for income from individual performances too have become news. Never before had media, as far as my research tells me, bothered to report the income of individual theater performance in the past. News and reports like these get special attention, especially at a time when many well-known theater artists are working for cinema and are already celebrities in the mini-world of movies in Nepal.

Journalist and film critic, Dabhu Kshetri's article 'Aba Āphnai Theater' (Theater of My Own) in *Rājdhānī* captures an impressive picture of the financial activities of theater groups and also the coming of new theater halls in Kathmandu city (Kshetri 2070 v.s.). This was the period when Mandala Theatre Group's Mandala Hall at Anamnagar; Sarwanam Theatre Group's Sarwanam Hall at Kalikasthan; Theatre Village's Satyamohan Joshi Hall at Lazimpat and Shilpee Theatre Group's Gothale Natakghar at Battisputali had just started operating. Similarly, journalist Sushil Paudel's report 'Kamāuna Thāle Nāṭakle' (Plays are Earning Money Now) in *Kāntipur* highlights the news that plays are earning in the millions now (Paudel 2071 v.s.). This was the period when 'Raśoman,' a Nepali version of a Japanese play of the same title, directed by Sunil Pokharel as a joint venture of the Arohan and the Mandala Theatre, was being performed at Mandala Hall. The article reports that the performance had earned half a million rupees. Similarly, the performance of 'Koṭ Mārśal,' a Nepali translation of a Hindi play of the same title, directed by Anup Baral for Actors' Studio and performed at Theatre Village's Satyamohan Joshi Hall, is reported to have earned Rs. 1.5 million. Journalist Madhu Shahi reports in *Kāntipur* about the coming of

Suskera Theatre Group's hall in Kathmandu Mall in Sundhara. Suskera is reported to have spent two million rupees in constructing its modest-sized Theatre Mall and this is reported to have introduced theater into the mall culture (Shahi 2071 v.s.).

But we may rightly ask some questions: Since the fall of the Arohan Gurukul in early 2012, what factors were responsible for bringing changes in the modus operandi of theater artists in Kathmandu? Are their methodologies of survival and struggle guided by a thought that they shall not face the same karma suffered by Gurukul? Have they really turned Nepal's modern theater culture in a new direction? I explore these very questions here and conclude that Kathmandu-based theater artists should try to define their professionalism on social and scientific grounds. They should have deep understandings of the demography of Kathmandu city and conduct research to develop strategies so that they can carve out a safe route to an economically independent profession. Though it focuses mainly on the economic activities of theater groups, this article also points out the need for theater artists to think of intervening at the governmental policy level, and also promote a practice of working with professionals of various fields to create and expand the market for the medium of production they are committed to work with.

This article has three parts. The first part traces the economic history of modern theater in the past. Direct governmental control over theater resources did not create conducive conditions for theater professionals to work freely from 1960 to 1990. Instead of concentrating on cultivating a consumer base for theater productions, the theater under government control had to please the polity. The second part mainly focuses on the historicity of the nexus between modern theater groups and I/NGOs starting from Sarwanam to Shilpee. The remaining part surveys the economic programs and burdens of five theater centers and concludes that it is high time theater professionals in Kathmandu set out to really study the demography of the city they belong to.

Rulers and Artists

Kathmandu-based theater artists have survived several socioeconomic and political obstacles. To understand how hard their struggles and burdens are we should realize that the obstacles they have been facing are rooted in the country's sociopolitical history. Kings, autocrats, their cronies, and art and cultural policy makers of this country of contemporary times indirectly have become parts of the medium of expression and production that these theater

artists have been practicing for several decades now. Nepal's failed art and cultural policies too become recurring references in narratives of the history of struggles of modern theater artists in recent times.

The Rana oligarchy (1846–1951) did not favor public gathering especially at night. The public's freedom of movement was curtailed due to the nightly curfew during the Rana regime. This form of controlling people's movement during the evenings hit theater, a metaphor of the public sphere, directly. Though each major Rana palace in the Valley had its theater hall and would hire artists for performances, theater was simply seen as a medium of entertainment for the ruling class Rana families. Theater was denied any place in the entertainment market or nightlife culture. Though there were several theater talents who would stage popular plays on different cultural occasions for the public, they too expected to be invited to perform in the Rana palaces so that they would get paid. It was only after the fall of the Rana oligarchy in 1951 that independent theater artists faced the pressure of creating a market for their profession. In this endeavor, many went bankrupt and became almost "outcaste" as Prachanda Malla, a senior theater director, has said repeatedly (Malla 2066 v.s.: 153; Rijal 2070 v.s.). Malla describes several theater artists who had to go through nerve wracking struggles in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of them had to live economically difficult lives. From 1951 to 1960 Nepal experienced democracy for the first time in its history. Several theater groups started to perform plays at various places in the capital city Kathmandu. Subhadra Adhikari (2069 v.s.: 44), a well-known actress and someone who had started to work for Rashtriya Nachghar established in 1961, recalls that apart from several already popular theaters and cultural groups active in Kathmandu, over half-a-dozen newly formed theater groups started to dominate the scene during the 1950s. The government for the first time started to allocate spaces for regular performances for the public. But with the displacement of democracy by the party-less Panchayat regime in 1960, modern theater groups had to survive in a politically undemocratic polity. Renowned artists found themselves working for the government-run theater and art centers on salary basis.

Resources Misused

Several paradoxes are associated with the modern theater that emerged between 1960 and 1990, the period of party-less Panchayat rule. Satyamohan Joshi in his public speeches and interviews often narrates an incident

associated with his play ‘Pharkera Herdā.’ Directed by Prachanda Malla, he reiterates that the play ran houseful in the then Royal Nepal Academy Hall and earned a significant amount of money, estimated at around two-hundred thousand rupees in the early 1970s. This hard-earned money went to buy a Korean car for the Vice-Chancellor (Malla 2071 v.s.). With pride Joshi recalls that his play could achieve that goal. Similarly, Ganesh Rasik’s play ‘Ke Sakkalī, Ke Nakkalī’ is often applauded for earning a significant amount of money that was used to buy a car for the General Manager of the then Rashtriya Nachghar, recounts Hari Prasad Rimal, the director of the play (R. Ghimire 2066 v.s.: 48). Though both the playwrights and the directors are proud of their accomplishments, seen from the perspective of socio-economic problems faced by theater artists in our times, using money earned by artists to buy cars for bureaucrats was unrealistic and non-productive and stands as a sad episode in the history of theater from this period. On top of that, most performances in Nachghar and the Nepal Academy were made to mark the birthday ceremonies of various royals. A priority was given to please polity. Mediocrity ran rampant as one of the senior-most artists, Subhadra Adhikari, had to work for Nachghar on a contract basis for her entire career. Most of her colleagues (who were personally close to influential directors) got permanent jobs and retired with pensions whereas she was not given that facility. She regards the day she received her retirement letter as a “dark day” in her life (Adhikari 2069 v.s.: 96). Hari Prasad Rimal, the most senior theater artist of the country, who served Nachghar for a longer time, confesses that many times he had to stage very poor plays under pressure from senior officials (Y. Ghimire 2066 v.s.: 147).

Since theater productions centers, artists, and other forms of resources started to function under the direct control of party-less polity, theater artists and critics faced a suffocating environment that did not favor the freedom-oriented spirit of modern theater (Rijal 2007). The Academy and the Nachghar did both popular plays and plays imbued with national sentiments as well as literary plays whose focus was to modernize Nepali art, mind, and aesthetics. But by the time the Panchayat regime came to an end in 1990, these government run art centers had nothing to hand over to the new era and artists with new political associations and aspirations. In the post-1990 political context both the Academy and the Nachghar have remained over-politicized art and cultural forums. They have remained nonproductive. In 2010 the government formed Nepal Academy of Music and Theatre. To

date this new Academy has no theater hall and has so far published only two issues of a theater journal entitled *Raṅga Rāga* along with holding discussion programs and organizing regional theater festivals of modest order.

In a sense, theater centers established during the party-less Panchayat regime shared several things with the regime. It emerged, grew, and declined along with the very regime. Political scientists and policy makers believe that this was the period when the national economy along with art and cultural activities were centralized. Modern theater too faced a similar predicament that most of the state-controlled organizations, from factories to cultural organizations, have faced in the post-1990 social and political context.

Here Come the Donors

Led by Ashesh Malla, the young theater director and playwright, Sarwanam theater group started to stage plays at a time when the Academy and the Nachghar had a monopoly over the resources required to produce theater in the 1970s and 1980s. These aspiring theater artists found it difficult to gain access to resources controlled by the government. Though the Academy provided short courses on acting and other forms of stagecraft and also organized national theater festivals, it did not help theater carve out its market sphere. Uncertainty related to theater profession loomed large. No artists except those associated with the Academy and Nachghar felt economically safe. It was in this psychosocial context that artists associated with Sarwanam and other theater groups found I/NGOs as friendly partners to work with. These partners helped theater artists generate money and become more resourceful. Malla recalls how his group started to work with donors in the following manner:

In 2038 v.s. I was a government officer in the Nepal Family Planning Association. I was responsible for creating documentary and radio plays. I proposed to stage street plays to spread awareness about the importance of family planning. Sarwanam, with the support of UNFPA donors, produced a street play and it was staged in Kapilvastu for the first time. (Y. Ghimire 2066 v.s.: 181)

He also staged modern plays and represented a pro-democratic youth force at a time when the party-less Panchayat polity tried its best to muffle voices for multi-party democracy. But staging modern plays did not bring financial benefit to artists whereas working with I/NGOs enabled them to earn lucrative amounts of money for the first time in their careers. With this

motive, Sarwanam started staging street plays in different parts of the city. Nepali street theater emerged as a new and powerful form of expression. Since then an important relationship between theater artists and donors has come to exist in Nepal. Before modern theater artists decide which particular play to direct or rehearse, the venue they will use and the artists who will be involved into the project, they have to undertake a topsy-turvy detour, a karma that cannot be excluded from the current politico-economic context of Nepal that has remained heavily dependent on donor support for decades.

Things did not change even after the 1990 political transition, as the government-run theater centers still remained over-staffed. The democratic polity did not bring any new policies to inspire independent theater artists. The national economy remained weak and Nepal had gradually become a donor-dependent country. On top of that, Nepal went through a period of Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006. Since then Nepal has been passing through a series of political transformations such as *Jana Āndolan II* in 2006, the declaration of Nepal as a republic in 2008, and the two elections of the Constituent Assembly in 2008 and 2013, which are often taken as landmarks in modern Nepal's history. Amidst these changes, modern theater artists know that they have been working at times when interventions from political parties into every sphere of art and cultural center have become nasty experiences. On the other hand, the popularity and presence of donors has increased over the years. Though critiqued, donors have often turned out to be needed partners for Kathmandu-based theater groups. Similarly, donor organizations too have found theater groups to be practical ways of reaching out to the public and spreading the kind of awareness they prioritize: "Donors found theater as part of a search for participatory communication methodologies and those development workers who are using theater in their projects are still enthusiastic of its potentialities in reaching marginalized communities" (Mottin 2007: 325).

Working with donors has brought economic confidence to a few influential Kathmandu-based theater groups. Sarwanam, Arohan, and Dabali theater groups first, and Shilpee more recently, are some which have worked with donors extensively. The achievements made by Arohan from 2003 to 2011, as well as those of Sarwanam and Shilpee, are often taken as good sides of working with donors. There are other theater groups who work with I/NGOs of all types occasionally. Though working with the donors is never as easy as it may seem, theater groups have proven that they, not the

government-run art centers, are providing a new lease on life to the modern theater culture. The activities carried out by more than half a dozen theater centers: Mandala, Shilpee, Sarwanam, Theatre Village, Arohan, Actors' Studio, and Suskera (all owned and run by individual theater groups) have become synonymous with contemporary modern theater in Nepal. This shift bears significant meaning especially given that the government allocates substantial amount of money to manage its art and cultural centers, and also earmarks funds for paying artists' salaries. Ironically, government-employed artists remain idle most of the time. By contrast, independent theater artists find themselves spending major parts of their time and energy in collecting funds and also, ironically, are found spending major parts of their hard-earned incomes to hire and maintain spaces where they can perform a few shows. This forces us to recognize that artists and their groups, carrying their regular activities in their own spaces despite the government's unfriendly art policies, need to be recognized not only as actors fulfilling mere wishes but as dominant forces that are providing modern theater culture in Nepal some greater depth and width.

'To Be or Not to Be'

Once artists associated with modern theater groups started collaborating with I/NGOs, especially after 1980, these partners started taking them to the villages where social problems are supposed to be rampant. They started touring the countryside where they were asked to perform as part of their contracts with donors. In the meantime, they did not let their connection with city-based modern theater cool down. They kept on showing their presence in metropolis. They were thus caught in a paradox. On the one hand, there are cities, modern plays, and audiences who will buy tickets before they come to occupy their seats in the hall. Above all, there is a shortage of funds to hire halls and rehearse plays. But on the other hand, there are donors, social issues, local communities, and importantly some amount of money that they can save by performing development-oriented plays. In such situations, they have developed methodologies that could save their money and energy, so that they could serve their donors as well as audiences in the city. Sarwanam produced street plays and staged the same play both in community spaces as well as in modern theater halls with some improvisations. Shilpee Theatre produced *Kacahari* plays both in the community as well as in a modern theater hall.

Of the many Kathmandu-based theater artists who vow to be artistic in their productions, many have been forced to take very different aesthetic journeys before they could concentrate on the medium of expression warranted by modern theatrics. They have to negotiate with numerous donors, middle-men/-women, and media long before they meet their regular audiences in the city. Such journeys are sometimes very lengthy, humiliating, and painstaking but also may be rewarding in other ways. They have to become members of networks of middle-men/-women, read the intention of the donors, develop proposals (or hire some professionals for this), and in many cases make several individuals happy for helping them to get funding. Next, they have to organize and run workshops, develop plays, travel to the places and successfully perform the agendas. Along with disseminating social messages, thereby helping locals and donors, they finally come to help themselves. They have to manage to save some money to use back in their urban base to produce modern plays, pay their artists, pay rent for performance spaces or theater halls, and so on. The journey into modern theater does not start from the rehearsal room. Rather, it begins at the negotiating table with middle-men/-women and donors. Yubaraj Ghimire described how Shilpee had saved Rs. 28,00,000 and spent it to construct its Gothale Theatre Hall in Battisputali.²

This nexus between theater and I/NGOs in Nepal has ironically made these theater artists realize the important fact that there exists a very close tie between them and the city. Nepali theater groups have been performing message-oriented social plays for various I/NGOs for over three decades across communities. But over these decades they have been trying to root themselves to the cities, which have been changing dramatically. The urban space in the Kathmandu Valley, the targeted zone for modern theater, has become much wider now. Pitamber Sharma, an expert on urbanism in Nepal, writes: “Kathmandu is the pre-eminent primate city with 22% of total urban population. Nearly a third of the country’s urban population resides in the five municipalities of the Kathmandu Valley” (2014: 5). Above all, the land that these theater centers have to hire on a lease basis has become expensive, along with the general cost of living.

The theater centers mentioned above and whose activities this article is trying to analyze are all located within walking distance of each other. All of them lie in the core part of the city. As we start walking from Mandala

² Personal communication, Yubaraj Ghimire, 15 June 2014.

Theatre from Anamnagar, we reach the Sarwanam Theatre Hall, located at Kalikasthan in a matter of ten minutes. Continuing, we can reach Shilpee's Gothale Theatre Hall at Battisputali in 25 minutes. From there to Theatre Village's Satyamohan Joshi Theatre Hall at Lazimpat takes only a 30-minute walk. Another 20-minute walk from here takes one to a recently opened theater hall at Kathmandu Mall, Sundhara. Then another 20-minute walk takes one back to Mandala. Ironically, these five theater centers form a circuit that encircles all three government-run theater halls – Nachghar, City Hall and Academy – which too are located within 15-minute walking distance. In a sense, these five theater centers metaphorically encircle the three government-run centers expressing non-action and lack of policy for theaters. In terms of location, Suskera's hall at Kathmandu Mall is the most easily reachable for the general public. It is located in the business area whereas Mandala, Sarwanam, Satyamohan Joshi and Gothale Theatre Halls are located some five- to ten-minute walk away from bus or tempo parks. Except Sarwanam, all theater halls have parking space available for audiences. The economic problems they have been facing in terms of maintaining their centers, providing salary to their fellow artists, and paying rent and loan to their landlord and banks respectively discussed below are directly related to the city-centric nature of their profession. My personal impression is that theater artists belonging to major theater groups know much about the countryside and also are in the process of learning the city and about their the city-centric profession.

Financing Future

Artists associated with the centers under discussion are, for the first time in the history of Nepali theater, in the process of defining their profession as a site of economic investment. They have invested their private savings at their own risk. Many have taken bank loans. Naturally, they now face the pressure of earning a profit, which places further demands for hard work on them. This brings them opportunities, as they have to become more articulate, creative, and resourceful. This has made them more realistic since they have to take practical decisions and act professionally in the domain of marketing and public relations. According to Yubaraj Ghimire, the director of Shilpee Theatre group, his center has invested Rs. 40,00,000 in constructing their Gothale Theatre Hall. His group saved Rs. 28,00,000 by staging development-oriented plays for various I/NGOs such as UK

Aid, The Asia Foundation, United Nations Development Programme, and Helvetas. On top of that, his center managed to raise Rs. 10,00,000 in donations from several well-wishers and supporters.³ Jibesh Rayamajhi and Bimal Subedi, the proprietors of Theatre Village, have spent Rs. 45,00,000 on their Satyamohan Joshi Hall and some two *ropanis* (1019 m²) of land that they bought in the Thankot area on the outskirts of Kathmandu.⁴ Mandala Hall, on the other hand, has a different genesis. Rajan Khatiwada, Dayahang Rai, and their fellow members collected Rs. 30,00,000, each bearing an equal financial share. Additionally, they have taken a Rs. 15,00,000 bank loan on which they still owe Rs. 10,00,000.⁵ Sarwanam hall was built out of Sarwanam Theatre group's savings made out of the fund that it had managed to save through performances made for various I/NGOs over the previous 25 years. Malla says that it took 15 years for him and his group to complete this project.⁶ Theatre Mall of Suskera at Kathmandu Mall, according to the artistic director Kedar Shrestha, was built for Rs. 14,00,000. Shrestha has taken a personal loan of Rs. 4,00,000 from a local bank and his group member Elina Nakarmi, now in Japan, has invested the remaining Rs. 10,00,000.⁷ Thus each hall has a distinct financial story. What is common among them is that all these artists have taken personal economic risks and are defining their profession in a new spirit by keeping the market sphere in target.

Every Soul has 'Some' Loans to Pay

Of course theater artists and their groups face constant pressure to earn and save money at every turn. This has put them under creative, though difficult, pressures and much now depends on how they are going to address this pressure. Shilpee has to pay Rs. 25,000 every month for the space taken on a lease basis. According to the agreement, the rent increases by eight percent every year. They pay Rs. 5,000 per month just for parking space. On top of that, Shilpee provides some remuneration for its 13 artists. Then there is interest on bank loans to be paid on a monthly basis.⁸ Theatre Village has a similar story. It pays Rs. 1,00,000 interest every month on

³ Personal Communication, Yubaraj Ghimire, 15 June 2014.

⁴ Personal Communication, Jibesh Rayamajhi, 5 August 2014.

⁵ Personal Communication, Rajan Khatiwada, 10 August 2014.

⁶ Personal Communication, Ashesh Malla, 16 August 2014.

⁷ Personal Communication, Kedar Shrestha, 16 August 2014.

⁸ Personal Communication, Yubaraj Ghimire, 15 June 2014.

its bank loan. It pays Rs. 25,000 as rent for the premises. On top of that, it pays Rs. 40,000 for five staff members and the proprietors also get some monthly remuneration. This center has to earn Rs. 3,00,000 per month to cover all its expenses.⁹ Suskera pays Rs. 50,000 per month for its space. Shrestha says that his center has to earn Rs. 2,00,000 every month to cover all expenses including the interest on the loan that needs to be paid to the financing company.¹⁰ Sarwanam has no loan to pay but it has to allocate some small funds to maintain their space and equipment. Since they propagate '*mitbyayī raṅgamanc*,' the economically frugal methodology of stagecraft, they spend a minimum amount for setting and props. Some money is given to the volunteers for breakfast, food, and also for transportation.¹¹ Mandala pays from Rs. 60,000 to 70,000 to the bank on installment basis. They pay a rent of Rs. 40,000 for the premises, Rs. 40,000 for parking space, and Rs. 20,000 for their office building. Three staff members are paid altogether Rs. 20,000 in the form of salary. Thus they must earn Rs. 2,00,000, at any cost, to cover their expenses every month.¹²

Hall Means Income

Theater halls are no longer only architectural spaces or venues for staging performances for these groups. They have also become sources of extra income. Depending on the economic stature of the organization that comes to hire the hall for a couple of hours in the daytime, these theater groups charge fees ranging from Rs. 5,000 to 15,000. Shilpee's Gothale Theatre Hall is hired for around ten days every month. The money that this group manages to collect by giving the space on hire is sufficient to pay the monthly rent to the landlord. Theatre Village's Satyamohan Joshi Hall is rented for five or six days per month. They too charge fees ranging from Rs. 6,000 to 10,000 per event depending on the economic capacity of the institution that comes to hire. The amount of money they collect from this source of income is enough to pay the rent to the landlord. Mandala's hall too goes on rent for an average of six to ten days per month. They manage to collect some Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 60,000 from it. Thus, this helps them curtail their economic burden. Sarwanam provides its hall on rent for an average of five days in a

⁹ Personal Communication, Jibesh Rayamjahi, 5 August 2014.

¹⁰ Personal Communication, Kedar Shrestha, 16 August 2014.

¹¹ Personal Communication, Raj Shah, 12 August 2014.

¹² Personal Communication, Rajan Khatiwada, 10 August 2014.

month. They charge from Rs. 6,000 to Rs. 15,000 depending on the financial status of the hirers. Suskera's theater hall, opened in mid-August 2014, has also followed this methodology of generating extra income. Shrestha says that they have already had their hall booked for a couple of days in the very week their hall was officially opened.

Sell the Tickets

'Houseful' or sold-out performances with audiences standing in queue, tickets in their hand, are what modern theater artists want to see. Such scenes are proof of their survival in the market world. Ticket sales have to come to occupy the central position in activities carried out by theater groups in Kathmandu in the recent years. Shilpee's Gothale Theatre Hall can accommodate an audience of 210. It offers three types of tickets: Rs. 500 for front rows, Rs. 150 for general admission and Rs. 100 for students. But income generated through ticket sales alone is insufficient to bear the full cost of production ranging from costumes to setting. Ghimire explains that his center aims to draw Rs. 4,00,000 through selling tickets so that they could divide some amount of money among artists every month. Its 'Komā: A Political Sex' that ran for 31 shows earned Rs. 3,00,000.¹³ Mandala too offers two kinds of tickets: Rs. 100 for students and Rs. 200 for the general public. On average they sell 100 tickets per show, earning around Rs. 8,000. Thus, they manage to draw Rs. 2,40,000 per month. Then there is the cost of production on set, costumes, food, and so on that they need to factor into their budget. 'Raśoman,' a joint venture between Arohan and Mandala, earned them Rs. 4,96,000. The money was divided fifty-fifty though Mandala had borne the cost of production.¹⁴ Theatre Village too offers two kinds of tickets: Rs. 200 for general admission and Rs. 100 for students. Its Satyamohan Joshi Hall accommodates 200 people. 'Cārūmatī,' its first and full-fledged play, was prepared for the Indian Embassy. Actors' Studio's 'Koṭ Mārśal,' directed by Anup Baral, ran for 22 shows in the same hall. On average each show earned from Rs. 35,000 to 40,000.¹⁵ Sarwanam gets good audience numbers mainly on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. On average they get audiences of 50 to 70 people per show. It too offers two kinds of tickets: Rs. 100 for students and Rs. 200 for the general public. From 36 performances

¹³ Personal Communication, Yubaraj Ghimire, 15 June 2014.

¹⁴ Personal Communication, Rajan Khatiwada, 10 August 2014.

¹⁵ Personal Communication, Jibesh Rayamajhi, 5 August 2014.

of ‘Śakuni Pāsāharū’ the group earned Rs. 1,30,000. Their target is to earn Rs. 10,000 per show.¹⁶ Suskera offers three kinds of tickets: Rs. 100 for students, Rs. 150 for the general public, and Rs. 200 for front-row seats. It had not produced its own plays by the time this research was completed. ‘Sunkesarī Rānī,’ a play written by Satyamohan Joshi and directed by Rajan Khatiwada for Mandala Theatre, and ‘Yellow Comedy’ prepared by Shilpee Theatre Group, were staged in the week this Theatre Mall Hall was officially opened. It had altogether made 12 performances, had managed to draw audiences of 40 people on average, and had earned Rs. 4,000 per show.¹⁷

Developing Software

These theater centers also offer short-term courses, mostly three-month-long, for aspiring artists and enthusiasts on acting and other aspects of theater art. Each batch comes with a performance at the end of the course. This methodology has helped the senior talents to teach innovative skills about doing theater. More importantly, it has helped these theater centers to bring new kinds of artists and audiences to their halls. Shilpee, during the period when this research was carried out, ran a short-term course on the storytelling aspect of theater entitled ‘Let Your Body Think.’ Altogether 15 students were enrolled. Though each student was supposed to be charged Rs. 10,000, only a few students said that they could afford the price.¹⁸ Theatre Village too has been running a short course on acting. The first course that they ran right after the center was opened in September 2013 did not bring much financial reward. But it was a good event for collecting artists and audiences for them. It, along with Actors’ Studio’s director Anup Baral, ran a three-month-long acting course from 15 July 2014. There were altogether 22 students taking this course, and Theatre Village was going to collect Rs. 3,00,000, says Rayamajhi. This time they are sure that they will generate a little income for savings too.¹⁹ Sarwanam too runs acting courses. But it charges Rs. 5,000 per student. Mandala has already offered three short courses, each lasting three months. This time alone it has enrolled 20 students and has hired Sunil Pokharel as one of the main trainers. Each student has been charged Rs. 20,000. This time they are sure to save some money so

¹⁶ Personal Communication, Raj Shah, 12 August 2014.

¹⁷ Personal Communication, Kedar Shrestha, 16 August 2014.

¹⁸ Personal Communication, Yubaraj Ghimire, 15 June 2014.

¹⁹ Personal Communication, Jibesh Rayamajhi, 5 August 2014.

that it will become easier to run the office, says Khatiwada.²⁰ Suskera too has plans to run acting courses in near future. Thus this methodology of generating income and artists and audiences has become very productive. Moreover, this has brought senior and aspiring artists, performances, and audiences of new and familiar order together and helped to expand the sphere of modern theater in Kathmandu.

Donors are Still Friends

Though these theater centers are located in central parts of the city and are now operating as independent business, they are still in need of collaboration with I/NGOs. They need to keep on visiting the countryside and performing development-oriented plays for their donors. Shilpee had managed to save a significant amount of money through performing awareness-raising plays in various parts of the country for several I/NGOs in the past. But it has not staged development-oriented plays for I/NGOs after it started running its Gothale Theatre Hall. They now find it hard to divide their time between the city and the village. Deep down they do not want to leave their stations now. That's why they expect I/NGOs to ask them to run workshops for local artists on the issues and aesthetics of development-oriented plays, so that Shilpee does not need to travel but can still generate money from donors. Mandala does not have any complaints against I/NGOs, neither does it have any fixed donors to work with. But then there is always one I/NGO or another that is looking for help in training local artists on development-oriented plays. Ashesh Malla, though he does not seem to be in a mood to work with donors these days, believes that working with I/NGOs is sure to lessen the economic burden of all these theater groups.²¹

No Fixed Methodologies

In this process of rooting themselves into the city and its nightlife culture, these theater artists and their groups have been inventing various methodologies. They do not have any fixed donors to work with. They have no fixed programs to operate throughout the year. Nor are there any fixed work plans. Sometime regular shows along with short-term courses and workshops conducted for the donors run simultaneously. Sometimes halls are given out on rent, but that may not draw any money at all. Methodologies

²⁰ Personal Communication, Rajan Khatiwada, 10 August 2014.

²¹ Personal Communication, Ashesh Malla, 16 August 2014.

employed by these theater centers remain thus partially successful. Some are under pressure to invent newer methodologies. Sarwanam has now entered a new phase of struggle as it does not need to make payments to the landlord. But the need of staging new plays or hiring theater talents, finding proper plays or experimentation in direction have come to pose the most powerful creative challenges for them. Producing ‘good’ plays and performances are the best methodology of struggle and survival for Sarwanam, says Raj Shah, someone in charge of managing its activities.²² Suskera’s 11 members work freely with other groups and organizations. They also provide their time for their hall and activities. Several artists belonging to Mandala also work for Nepali cinema production houses. For the Mandala team members, their center is a platform for bringing as many good opportunities as possible for them and also for individual members. There is no problem in generating audience numbers and maintaining quality in production, says Khatiwada.²³ In a matter of three years, they have already produced ten successful plays. They are not worried about the money they need to pay in the form of rent. They divide the small amount of saved money among their members. They are planning to organize some ‘big’ events to pay all the loans to the bank and be free of debt. For this, they are ready to work with any organizations.

My impression is that most of the artists running their theater centers are like the characters from the very plays they stage on a regular basis. Like the characters, these artists are also unaware of their impending fate. Some are in need of good plays, some still want comparatively less time-consuming work from donors, some are expecting rising audience numbers. Some are in search of inventing new methodologies as they are in the very first phase of creating and managing their resources. Almost all of them need to earn a certain amount of money to pay the bank and their landlords, and this burden hangs like Damocles’ sword over the roofs of their offices and theater halls. This is so because they are located in the metropolis and bear the economic burden of continuing their profession in this city that is becoming more expensive every month.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this essay with some questions: How are these theater groups going to address the city side of their profession? How are

²² Personal Communication, Raj Shah, 12 August 2014.

²³ Personal Communication, Rajan Khatiwada, 10 August 2014.

they going to fuse the theater with the city's nightlife culture? How are they going to generate returns on their investments? What kinds of marketing strategies should they develop? How can a third party constituted by banks and other financial entities become partners with theater artists? How can they invite professional minds from the world of modern business to be part of the modern theater culture? Furthermore, since they operate in the core part of the city, how are they going to conduct research about the city? My impression is that these theater artists who are operating their theater centers throughout the year know that they are living through hard times, but have also seen possibilities for jumping into safer times. They are in in-between or 'liminal' state, to borrow a term from anthropologists, a very necessary state from which to emerge with new energy and hope. Donors might have helped them understand common people in the countryside. Now they must learn to become economically independent through embracing challenges and opportunities brought by the urbanization that is taking place in the Kathmandu Valley.

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