



Fig. 1: *Unscientific Storytelling* workshop with public school children on theatre and science (Photo courtesy of *Unscientific Storytelling*/Deepak Srinivasan).

Performance as 'Process' in Public Engagement

Deepak Srinivasan

As a facilitator of processes, I have often pondered a question: *What constitutes a creative professional?* Around 2005, after changing directions from a formal background in Environmental Science and Neurobiology, I turned to visual-narrative media like theatre. I felt the need to explore theatre tools in order to develop alternative engagements due to a fractured sense of intimacy with my city of birth, Bangalore (now Bengaluru). My initial experience with urban theatre groups led me to be critical of the competitive, celebrity culture permeating many media forms. Instead, a strong sense of social consciousness, collaborative creation, and community engagement was induced through my time with an urban theatre group called *Rafiki*. Gradually, I was introduced to a large but fragmented network of alternative theatre groups and practices in India.

based on form and medium as output. Research and facilitation are often cast prior or external to art production, used to develop inspiration or as art pedagogy. Furthermore, community artists are perceived to be hierarchically beneath artists who work with a defined form or commercial output. Conceptual art and mixed media movements that historically began as critiques of aesthetics, meaning, form and politics stand usurped by capitalist, elitist forces who determine funding, visibility, and trends. Casting process-driven commentaries as "outreach" – and not as art itself – is partisan to market-driven notions of art. For the past 16 years of my practice, I have switched between denying and reclaiming the label of an artist. These have both been my way of responding to working on the fringes of conventional art networks.

My work has evolved through cultural research and community facilitation, yielding different layers of output which emanate from converging processes. First, such work facilitates inclusive, participatory, creative communication tools within various community contexts, from children who are school dropouts to collectives working for the rights of street-based sex workers. These processes manifest as periodic workshops or culminate in a public presentation. Second, my work uses storytelling and performance processes that lead to creating interactive performances in public parks and controlled public zones (e.g., museums). These projects work to critique contexts of learning and postcolonial hangovers in designing museum experience. Third, my work engages with the city and its neighbourhoods as a living practice of visible and invisible histories and experiences, by unravelling and

In 2008, I initiated a free public space movement called *Theatre Jam* as a critique of proscenium-centric performance processes and of the lack of accessible public spaces to perform. Meeting every first Sunday of the month, this self-organising, eclectic network of theatre, dance, music, and photo artists offered workshops, performances, and activities in public areas and parks located in different neighbourhoods across the city. This urban practice is still kept active as *October Jam* by the media collective *Maraa*, with whom I worked back then.¹

Around the same time, as a response to the rapidly changing public sphere of Bengaluru, I had begun a modest engagement with citizen-led urban activist networks, specifically around the loss of avenue trees for urban development and around themes of escalating gender violence in public and private contexts. While participating in and observing street protests, I could not help but notice that the human-rights centric social justice discourse developed by NGO workers and urban activists elicited a weak and unsustainable public response. Somewhat disheartened at this disconnect between urban development issues and the public of neoliberal India, I chose to pursue introspective cultural activism using theatre, storytelling, community media,² and (later) design thinking. My engagement with community spaces grew and allowed the development of creative tools that aided a new emergence of relationalities and culminated in the role of an educator in a design school in 2009. Over the past decade, this work has developed into what I consider 'Critical Practice' with a social design focus.

Creative professionals such as artists have, over time, created their specialisations

re-presenting histories and memories using mixed media (which also respond and evolve with the process). Fourth, my work uses body and narrative to facilitate actors and oneself through autobiographical, psycho-cultural presentation in the public domain.

Based on these principles, I will briefly introduce three different projects that reveal various layers of community facilitation, public space engagement, and creative expression.

Performance for interaction: *Unscientific Storytelling* (2010)

As a faculty member at Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore (now *Srishti-Manipal*), I led a small group of students through a learning context titled *Design for Dialogue*. The larger project hoped to facilitate community experiences and develop performative interventions for a local, government-funded planetarium event, for which Srishti was commissioned to design. My students and I developed *Unscientific Storytelling*, a process that worked with layers of memories and histories imprinted in our culture around the context of 'School and Science' [Fig. 1]. A final performance was designed using documentary film and theatrical improvisations that would interact with a live audience.³

Working with the premise of stiff post-colonial impositions of science in schools – where "content-feeding" supersedes "context-creation" – the process of dialogue created workshops that allowed young, school-going children to understand their learning through creative tools.⁴ As artists, we delved into our own school experiences and developed an alternative layer of storytelling about scientists like Newton and Galileo and their personal struggles. Often told only as super-achiever biographies accompanied by a list of inventions and dates, the humans behind their science are often poorly depicted in Indian schools. A project theme titled *Scientists of the East* explored a few early Indian scientists' work, philosophy, life, and social context. Much of this history is poorly archived. Two of my student collaborators, Gauri Sanghi and Rajasee Ray, further helped develop a parallel exhibit, *Scientist Saloon*, where school children could dress up as a scientist and conduct experiments of their own. Such a performative intervention at a public gallery allowed young visitors to be relieved of being constantly reprimanded for touching exhibits. It enabled them to have a sensorial and contemplative experience of the material and context with which they had come to engage.⁵ As contemplation on notes and experiences in the process, a final artist's book was produced.⁶

Performance for dialogue: *The Draupadi Project* (2012-2015)

Bengaluru *Karaga* is an urban ritual-procession held by a traditional community, and it marks the city's geo-cultural sites. I was born in 1979 in this city, to parents whose families were naturalised here for a couple of generations. Yet, the *Karaga* remained relegated to the traditional old city, whereas modernising citizens lost their connection to this quasi-urban public ritual. *Draupadi*, the primordial goddess revered by the *Tigala* community, is also the female protagonist of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The male head-priest of the *Tigala* community cross-dresses and is said to be possessed by the spirit of *Draupadi*. He leads the procession through the streets of the old city, while a reverent, yet festive atmosphere with food, music and other activities take place.

Since 2007, I have been interested in mapping the interwoven histories and memories of neighbourhoods in Bangalore /Bengaluru. This period witnessed a peak in conservative-traditionalist politics, antagonistic towards women adopting Western liberalism through their attire. Growing public and state resentment



Fig. 2 (left): Image from a photo-art series that made geo-cultural references to Bengaluru's Trees. (Photo courtesy of The Draupadi Project/Deepak Srinivasan).

Fig. 3 (below): Still from the film *Desidere 7*, a visual-commentary that featured The Draupadi Project (Photo courtesy Nicolas Grandi).



Fig. 4 (right): *Hasivu Kanasu* performance still (Photo courtesy of Hasivu Kanasu/Deepak Srinivasan).

Fig. 5 (below): *Hasivu Kanasu* performance still (Photo courtesy of Hasivu Kanasu/Deepak Srinivasan).



against communities of transgender women and cross-dressing men also escalated during this time. As an anomaly, the *Karaga* procession stood as an instance of permissibility and reverence for a male priest crossdressing in public. This thought triggered the need for a series of live performances, where I donned the character of Draupadi and spoke to the city's public on the streets. Conversations organically arose around topics like gender, courtship, violation, and changing cityscapes.

Initiated in 2012, the project has since evolved and traversed through theatre, film, and photography, adapting to different contexts of gender, desire, sexuality, and ecology [Fig. 2-3]. My interests in myth and memory have also subsequently expanded beyond the geo-cultural to also include queer readings of such material.⁷

Performance as catharsis: *Hasivu Kanasu/Hunger Dreams* (2014-2017)

My interest in communities emerged from a desire to democratise public space, to encourage public expression, and to reclaim 'publicness.' As a facilitator, I have used theatre tools to aid a development of personal and political perspectives for marginalised groups (e.g., labour, gender, sexuality) and to contextualise learning experiences for young adults. These contexts would be conventionally categorised as emerging from social development frameworks. However, my deep intent has been to explore cultural and psychological transits.

Hasivu Kanasu was a community theatre project that ran from 2014-2017, in collaboration with *Sadhana Mahila Sangha*, a Bengaluru-based collective that works to secure the legal rights of street-based sex workers [Fig. 4-5]. Initiated by Rumi Harish and D Saraswathi, artist-activists from Karnataka state, they began collecting oral history narratives of sex workers to ultimately craft a three-act proscenium text. Saraswathi, a renowned Kannada writer and thinker, evoked subtle aspects of being human through her script. It gently prods the audience about the societal absurdity of exoticising or dehumanising women who perform sex work by revealing their everydayness, aspirations, and philosophy of living.

Working with non-actors – women volunteers who doubled as field activists for *Sadhana Mahila Sangha* – and allowing them to find the artist within by working with stories from their own communities was a deeply moving process for me.⁸

My primary, visible role in this process was to facilitate a dramatisation of a textured script, but I wanted to reach into the actual being of participants such that they became aware of their internal dialogue and shifts while working with the text and the medium of theatre. I designed workshops to understand body, movement, voice, and improvisation, without the rigid imposition of the script's directions alone. This allowed the participants to explore their inner being. Due to long colonial and postcolonial histories and legal-cultural battles over women's bodies and agency, South-Asian beingness for women – especially sex workers – had many imbibed and hidden layers that required unravelling. As an artist interested in the histories of gender, art, culture, and eroticism, I feel that postcolonial delinking of sex work from artistic practice – and compartmentalising and shaming women's bodies – has led to extreme social repression as well as to subsequent violations of women's rights and safety in private and public domains. For women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, creative storytelling practices allow both intimacy and distance from experiences of familiarity.

To give a glimpse into the process, I cite an experiential moment here from one of the residential workshops. As a core process, we designed three-part residential workshops in rural terrain, where participants felt comfortable and familiar (most of them spent earlier years in rural environments before encountering harsh urban realities). Each day began with a walk into nature, and

reconnection with the ecological landscape brought memories of childhood back to the women. One participant with an agricultural background began identifying herbs and medicinal plants. Another deftly trekked up a rocky hill, having grown up in the central rural landscape of Chitradurga district in Karnataka. The landscape evoked knowledge systems lost or buried in the women, all of whom were Dalit.

With respect to the script, narratives that are deeply personal can trigger further victimisation. Hence, it was important to work not just with the text they knew so well, but also with their body, as holding in experiential memories. Participants got to explore movement, character development, and storytelling in the pursuit of self-expression and catharsis.

As one of the participants, Satya, quipped in Kannada, right after their first show in December 2014, "Since 1990, we stood on the streets with placards, voicing the violation of rights of our women by state and society. An apathetic Bengaluru would barely take note! Not a single passerby came over to dialogue with us, let alone be an ally. Today, in 2014, an audience of over 600 experienced our stories and bodies as art and artists, and they sat through, engaged for over an hour! This is all we wanted from this city, and what we waited for, for 25 years!"⁹

The troupe of six participants named itself *Prakriti Kala Thanda* (Nature's Talent Troupe). Between 2014-2018, the group performed at a few national theatre festivals and urban conferences on gender and urbanism.

By outlining these projects, I am hoping to share my creative and community media process, which has avoided planning a product output. I use performance as a medium to unravel personal and collective identity, to challenge external and internal constructs, and to allow new emergence. I have hoped to delve into the criss-crossing of lived experience of traditions and modernities, psycho-social layers of gender, and the resultant production of space.

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Notes

- 1 October Jam, curated by Maraa: <https://www.maraa.in/arts/festivals>
- 2 Srinivasan, D (Dec 2010) *The Aesthetics of Participation*, 'Ready to Change? An experimental forum on Cultural and Social Innovation', hosted by Bunker, Ljubijana. Video of presentation: <https://vimeo.com/18987805>
- 3 Excerpts from the final *Unscientific Storytelling* performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbrDO-0JY8Q>
- 4 Children's workshop documentation video from *Unscientific Storytelling*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgkpHXXGJl8>
- 5 *Scientist Saloon* documentation video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcyG1FvdpzE&t=1s>
- 6 This artist's book is available online: <https://issuu.com/gaurisanghi/docs/unscientificstorytelling>
- 7 Srinivasan, Deepak. 2020. "Exploring Gender in South-Asian Cultural Memory through Artistic Process." *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research* 76(5-7): 383-406. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/02604027.2020.1778341>
- 8 Digital English documentation of the process with translated text of the script and an interview of participants: https://issuu.com/cosmiccloud/docs/hasivu_kanasu_merged-pdfux-add-blank (Translated from Kannada and produced by *Sadhana Mahila Sangha*, Bengaluru).
- 9 Local press report (in Kannada Language) that carried a detailed review of the theatre piece and the issue it handled: <https://www.facebook.com/events/454021241475583/permalink/456479247896449/>. The performance seemed to orient local journalism towards sensitivity rather than sensationalism.