**‘We give too much importance to hero worship…No negative views are tolerated’ | The Indian Express**

Summary. Related. In this Idea Exchange session with the Loksatta in Pune,actor-director-playwright Girish Karnad talks about his love for fiction,the transition to cinema,his decision to write an autobiography and why his attacks on Naipaul,Tagore were justified. Girish Kuber: You have been doing theatre and films,even Hindi films,and many of us have grown up with them. Over time,have you seen a degeneration of Hindi cinema? Not really. Indeed,multiplexes have given good cinema a chance. A while back,only commercial movies did good business. There was also good cinema with strong themes,good structure and an audience that was ready to experiment,but such films were fewer. For an audience who liked only entertainment,a lot of song,dance routines and action scenes would be packed in the film. Many a time distributors would decide the format of the film. Punjabi distributors would want action scenes whereas Tamil ones would want lots of song and dance routines. It became a challenge for the writer/director to work around this format and make something different. Then multiplexes arrived. It was a dramatic turn for cinema. Multiplexes changed the economic equation. For an audience that had a different taste in cinema,different theatres opened. Then,corporates started producing films. Through these efforts,some good cinema was seen. Girish Kulkarni<U+0092>s Vihir,Vicky Donor were films that were made outside the set formula. Another noticeable film was Shanghai. Ravindra Pathare: As an eminent playwright,what is it about theatre you miss now? The four of us,I<U+0092>d say. (Mohan Rakesh,Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar,and me.) Satyajit Ray,Bimal Roy and Guru Dutt were making movies at the time. The National School of Drama had been established. Satyadev Dubey had just started a Hindi theatre movement in Mumbai. From around 1960 till 1982,theatre was the only form of entertainment. Most importantly,there was no television. So there was a good audience which regularly watched plays. We are lucky in a way that we all worked around the same time period. Dubey and Arvind Deshpande were given space at Walchand Terrace,and we finally had a place of our own… There was no competition among us. Once I went to meet Dubey at Walchand Terrace,and Vijay Tendulkar was there. We fell asleep there and woke up to find Badal Sircar sleeping next to us! It was an exciting time… We translated each other<U+0092>s plays into our own languages. Once,just before the opening night of a play,Mohan Rakesh joked,<U+0091>The future of Indian theatre is in our hands.<U+0092> I was 10 years younger than Tendulkar,Badal Sircar,Mohan Rakesh and that worked to my advantage. Everything that they received,they passed it on to me. Even awards. In fact,Tendulkar deserved to get the Jnanpith Award before me. Abhijeet Tamhane: Why did you choose the story of Tughlaq for your first play? When I started writing historical plays,that genre was very prevalent. I researched on everything right from the Mohenjo-daro era to the Mauryas and then finally to the Tughlaq dynasty. Tughlaq was known as the mad king. That drew me to the story. I wanted to write a historical play which would reflect the times of today. I tried to look at the person and not the king. I also highlighted the events that followed because of his rule. People talked about how the play depicted the social status of the Nehru period. It might be so,but I never wrote the play with the intention of giving a political commentary on the times. Ravindra Pathare: And your most recent play is based on the situation in Bangalore today… It<U+0092>s called Benda Kalu on Toast. We were playwrights from Bangalore who had come from rural areas. In Kannada there is no separate rural literature like in Marathi. Kannada literature is rural literature. There is a story on the name of Bangalore. It is said that a king once came here in poverty. He had nothing to eat when an old man gave him baked beans,which are called bendakalu in Kannada. From bendakalu to…Bengalaru. This story has nothing to do with the story of the play,I just borrowed the name. The play opens through 15 different plots through different characters. It captures the changing nature of the city. I don<U+0092>t write any situational plays. I write about people. Rohan Tillu: Tell us about your journey as a writer… My interest in fiction goes back to my days in Sirsi. My father had a government job and during WWII,he was transferred there. My mother was very upset. The place we were shifting to was just a small village in north Karnataka. Electricity had not yet reached there,so at night,we lit oil lamps. The elders of the village would narrate stories from Mahabharata and Ramayana. There were some broken-down theatres,where small companies would perform Marathi musicals. There were also religious teachings,kirtans that we would attend. All these had a very strong influence on me. I came across poet Irawati Karve<U+0092>s Yuganta,M G Rangnekar,Acharya Atre type of social plays. I decided I would not centre my plays around the living room. I would look for other formats. It was then I saw Antigone by Alkazi. At that time,after the war,there was a lot of censorship. So if you wanted to say something,you said it in a play. Making a devotional tragedy was not possible,because if you believed in God,you knew he would come to your rescue. So in Yayati,I took the help of fiction. Later in Agnivarsha also,I did the same. Then I saw the 20th-century French tragedies when I went to Oxford. It was there I realised that I could use fiction to present modern views. Abhijit Ghorpade: Why an autobiography now? I see it as a documentation of the ages. They say an autobiography never has the complete truth. A lot of authors try to hide their past relationships. But if a relationship has had a big influence,then it should be written about. I was born in 1938. In 1947,India won independence. The <U+0092>60s were a golden age for Indian cinema. My life is a documentation of those times. There has to be a record of all the things that were happening during that time,which is perhaps why I wrote this autobiography. Originally written in Kannada,I<U+0092>ve named the book Aadadata Aayushya. I borrowed the title from famous Kannada poet D R Bendre. In the first part of the autobiography,I have written a lot about my mother and elder brother. My mother was a widow. She had a son from a previous marriage. My mother was a nurse and father,a doctor. They loved each other but my mother wasn<U+0092>t sure if my father would marry a widow like her. My father was also a little worried of what the society would make of their marriage. They lived together for five years. It was a bold decision in those days. Finally they got married. At that time,my elder brother was 8 or 9 years old. I wondered how all these things affected him and wrote about that. Our parents didn<U+0092>t tell us about this. So I always thought he was my real brother. At the age of 82,my mother wrote about that period of her life and it was then we found out. When my father passed away,people said my elder brother had no right to perform the last rituals. I didn<U+0092>t understand why they said that since my brother always attached Karnad to his name too. So we had to fight to get him that right. Rohan Tillu: Did you expect such controversy with. Samskara? I was deeply influenced by Satyajit Ray<U+0092>s films. I wanted to try making films. U R Ananthamurthy<U+0092>s Samskara was a great novel. A couple of friends and I decided that a movie must be made based on this. We put together Rs 95,000 and made the film. I was an editor at Oxford University Press at that time. We used the car that was given to me by OUP in our production. We called ourselves the <U+0091>Madras Group<U+0092>. The movie was made,but was alleged to be anti-Brahmin. I was surprised because there was nothing anti-Brahmin in the book and the movie was based on the book. It was an exact depiction of rural life. The movie was banned and we couldn<U+0092>t understand why. Then we started to protest. The writer of the story was a Brahmin,the producer was a Brahmin,as were most people associated with the film. Then why would we put forth anti-Brahmin views? But the ban stayed,so we kept protesting. The result was,the movie got a lot of attention and when the ban was lifted,it ran to packed houses. Shyam Benegal saw me in this film and cast me in Nishant. Mukund Sangoram: You<U+0092>re not afraid of controversy. Tell us about your days in Pune. There were times when my post was at stake,be it the presidentship of the Sangeet Natak Akademi or directorship of the FTII. I consider myself fortunate to have received these honours. I like working as an administrator because it gives you the right to take and enforce decisions. As president of the Sangeet Natak Akademi,I found that Koodiyattam as an art form was largely neglected. Koodiyattam is the oldest surviving art form today. The oldest master of Koodiyattam was an 82-year-old at the time. Fine arts have to be learned personally from the masters. Hence I thought that something needed to be done to save Koodiyattam. I sent a proposal to the Mantralaya and received a reply saying that a committee would be appointed to study it. I was fairly aware of what would be the actual outcome of that. So I made a plan myself and decided to provide Rs 5 lakh as funds. The secretary of the Central Cultural Department said that this would not be possible as the Akademi does not have any financial rights. But I thought that,at the most,I would have to leave my post. I am proud of the fact that I saved Koodiyattam,and even the UNICEF has declared it a global historical legacy. The same happened in the case of the FTII. There was a plan to install a Doordarshan centre in the FTII compound,and a division of the premises was proposed. A committee visited the FTII to conduct a survey. But I learned that the survey was just a formality. I voiced my opposition. I met the Information and Broadcasting minister and told him that I was against the division of the FTII,and that I would quit if it happened. He told me that he had no idea that a division was already decided. He told me that nothing of the sort would happen. Mukund Sangoram : That<U+0092>s almost like a lobbyist… Democracy works on lobbying,it is a part of the democratic process. So why not lobby for public interest? Issues of public interest need lobbying. There are some differences between lobbying and ochlocracy. Ochlocracy takes advantage of democracy,but once ochlocracy starts getting enforced,democratic processes are not observed. There are many who say that ochlocracy is on the rise in the arts,but bear in mind,that it was accepted as part of our politics when the Babri Masjid was demolished. The one accused of encouraging the mob (L K Advani) went on to become the home minister of the country. This was a sign of ochlocracy being accepted as a part of politics. I have a lot of respect for Vijay Tendulkar; I have translated many of his plays. But I had a lot of differences with him. His plays lack ambiguity. For example his play Shantata Court Chalu Aahe! or Sakharam Binder. Not only did his plays have a predictable ending,but there was no scope of imagination for the audience. But I liked Ghashiram Kotwal. In my plays,truth is always ambiguous. Ravi Amale: You have had disagreements with your contemporaries…like the one you had with Amitabh Bachchan. With Amitabh Bachchan,I have disagreements but also appreciation. I never liked that he did the Gujarat campaign. Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar,who are Muslims…their dialogues have had a big role to play in his career. Despite this,Amitabh Bachchan doing the Gujarat campaign is deeply annoying,very shocking. What happened in Gujarat in 2002 was condemnable. But that Amitabh is a great artiste is beyond doubt. Girish Kuber: Was it the same with Naipaul and Tagore? Nowadays,competition between media has gone up considerably. Anything can become big news. It is the media that gives wind to a lot of controversies. Last year,in Mumbai,V S Naipaul was given an award. Later from the same platform,I criticised him. Even before 2002,Naipaul was being fielded in the Nobel Prize race. But it was only two years after the World Trade Centre was demolished that Naipaul was given the Nobel Prize. The reason behind that was obvious. Naipaul always had a prejudiced view of looking at Muslims. His writing on Indian Muslims is also prejudiced. He never understood the Ganga-Jamna culture. We give too much importance to hero worship. If a person is considered great,no negative views are tolerated. The same thing happened with my criticism of Rabindranath Tagore. Even in Bengali theatre,Tagore has never been accepted as a great playwright. Not a single play by Tagore could be successfully presented in Bengali theatre. Some of his plays became successful in the 1970s,the credit for which should really be given to the directors of that time. Ravindra Pathare: Tell us more about your experience with theatre and cinema. It is very difficult to achieve success in the field of cinema. But,once you taste success,it is very difficult to back out. My real identity is theatre,not movies. I got interested in movies,and later out of my own choice,I stopped producing and directing films. But cinema had an important impact on me. I learned a lot of things like editing,better interpretation of scenes and to present visuals in a more emphatic manner. Because of Hindi cinema,I also got recognition as an actor. Theatre is a pure art. I never felt like making a film out of a play,most of my films were based on novels…In our case,a novel is a form more amicable to the middle class taste. On the other hand,cinema caters to the taste of the working class. If you notice the changes in our cities,you will realise cinema has also changed. After Partition,a number of refugees came to India. Cinema found a large audience in the labour class. In the <U+0092>80s,colour TV emerged and the middle class was drawn to it. Films that succeed in multiplexes these days are for the middle class. Rohan Tillu: Do you suggest that a writer,an artist,should take a political stand? These are the days of linguistic and caste politics. How can you deny freedom? In Karnataka,the BJP and JD(S) government had banned cow slaughter. At that time U R Ananthamurthy and I opposed it. We are both Hindu Brahmins and we don<U+0092>t eat beef but we still opposed it. Those who eat beef have the freedom to do that and how can you deny that to them?