Research on Theatre Documentation and Dissemination

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INTRODUCTION: NINASAM

Ninasam – Nilakanteshwara Natyaseva Sangha – is a voluntary cultural organisation based at Heggodu, a village in Karnataka. Established in 1949 by a band of culture enthusiasts, it has been engaged in the fields of literature, theatre, film studies, and culture. It carries out a variety of activities focussing on theatre training, art sensitisation and culture dissemination through its several units that include a theatre institute, a theatre repertory, a film society, a publication wing, and a foundation managing extension programmes. While most of these activities are conducted at Heggodu the others are held at various centres spread across the length and breadth of Karnataka. Ninasam's work has won acclaim from laypersons and connoisseurs alike and one such recognition came in the form of the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Creative Arts, Communication, and Journalism conferred upon late K V Subbanna, the founder and guiding spirit of Ninasam in 1991. (For more details, Please see: www.ninasam.org).

OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT

The aim of the project is to explore and evolve a method of documentation and dissemination for theatre performances, and other performing arts suited to our context. This method aims to achieve both the best possible watching experience of theatre, as well as a mode that is infrastructure-wise viable for regional theatre groups in

India. The projects consists of a survey of available methods of documentation, nationally and internationally, and then, with the help of experts, to try and develop a mode that works best in our context, and finally to disseminate not only the actual performances documented, but also a paper that elaborates on the finding of the project.

Story of a documentation project by Ninasam and Sanchi Foundation

The documentation project conceived and executed by Ninasam and Sanchi is an ambitious venture located in a complex history of theatre and documentation in India and aims to make, in its limits, an impact on the modes of documentation and dissemination. The aim of the project is to explore and evolve a method of documentation and dissemination for theatre performances, and other performing arts suited to our context. This method aims to achieve both the best possible watching experience of theatre, as well as a mode that is infrastructure-wise viable for regional theatre groups in India.

The Activities of the Project

A meeting of an expert group was held in Ninasam on 11 September 2017 to discuss the various aspects of documentation—in terms of history, philosophy, aesthetics, technicalities and aesthetics of documentation and dissemination. KVAkshara, TPAshoka, JaswantJadhav, AbhayaSimha, VidyaHegde,MadhavaChippali, KVShishira, Deepa Ganesh and NAM Ismail participated in the meeting. There have been conversations between all these experts over telephone and e-mail and a considerable amount of discussion and research was already done before this meeting. Hence, this meeting laid a firm foundation for the project.

The first set of documentations in this project was done on 29 and 30 September 2016. The two plays by NinasamTirugata were recorded— 'KalandugeyaKathe' directed by B.R. VenkataramanaAithal and 'Atta Dari IttaPuli' directed by HaisnamTomba. 'KalandugeyaKathe' is adapted from the three plays by H.S. Shivaprakash namely 'Madure Kanda,' 'Madhavi' and 'Matruka.' 'Atta Dari IttaPuli' is conceived, designed and directed by HaisnamTomba. This play deals with the conflicts between the common citizens and the authorities who represent the power of a nation state.   The group of

experts and technicians who worked for the documentation of these two plays include Vishnu Prasad, LakshmanNayak, Ravi, Jamie DSilva, Shishira KV, PrashantPandit, NAM Ismail, Omshivprakash, Avinash G, Deepa Ganesh, AbhayaSimha, NehaShishira, KV Akshara and MadhavaChippali.

The second set of documentations was held between 14 and 18 December 2016. This project documented various songs from the plays that were produced by Ninasam in the last six decades. A whole day of recording was dedicated to these songs from the plays—Rangasangeeta. The list of artists who performed these songs includes VidyaHegde, ShailashreeUrs, Rathna, GeetaSiddi and GirijaSiddi presented female vocals; Bhargava KN and Ravi Murur on the Keyboards; ChandrashekharaAchar on Leg Harmonium; ShreenivasBhat (Cheeni) on Guitar; Arun Kumar M on the Drums, Nagaraj KN and MP Hegde on percussions.

There were two Talamaddales organized in Ninasam on these days and they too were documented. The episodes of 'VamanaCharitre' and 'Seetapahara' were performed on two different evenings. In both of these performances SubrahmanyaDhareshwarawas the leader/director/singer or the Bhagavata. NagabhushanaKedalasara played the Maddale and Bhargava KN played the Chande. Artists like M Prabhakara Joshi, AshokaBhatUjire, RadhakrishnaKalchar, NityanandaKaranta and VasudevaRangaBhatta performed various roles in these performances. In addition to these performances, there was a lecture demonstration and an interview of the Talamaddale artists by KV Akshara that were documented.

A leather-puppetry show performed by the team led by YadramanahalliDoddabharamappa was documented. The episode was drawn from the 'ShurpanakhiVadhe' from the traditions of Ramayana. NingappaKillekyatara, Devendrappa, Ashoka, Ratnamma K, Jayakumara and Nagaratnamma were the artists who supported YadramanahalliDoddabharamappa with various aspects of the performance including music.

'Babugiri,' a play based on two stories by Rabindranath Tagore, translated into Kannada by AhobalaShankara, is directed by KV Akshara. This play was documented in this project. Arun Kumar M has worked with music and MM Krishnamurthy with lights for this play. This play was performed by VidyaHegde, Ganesh M, ManjuKodagu and SadashivaDharmashtala.

'AscharyaChudamani,' a Sanskrit play by Shaktibhadra translated into Kannada by K. Krishnamurthy and directed by Joseph John, performed by the students of the Ninasam Theatre Institute was also documented.

A panel discussion about the challenges and possibilities of documentation was held in Ninasam. RustumBharucha, Paula Richman and KV Akshara were in the panel. This panel discussed various technical and aesthetic aspects of

documentation locating it in the history of theatre and documentation in India and elsewhere.

A review meeting was held on 8 January 2017 where the process and products of the project were discussed in detail. A group of experts including AbhayaSimha, Deepa Ganesh KV Akshara, TPAshoka, NAM IsmailJaswantJadhav, ShishiraKV, MadhavaChippali, VidyaHegde, Jamie DSilva, PrashantPandit and NehaShishira participated in this meeting.

NINASAM: A COMMUNITY OF THEATRE MAKERS

Ninasam was started in the wake of Indian Independence in 1947. Ninasam was a band of theatre enthusiasts from the villages around Heggodu, Karnataka who got together to put up plays once every year or two. In the first three decades of its history, Ninasam grew like a tree with many branches of activities having rooted in the space and times of its existence. With K.V. Subbanna at the forefront, Ninasam attracted many stalwarts of theatre and culture to think about and do theatre in Heggodu. ShivaramKaranth and B.V. Karanth were two of the many regular visitors to Ninasam. When the activities of Ninasam increased there was a need for an auditorium for its activities. In 1971 the ShivaramaKaranthaRangamandira, perhaps the only theatre space in non-urban India in the early 70's that had all the basic requirements for doing theatre, raised its head in Heggodu.

The activities of Ninasam became manifold after building the auditorium. Ninasam, a cultural space where plays were produced occasionally, provided an opportunity for the villagers to come together in the evenings and talk to each other. Once the productions were over, there was no activity that was going on in the rest of the season. The scene of Ninasam changed drastically in the seventies. The Ninasam Film Society (1973) and The Ninasam Theatre Institute (1980),two major projects started in the 70's,made Ninasam active throughout the year. As a result, the villagers who visited Ninasam once in a while started getting together more often, almost regularly.Over time, the nature and functions of the Film Society has changed. The annual Film Appreciation Courses were started in 1979 has modified itself into the Ninasam Culture Course after 1990. NinasamTirugata, a repertory, was started in 1985 with the alumni of the Ninasam Theatre Institute. This repertory has been travelling all over Karnataka performing mostly in small towns and villages. It has put up more than 85 productions, staged about 3400 shows before an estimated audience of 20 lakh. With the Ninasam core group consisting of the villagers around Heggodu, the Ninasam Theatre Institute that offers rigorous residential training to students in the art of theatre for a duration of ten months and the NinasamTirugata, the repertory that travels the length and

breadth of Karnataka with plays Ninasam puts up and performs about 10-15 plays every year (see ninasam.org for more details about Ninasam).

Ninasam has been documenting its productions both in terms of book keeping and audio-visual documents. Ninasam has the details of most of its productions that include the number of shows, an approximate number of people who watched these shows, and the places where these productions were performed. Many of the plays were audio and video recorded in the equipment that was available in the times of those productions. Most of these recordings, because of the constraints in technology and funding, are not of good quality. Ninasamvideo documented four of its productions and titled the series 'Kannada NatakaKannadi.' The documentation was directed by the well-known film director, GirishKasaravalli. The four plays that were recorded in this project were 'Gokulanirgamana' directed by B.V. Karanth, 'Taledanda' directed by ChidambaraRaoJambe, 'Sangya-Balya' directed by K.V. Akshara and 'SmashanaKurukshetram' directed by K.V. Akshara. These audio-visual documents have been used in various instances including the literature and theatre appreciation workshops conducted in various parts of Karnataka by the NinasamPratishtana. Though these videos were seen by a large number of people, the access to these videos to the public was limited given the restraints of technology to make copies and arrange screenings of the videos.

The documentation and dissemination of the productions by Ninasam were limited to the resources and technology that Ninasam had. To start with, all the productions by Ninasam have not been documented. Those that are documented are not of good quality and they cannot be easily accessed as they are in formats that are dated. Sanchi Foundation has retrieved some of these videos and they are now available online. Yet, the lack of documentation is obvious when we look at the history of Ninasam.

EASY ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

In the recent years, audio and video recording has proliferated into the everyday lives of people. There are cameras everywhere, including in most of the cell phones. Many of us carry a camera every day in our pockets. Furthermore, the video cameras and DSLR cameras are also available much more easily and they are easy to use. The modes of dissemination with the new media like Youtube and Facebook, for example, are extremely easy, both in terms of format and finance,when compared to the earlier times when films had to be physically carried to the place of the screening. As a result, many people are recording the performances and broadcasting them in the social media. One can easily find thousands of video clips of theatre performances, yakshagana, dance, music

recitals and other performing arts on the internet. This change has caused the time-and-space-bound performing arts reach the people who could not be present in the time and space of the performance.

This proliferation has raised questions regarding the rigour of the visual documents that are available online. Firstly, even with the availability of recording equipment, because of poor or no training for the videographers the recording quality is often low. Secondly, as many of these recordings are done in order to share them with their friends online, many videographers do not bother to provide the details of the performance like the names of the performers, director, time and venue of the performance etc. They are often shorter clips of a much longer performance. There are instances where these recordings neither have the permission from the performer to record nor do they acknowledge the source from which these videos are shared. Hence, these videos float around the internet with no details about the performer and the performance. As a result, the apparent amount of audio-visual documents available to the audience has shot up but for a serious audience or a researcher, these recordings seldom provide a chance to watch the performance even with basic quality of the recording that is required.

This is the context whenNinasam collaborated with Sanchi Foundation to think about the practice of documenting theatre and also to do some exemplar documentations.

SANCHI FOUNDATION: A WALLET TO BE SHARED

Sanchi Foundation is a group of experts in the fields of film, media, culture and technology. Sanchi has been engaged in thinking about and doing documentation in addition to retrieving the recordings from the archives that are present in formats that are not easily accessible by common people. The foremost activity of Sanchi is to record performing arts with the best possible quality given the limitations of the available resources. The introductory note in the Sanchi website gives a clear idea of what they are doing and what they want to do. The following is an excerpt from the introductory note by Sanchi: "We do documentation in folk, classical art forms and other steams of knowledge on priority basis. Documentation is something, which is largely ignored by many. Some understand the importance but are not sure what is the best way. Keeping this in mind, we also want to create online material about documentation. We would also like to do workshops and train people in documentation. We hope this effort will help us create a community, which contributes to a documentation, which will eventually become the collective source of knowledge. We want to make our documentation available for public use for free. So all the documentation done through Sanchi

Foundation will be released under Creative Commons and released to public usage. However, it would be restricted from commercial usage."

AbhayaSimha, of the Sanchi Foundation, notes that many of the institutions do not have the compelling desire and resources for documentation. Even with the institutions that have the best of documentation practices, the material is either of low quality or incomplete, often both. Being trained in film making, AbhayaSimha says that, in a situation where there is no good documentation, we thought we will do what we can: "we are trained in this field. Though we are not trained in archiving, we know the aesthetics and technology of visual documentation."With AbhayaSimha, N.A.M Ismail and Omshivprakash investing their scholarship and skills, Sanchi Foundation has been active in documenting performing arts and disseminating it. Many technicians and scholars have joined hands with the Sanchi Foundation through working voluntarily or for minimal charges in the documentation projects.

THE ONUS OF DOCUMENTATION

K.V. Aksharaobserves one of the major challenges with documenting theatre and he says that "in India the theatre makers themselves have to be documenters." It is often stated that documentation in India, particularly in the field of theatre, is very poor. However, as Akshara suggests, documenting theatre, at various levels, is different from doing theatre. In India the burden of documenting is also on the shoulder of the theatre makers. This is not just a comment regarding the workload.Akshara does not suggest that good quality documentation of theatre has not been possible only because of the increased workload on the theatre makers, though it is one of the major factors. The statement is much more nuanced because doing theatre and documenting theatre require different kinds of scholarship and skills. There is a gamut of scholarship—available also in writing—regarding the art of doing theatre beginning from Anandavardhana and Nandikeshwara to Stanislavsky, Brecht and BadalSircar. This scholarship is still alive and it is becoming more nuanced by day. Yet, the scholarship in the field of documenting theatre is at best very less.

The lack of scholarship regarding documentation is intermixed with many aspects like the skills and funding. The financial scene of theatre in India, particularly in the non-urban spaces like Heggodu, is such that the theatre makers get, if they get, only the money required to produce the play. Documentation requires not just equipment that are outside the usual budget of a production, but it also requires a team of experts and technicians to work with the aspects of recording video and audio, editing, the aspects of dissemination of the recorded document etc. This means the money has to be spent not only on the production

but also on documenting it. Akshara says that this is one reason why "Ninasam never thought about documentation until very recently."

Though the financial aspect is a major constraint with documenting theatre, there are other larger issues too. The aesthetics of theatre is a much developed area of scholarship. When we look at the aspects of aesthetics in documentation, the scholarship is yet to be developed. The theatre makers themselves are now interested in developing this scholarship, though in collaboration with scholars from film-making and other fields of knowledge. Documenting oneself, like Ninasam documenting its own productions, has become unavoidable as there are no other institutions that are doing the job of documentation in a systematic way. At the same time, Akshara notes that documenting ourselves is like "writing about ourselves. It is also embarrassing sometimes."

A Tradition of Documentation

"Documentation is very necessary for research. Why is such a dearth of academic scholarship on theatre and performance in India compared to so many other fields? I would attribute that at one level to the lack of documentation," says Bharucha. If one wants to study how the theatre was in India, in 1970's for example, there are no documentations that are available for the study. There are, where they are available, only a few photographs of the productions. Bharucha notes the difference between the theatre documentation for example, in India and in Japan, "the Japanese were documenting their performances, the avant-garde beginning in the 1960's. All the performances were documented very well. That's the Japanese kind of prioritization, we did not prioritize documentation."

There is no tradition of documenting theatre in India as there is in Japan. Hence, the methodologies or the grammar of documentation has to be invented through the projects that theatre documenters take up now. The issue in question cannot be resolved just through the technical details of how do we position the cameras, how do we record sound etc., though they are extremely important.

The Category of the Contemporary

Before we ask 'how' we need to ponder over 'what to be documented.' On a very practical level when an institution like Ninasam is involved in a documentation project, it is easy to say that it should document the play produced by Ninasam. However, the current project has a broader agenda that goes beyond the immediate necessity of documenting the productions of Ninasam. This project is

concerned not only with producing some exemplar documentations but also with creating the grammar of and scholarship about documentation of contemporary theatre.When we think of documenting contemporary theatre we need to be aware of the variety of theatre genres that live around us. Do we consider a production by NinasamTirugata a contemporary performance and a Yakshagana performance traditional to hint that our thinking about documentation does not concern forms of theatre like Yakshagana? It is not easy to distinguish between what is contemporary and what it not.

The aspects of contemporary and traditional have flown into each other making it not possible to place forms of performances in water tight compartments. It sounds acceptable that we should not make demarcations between the contemporary and the traditional and consider all the art forms that are alive at present as contemporary. Even when we accept the absence of a divide between the two kinds, one has to think of the methodologies of documentation. Do we document a play performed in a proscenium theatre in a particular way that is different from the way a Kudiattam or Yakshagana performance is documented? Bharucha, while responding to these questions, observes that the methodologies of documentation will be dictated by the context where the performances happen: "if you are watching Yakshagana in the Ninasam Auditorium, it is one framework. If you watch the same group perform in a field, it is another framework. It is not just genre but it is also the performative circumstances. Can you train people holding the camera to see this? The training is missing at that level."

EPHEMERALITY OF THEATRE EXPERIENCE

The possibilities and limitations of documenting theatre are manifold. Theatre happens in a given time and space; this statement has been repeated so many times in the history of discussing theatre that it has already become a cliché. Unlike a painting, one cannot watch the theatre performance in a different time and space from when and where the performance happens. To some extent, one can even argue that one cannot watch the same play twice, to mean that each performance is different. Though it is believed to be the same play, the performance is constantly changing, willingly or not. This is one of the basic issues that one has to keep in mind when discussing documentation. All that we can document is, perhaps, one performance of a production. Even if we document two of the performances of the same production, the intensity of the question does not reduce. One possible way of answering this question can be through live-streaming the performances. Many theatre groups including the Globe Theatre, offer the audience throughout the globe to watch their performances online as and

when the performance takes place in a given space. Live-streaming partly removes the 'space constraint' of the theatre. If the camera work and editing is of a considerably good quality, then one can perhaps watch the play in a place that is far away from the venue of the performance and get somewhat similar aesthetic experience as the audience in the venue of the performance.

Cricket provides a good example of overcoming the 'space constraint' of a performance. Many people believe that watching cricket over television is 'much better' than watching it in the actual stadium. The technology and the scholarship in the field of telecasting cricket matches are developed to such an extent that the number of people who watch it on television is considerably bigger compared to those who watch it sitting in the stadium. The elements such as the score strips, facts on display and more importantly the commentary has given the televised cricket a distinction from the cricket watched in the stadium. If cricket can achieve this kind of sophistication in live-streaming and documenting, theatre should also be able to develop a grammar and technology of documentation that makes theatre accessible across space and time.

THE LIFE OF A PERFORMANCE

RustumBharucha, while responding to the issue of 'live-ness'of theatre experience that cannot be captured in a video-recording, makes an important point. He remembers his early career in theatre when he had the angst and pain that the play will die once the performance is over. This kind of anxiety can be seen also in repertories such as NinasamTirugata. Tirugata is a repertory but not a repertory in the sense that the group of actors and crew are reconstituted every year. Though this process keeps the repertory fresh with new people entering the group every season, it also creates the impossibility of retaining a good production for another season or two. Video-recording is one of the important ways of not letting the production die after the performance is over. Furthermore, Bharucha notes that the contemporary Performance Studies scholars, including him, have a very different take on the live-ness of performances, the ephemerality of the watching experience. The lamentation about the death of a production does not exist anymore; or at least, it does not exist the way it existed earlier. The existential life of theatre that presents itself in a certain form will die, Bharucha notes, it does not mean that the production is not going to be repeated. The ontology of the theatrical experience is intimate and corporeal but theatre continues to live in different pneumonic registers and discourses even after the performance ends. According to Bharucha, the contemporary thinking about performances concentrates on this kind of life that theatre lives rather than lamenting about the

death of a performance. Thus theatre dies and does not die; it lives and does not live.

THE BOUNDARIES OF AN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

One may say that watching a play in a video recording, even if the grammar and quality of recording is of a great quality, is not a complete experience as the watching experience of a play includes various peripheral activities as mundane as snacking in the interval with other audience or as sensuous as inhaling the aroma of the smoke that a particular play uses in a scene. Such a statement is valid but has to be understood in its limitation.One has to distinguish between what constitutes the aesthetic experience and what does not. It is true that the community-feeling of watching theatre being one in 700 people in the auditorium cannot be felt while watching a play over a screen. There is no equivalent alternative to watching a performance in the time and space of its performance. It is perhaps true that not even watching another performance of the same play will be an alternative to watchingone particular performance. However, like in translation, one cannot expect an absolute equivalence between the experiences of watching theatre in an auditorium and of watching the same in video recording. What one can hope for, in the context of performing arts, is a methodology of documentation that captures those aspects of theatre which can be recorded using the available technology in addition to developing a grammar of documentation that strives for the betterment of the aesthetics of documentation.

AbhayaSimha's thoughts provide a much more practical and agreeable way towards thinking the 'what constitutes a play' question in the context of documentation. He says that the person behind the camera should be first able to appreciate the play as a rasika.She should attempt to capture, through the camera, whatever strikes her while watching the performance.AbhayaSimha has clear answers to questions like whether snacking in the interval constitutes the experience of the play. According to him, it does not; it is an off-stage experience. He reasons out that the snacking is not contributing to the play directly. There are performances where the audience participation is central to the art form or that particular production. In such cases the strategy of documentation should be different. Most of the documentationsby Sanchi have been done in what AbhayaSimha calls 'laboratory conditions.' The performances are done without audience and the show was put up only for the purpose of documentation. While these documentations took place, there were no regular audience in the gallery. However, he recollects recording 'Shanimahatme' a play performed in the premises of a temple. This play was recorded while an actual show was running with a packed audience. This play was quasi-interactive with the audience like in

the instance where a person from the crowd gets on the stage, in the middle of the performance, and appreciates the actor by putting a garland of currency notes around the neck of the actor. These kinds of plays are different from the NinasamTirugata plays of 2015-16 or 2016-17 that were documented by Sanchi. The Tirugata plays are performed ideally in a proscenium theatre where the audience is not expected to get on the stage while the performance is going on or the verbal or tangible interactions between the performers and audience are absent. In such cases, the group of people who are documenting the performance can decide a particular activity like the whistles of the audience to be peripheral to the performance and ignore them.

A SPACE FOR CONVERSATIONS

The argument presented in the previous section that particular activities such as the interactions in the interval is in no way to undermine the importance of the experience of a person who enjoys the interval as much as the performance and consider that her aesthetic experience of watching a play is complete only with what happens in the interval. The list of the differences between watching a play and watching its video can be easily made and it will be trivial at best.There is no need to stress that the video recording can never be a substitute to watching a performance in the space and time of the show. Our documentation project aims not at the impossible task of reconstituting the ephemeral aesthetic experience but it tries to capture certain aspects of the performance that can allow a person to access the performance that she could not watch.

The 'interval' experience is not absent from our documentations. This aspect is an important element in the way we disseminate our recordings. We upload the recordings on internet platforms like Youtube and the links to these recordings are spread through social media like Facebook. These platforms like Youtube and Facebook allow the audience not just to comment on the performance that they are watching but also to respond to other.

ACCESS: THE QUESTION OF OWNERSHIP

Online platforms such as Youtube, in addition to providing a space for discussing the video that is being watched, primarily allow people to access the document and watch it whenever they want to. The videos that are produced and disseminated through our project are available online for everyone to watch and share. There is no restriction on watching these videos, except that they cannot be used for commercial gains. This idea, popularly known as copy-left or free

culture, is about making the documents available to public—common audience and researchers as well—without a gate-keeper guarding these resources. The documentations done in this project are available to watch without a need for any permission of any institution. The documentations that have been done in the pastare often buried in the racks of archives; this is more true in the case of various archives in India. If one has to watch or use the video recording, she has to write letters, seek permissions, go to the archive on a given date and watch it. Making copies of the documents for oneself is a more arduous task.

As examples we can see two institutions from Karnataka—Ninasam and Regional Resource Centre, Udupi—where video documentations have been done and archived. Both these institutions have maintained an archive that is ideally available at a request to the interested. Compared to many other archives accessing archives from these two institutions is very easy; it involves little bureaucracy.Yet, it is important to note that there is a difference between this model of providing-at-request and making it available to the interested without a need for requests and permissions. The major difference is that in the former model, the audience have to come to the institution to access the archives. In the latter, the institution goes out to make the archives available to the audience.

ACCESS: THE USE OF INTERNET

Providing the archives using platforms such as Youtube overcomes two hurdles together. First, it eliminates the need for taking permissions and coping through the bureaucracy, wherever it is present. If writing letters to the authorities and taking permissions even to watch what is in the archives are necessary, it definitely discourages many commoners to access these archives. Perhaps only those who are required to access the material for their study or research will be motivated to make an attempt at watching these materials. It is rare that a person who is not institutionally supported will make an attempt to undergo the process of getting permissions to watch the videos.

Second, it makes the access easier not only by circumventing the gate-keepers but also through technology of archiving. Many of the archives preserve even at present times their material in formats that are not in popular usage anymore. If the videos are in VHS tapes, it is difficult to watch the video as the VHS players are not available now. The onus of converting the available resource from format in which the material is preserved to the format that can be used often lies not with the archive or the institution that holds the archive but with the person who wants to watch the video. This too is when the archive agrees to lend the document preserved in a dated technology to the viewer. It is not rare that the institution or the archive refuses all kinds of access to the archived material for

they assume that using the material might 'damage' the document. Some of the archives have started converting their materials from dated formats such as VHS to formats like DVD. This is a welcome move as it partially takes away the hurdle of inaccessibility arising out of dated technologies, but DVD is already a technology that has started losing its popularity. Furthermore, converting archives into DVD does not take away the gate-keeping aspects of an archive. These problems were there with the archives of Ninasam too, till very recently. The available technology at present allows us, to an extent, overcome some of these limitations of archiving.

DOCUMENTATION FOR THE PRESENT

Dissemination of video-documents through easily accessible platforms is the need of the hour as the idea of documentation has also been changing. There was once a time when documentations were made for posterity. Akshara expresses it succinctly: "we have a very exotic image that after a hundred years somebody will come and use it though we really don't know what happens after a hundred years." Our conception of documentation that arises with the need to preserve the archive only for the future is an unfortunate idea as it often does not allow the people living in the present times access these documents. The idea of documentation at present, particularly in our project, is not only of preservation. It is about creating access; this should be a process where the primary intention is to make the documents available to those around us with a hope that these documents will last long and be available to watch even after a hundred years.

It is only a hypothesis to say that a research scholar will come after a hundred years to watch these videos. What we know is that somebody who is in a different continent may want to watch a performance that happens in a small-town in India. Making documentation available to the people in present times may sometimes help audience who stay far away from the place of performance watch it. Instead of doing a long journey, spending money and energy, one can watch these performances from wherever they are. This does not, in any way, stop them making the actual journey to watch the performance; it only provides an opportunity for them to get a glimpse of what is happening; they might plan their travel only because they watched these videos. Hence, what comes first is dissemination.

The dissemination of our documentations is planned in such a way that it should also cater to the coming generations. When the video documents are kept in a particular format, most often in physical forms like DVD or VHS cassettes, the possibilities of losing the document either through physical damage or through the limitations of the technology to access those formats is high. When the process

of archiving is decentralized the longevity of the archive hopefully increases. For example, when the video is uploaded on Youtube, it is no more confined in the racks of a particular building. It is possible that at least a few people will download it to their systems, in various formats of which at least some will be available in the time of access. Thus it positively overcomes the possibility of damaging the archives through physical deterioration or damage to the archives. Akshara, while talking about the possibility of disseminating the videos through Youtube that allows even a person sitting thousands of miles away watch the performance, says that "we are excited about it. We are also scared of the whole thing."

THE METHODOLOGY OF DOCUMENTATION

In this project we had to take a few decisions regarding the methodology of visual documentation. Some of the major decisions were regarding how we shoot the performance, what will be the nature of the intervention by the director of the documentation and how should we place the cameras. It is possible to record a play—as if in a film—scene by scene. The technology easily allows us to record the scenes of a play in a random sequence and put them together into linearity at the stage of editing. Even if one shoots the play sequentially, one can stop the camera and action at every level, taking multiple shots of a sequence in order to achieve a degree of perfection.

In our project the decision was very clear that the intervention of the director of documentation will be absent or minimal in the performance. For example, the team of documenters never asked the performers to adjust their lighting according to the needs of the camera. It was the responsibility of the camera-person to adjust the camera to the lights designed by the production and achieve the best possible result. The cameras that are now available allow the technician to capture good images without interfering in the scheme of lighting that is designed for the stage.

DOCUMENTATION AND THE PRESENCE OF AUDIENCE

Except a few performances where the presence of the audience was significantly contributing to the performance, the documentation was done in a laboratory setting where there was no audience in the auditorium. The recording of talamaddale was, for instance, recorded while there was a house-full audience. This is because there is quite a bit of non-verbal transaction between the artists and audience that happens while the performance is going on. On the other hand,

some proscenium plays such as the Tirugata productions interact to a much lesser extent with the audience. These plays were recorded when the performance was put up not for an audience but for the purpose of recording. It should be noted that there was no absence of audience here. There were always a few people in the auditorium—yet the number of audience was considerably small.

THE CONTINUITY OF ACTION

The performance and documentation took place, even in the plays that were recorded in laboratory conditions, without breaks. After many discussions with theatre directors, actors, connoisseurs and critics we decided that the best way to document theatre is not when the director of the documentation stops the performance every now and then, but it is when the performance goes on as is happens on stage. This is because acting in theatre needs a kind of immersion that can be very easily disturbed when the action is cut and requested to continue from a given point. The aim of this project was not to produce near-perfect films of the performances, but to capture the performance that can give the experience that is as near to the experience of watching a live performance as possible. Performances in theatre, because of complex reasons, will always have some little flaws here and there. Those flaws are seen also in the documentation. However, there were, though not many, instances where the recording was paused and resumed because of a major glitch.

CAMERA AS AUDIENCE

The placement of the camera too was an attempt in creating the auditorium experience. The middle seat of the middle row of the auditorium is often the best place to be seated while watching a performance. The cameras were placed in that position. We usually had three cameras—one wide angle capturing the whole stage throughout the performance, and two for mid-shots and close-ups. All the cameras used for documentation were kept very close to each other to make sure that there is very minimal change in the angle between the stage and the different cameras. This was an attempt to imitate the way a play is watched in an auditorium.

There have been quite a bit of visual documents, particularly by Doordarshan, where three cameras are kept in three different angles to capture the action from all sides. Though that kind of camera arrangement has its own benefits, it fails to give the experience of sitting in an auditorium and watching the play. This is because when the camera is kept in three different places, the view

point of the video travels from one angle to the other. When a person sits in an auditorium, she does not run from point to point to watch the play. She sits in a particular seat and watches the performance. Thus, we decided to keep the cameras together. The person who is watching a performance in an auditorium will normally not keep staring at the whole stage from the beginning to the end. She looks at the whole stage once in a while, also focussing on a particular part of the stage where the major action is taking place. We tried to follow the pattern of an audience's eye in using wide angle, mid-shots and close-ups.

AESTHETICS AND DOCUMENTATION

AbhayaSimha notes that if a performance, Yakshagana for instance, happens in a stage that is 10'x10', we cannot ask them to perform in a stage with different dimensions. The director of the documentation and the crew should be able to, not just produce a good looking visual document, but understand the aesthetics of the performance. One should know why they frame their performance in a stage with a particular dimension. This, AbhayaSimha suggests, need not be learnt by getting trained in the art of Yakshagana, but a sensitive visual artist should be able to see these elements just by keeping an open eye to the performance. According to him, this is not just about the ratio of the stage, even the subject of the play, how it is constructed and how it is executed play very major roles in the way the camera moves. In the documentation of 'Orestes Purana,' a Kannada adaptation of a Greek tragedy, and 'Tartuffe,' a Kannada adaptation of a comedy by Moliere, the framing is visibly different. In the former, there are more wide-angle shots whereas in the latter there are more mid-shots and close-ups. The collective is the fundamental unit in Greek tragedies and the individual was at the centre in French comedies. This was captured in the way the plays were designed. The camera-person may or may not know the details such as the primacy of the community in Greek plays, yet by watching the design of the play she should be able to capture the sense of the community. For this to happen, "the person holding the camera" says Bharucha,"has to be in sync with the process and priority of the documentation."

We hope that this documentation project lays a firm ground for us to document the future productions of Ninasam and other groups. Producing the visual documents and disseminating them online is only the empirical outcome of this project. This project has to make an impact in a very different realm. We hope that the project along with this report that defines and explains the philosophy and technicalities behind this project will make many others take up documentation as a serious activity. There is no necessity of imitating the work that this project has

produced, though these are, we believe, exemplars of good documentation; there has to be a concerted effort from various groups of people where different modes of documentation are tried and discussed to come up with methods that are better than what is already done.