

Article 1

SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE AND THE KACHAHARI THEATRE OF SINDHULI NEPAL

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Abstract

This paper is based on field research conducted over the course of a year among Dalit theatre workers in Eastern Nepal. It explores how and why war factions direct states of fear in a garrison town in Eastern Nepal, and attends to the ways in which local theatre activists negotiate witnessed and rumoured violence within this context. As a study examining local reactions to national narratives of violence, this work contributes to understandings of the complex relationship between violence, theatre activism and performance theory.

Résumé

Cet article est basé sur des recherches menées sur le terrain pendant une année parmi les travailleurs Dalit de théâtre, dans le Népal oriental. Il explore comment et pourquoi les factions en guerre causent des états de crainte dans une ville de garnison dans le Népal oriental, et observe les façons avec lesquelles les activistes de théâtre locaux négocient des violences observées et supposées, dans ce contexte. En tant qu'étude examinant les réactions locales face à des narrations nationales de violence, ce travail contribue aux compréhensions de la relation complexe entre la violence, l'activisme par le théâtre et la théorie de la performance.

Resumen

Este artículo se basa en la investigación de campo realizada durante un año entre los trabajadores de teatro Dalit en el Este de Nepal, explorando cómo y por qué facciones bélicas controlan estados de temor en una ciudad con guarnición en el Este de Nepal, y atendiendo a los métodos con los cuales los activistas locales del teatro sortean, dentro de este contexto, la las reacciones locales relativas a las narrativas nacionales de violencia, este trabajo contribuye a la comprensión de la relación compleja entre la violencia, el activismo teatral y la teoría de actuación.

Author's biography

Professor Alberto Guevara pursues a lifelong interest in the intersections of performance and politics. Under the Nicaraguan Sandinista government, he participated in a cultural brigade and received training at the National Theatre School. His scholarly work focuses on contestations of social and national politics through performance and the theatricality of violence. He has collaborated with a number of international intercultural theatre organisations, and has co-curated and contributed multimedia works to two exhibitions dealing with the aftermath of the Nicaraguan revolution. Recent major projects include a documentary film, *Pesticide, Performance, Protest: The Theatricality of Flesh in Nicaragua*, published by *InTensions* no. 1, 2008, available at www.yorku.ca/intent/issue1.

Biographie de l'auteur

Le professeur Alberto Guevara a eu toute sa vie un intérêt pour les intersections du spectacle et de la politique. A l'époque du gouvernement sandiniste du Nicaragua, il participait à une brigade culturelle et reçut une formation à l'Ecole nationale du théâtre. Ses travaux académiques se concentrent sur les contestations des politiques sociales et nationales par la représentation théâtrale et la théâtralité de la violence. Il a collaboré avec un certain nombre d'organisations théâtrales interculturelles et a co-organisé et réalisé des travaux multimédia pour deux expositions traitant des conséquences de la Révolution au Nicaragua. Ses projets récents comprennent un film documentaire, *Pesticide, Performance, Protest: The Theatricality of Flesh in Nicaragua*, (Pesticide, Spectacle, Contestation : La théâtralité de la chair au Nicaragua) publié par *InTensions* no. 1, 2008, disponible à www.yorku.ca/intent/issue1.

Biografía del autor

Durante toda su vida, el Profesor Guevara ha seguido con interés las intersecciones entre actuación y política. Participó, durante el Gobierno Sandinista en Nicaragua, en la brigada cultural y recibió entrenamiento en la Escuela del Teatro Nacional. Su trabajo académico se concentra en las controversias de las políticas sociales y nacionales a través de la actuación y la teatralidad de la violencia. Ha cooperado con un número de organizaciones interculturales de teatro internacionales y co-dirigido y contribuido trabajos multimedia para dos exposiciones que se ocupan de las consecuencias de la revolución nicaragüense. Sus recientes proyectos más importantes incluyen una película documental '*Pesticide, Performance, Protest: The Theatricality of Flesh in Nicaragua*' (*Pesticida, Actuación, Protesta: La Teatralidad de Carne en Nicaragua*), publicada en '*InTensions*' n° 1, 2008, y disponible en la página web www.yorku.ca/intent/issue1.

SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE AND THE KACHAHARI THEATRE OF SINDHULI NEPAL

This paper is based on field research carried out among a Dalit theatre group working against caste discrimination in an atmosphere of fear and violence in Sindhuli, an eastern district of Nepal. It explores how and why Maoist and government troops *direct* states of violence and fear in a garrison town, and pays attention to the ways in which the members of the theatre group negotiate witnessed and rumoured violence within this context.

I spent the summer of 2005 living among these activists and taking part in their theatre work, consisting of workshops, preparations, rehearsals and public presentations. One of my goals during this research was to gain a sense of how these theatre workers — who regard *theatre of the oppressed* as a tool for social change — practise their craft in this tense local and national context. What are the possibilities for and challenges of engaging in social activism in a context where critique of current inequalities is the cause espoused by Maoist rebels and therefore dangerous for the group?

As I came to realise, the ongoing work of the Dalit theatre group requires careful consideration and management of local authorities' perception of the group in town and a clear understanding of the national socio/political situation. As a study of the theatre group's embodied reactions to national narratives of violence, this work aims to contribute to understandings of the complex relationship between political violence, theatre activism and performance theory.

This exploration seeks to add to the study of performed violence from an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective (e.g. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Feldman 2000; Coronil and Skurski 1991; Parkin 1985; Taussig 2004; Skidmore 2003; Taylor 1996, 2003). Understanding violence as encompassing all forms of 'controlling processes that assault basic human freedoms and individual and collective survival' (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 21), the focus here is on symbolic violence as a 'theatricalised violence' in both national and local contexts. The study looks at violence as an evocative act that has cross-cultural resonance (Parkin 1985: 2), and that needs to be understood within its own particular cultural, social and historical context.

'Theatricality of violence' as an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural framework for analysing social relations revolves around the notion of 'rhetoricity' as a social, political and cultural intentionality in contested systems of power relations. From a 'dramaturgical standpoint' (Turner 1988), the *form* of presenting a situation (i.e. violence, control, force, power or social accommodation) by actors aiming to create a certain impression on audiences can be viewed as 'theatricality', and is shaped by environment, audience and actors (Goffman 1959). As in the conventions of the 'theatre', the purpose of 'theatricality' is to activate audiences' actions. The construction of social relations in this case involves roles, characters, props, supporting casts, scenes and audiences.

Echoing Taussig's (2004) view that cultures of fear and terror 'are based on and nourished by silence and myth ... by means of rumour and fantasy woven in a dense web of magic realism' (2004: 49), I propose that 'theatricalised violence' is a powerful tool for social control in the ongoing civil unrest in Nepal. As a tool and arena for domination and subjugation, the 'theatricality of violence' is both 'actual' and 'symbolic'. As a 'scopic regime', it is 'an ensemble of practices and discourses that establish truth claims' (Feldman 2000: 49), which normalises social structures of control. I do not want to imply that a state of fear is not generated and perpetuated by actual physical violence in Nepal. Certainly, actual violence and fear suffuse people's everyday lives — thus the institutionalisation of symbolic (i.e. theatricalised) violence staged by the protagonists of the war in Nepal with a population (audiences) in mind has become a powerful tool for maintaining and challenging power in the country. For example, casting others involved in the social and political conflict of Nepal as heroes, villains or neutral bystanders, depending who is enacting the social performance in Nepal during the conflict, can be seen as a deliberate effort to create a social environment facilitating the creation, imposition or replacement of normative systems in the population.

It is under the conditions of fear of violence, for example, that individuals and groups could enact social relations in public and private, as masks of intentions and feelings and as ritualised normative behaviours. 'Neutrality' or silence about what is going on around one in this context could become a password, a mask, a daily ritual — and a way to access a sense of 'normalcy' in one's social life. For the members of

the Dalit theatre group, for instance, claiming 'neutrality' in public and even in private became a presentation of self, allowing their critical theatrical activist work against caste discrimination to continue. It is precisely in this normalising framework imposed by the protagonists of terror and violence in the country that the members of the theatrical group and others have found the tools to defy caste discrimination and systematised historical oppression, and to oppose social inequality.

During my stay in Sindhulimadi, the district headquarters of Sindhuli, I observed my informants' verbal and non-verbal reactions to national and local events. When it came to both their private theatrical and public everyday lives, I paid particular attention to the dominant and counter-hegemonic representations of Nepal's current political and social conflicts. I engaged in informal discussions with no particular priority of questioning, as open-ended dialogues allowed rich and diverse knowledge to emerge. I also conducted dozens of interviews with my main informants, Bir Bahadur and Deepak, their families and many other people in town. The written data I was able to assemble here represent my effort at a cross-cultural and intersubjective discussion. My hope is that this ethnographically negotiated article will serve as a catalyst for further research on this topic and on the region.

Contexts: The 'people's war' and the theatricality of violence and fear

I draw on performance theory (e.g. Turner 1988; Schechner 1985, 1993, 1998; Beeman 1993; Fabian 1990, 1998; Taylor 2003; Reed 1996) as a theoretical and methodological framework for this social/cultural inquiry, and on phenomenology (e.g. Jackson 1996; Desjarlais 1992, 2003; Feldman 2000) as an experimental vehicle that facilitates a close interaction between the internal (my own and my informants' subjective experiences) and external (the external to the subject) conditions of knowledge. As a framework of analysis, I use the concept of the 'theatricality of violence' to navigate between two very important overlapping social spaces: the theatre of activism within a context of social conflict; and the theatricalisation of the national conflict within the nation. Following is a brief exploration of the historical context of this national conflict.

As a multi-ethnic and caste-based society, Nepal is a nation where one of the fastest developing civil wars in the world took place from 1996 to 2005. The Maoists and the political parties signed a new peace agreement in the last months of 2006. This new deal sidelined the power of the monarchy to a great extent, and has given the Maoists a chance to participate in the 'democratic' process again. By 2008 the old regime gave way to a new republic and as of late 2008 the Maoists were occupying the most important positions of political power in the new republic. There is great optimism in the country about the prospects for long-term peace.

Ethnic and social groups such as the Dalits, the Magars, the Tharu and many others felt and still feel a sense of cultural and social prejudice, and are struggling to affirm their vision of a 'Nepali nation' (Thapa 2003). The establishment of a liberal market economy in the country in the 1990s did not change the marginalisation felt by ethnic groups, Dalits and women (Roka 2005). Moreover, 'because of liberal democracy ethnic groups, Dalits and women, all of whom have long been oppressed, realised the extent to which they have been ignored in religious, social, political, economic and also psychological terms' (Roka 2005: 250). The traditional elites and ruling groups, the Brahmin-Kshetris, have become the target of those ethnic and social groups fighting for political and cultural emancipation. The 'people's war', an effort to put an end to the current political system that the Maoists perceive as oppressive, is seen by some (mostly intellectuals and academics) as the ultimate outcome of centuries of systematic inequality in the country (see, for example, Thapa and Sijapati 2003; Thapa 2003; Hutt 2004). There are some intellectuals who disagree with the notion that the rebellion is the consequence of failed development, poverty and corruption (see Hachhethu, cited in Hutt 2004). The rebels have harnessed this 'longstanding resentment of many minority ethnic communities' to their cause (Hutt 2004: 18). They have organised a number of liberation fronts around these groups (the Tamang National Liberation Front and the Tharuwan National Liberation Front among others). The Maoists have also taken the cause of groups such as the Dalits as they advocate the elimination of caste discrimination in the country. The 'people's war' launched in 1996 by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) stretched to almost half of the territory of Nepal. What was initially a group of a few hundred poor peasants, former soldiers and unemployed youth grew to comprise an army of more than 25 000 fighters by 2006.

In February 2005, after almost a decade of bloodshed, King Gyanendra, trying to put an end to the Maoist rebellion, declared a state of emergency and dissolved the government. This royal takeover brought the monarchy and the mainstream political parties into sharp conflict with each other. Political leaders were

detained and some remained in detention seven months later. Mass detentions, the curtailing of freedom of speech, the security forces' involvement in the disappearance of alleged Maoist sympathisers and human rights activists, and the increasing military campaigns by the Maoists — sometimes against civilians, and not only in the countryside but also in the cities — were just some indicators of the country's delicate political situation.

When my wife and I arrived in Nepal in the summer of 2005, Kathmandu seemed at first unchanged from the previous year. In the main tourist zone of Thamel, shopkeepers found the flow of visitors low, but it had been that way for several years. As we joined my friends, local artists and expatriates, we started to feel a sense of vulnerability and fear around us. The social and political violence streaming from the government's heightened war on 'terror' had taken its toll on my contacts. This situation — a ban on non-governmental radio stations, censorship of all media, the detention of political and student leaders, and the alleged torture and disappearance of some human rights and social activists — has created a state of apprehension in the population, which rendered my friends almost silent about the political and social situation. The previous year, some acquaintances and informants had openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the country's leadership. In contrast, this year the King's name was never uttered in my presence and the mention of the social and political situation was consistently vague. For example, one friend informed me that 'everything is not fine, but the conflict will be over soon'. He would not elaborate on how it was not fine and instead quickly changed the topic. Another friend, who manages a shop in Kathmandu, told me that the problem was in remote areas: 'If you stay in the capital there is no problem. Everything is fine here.' Many shopkeepers in Thamel were surprised to hear of our intended destination in the Eastern part of Nepal. This was a region, they told us in hushed tones, controlled by the 'second government' — a term I heard often throughout my stay in reference to the Maoists.

We were apprehensive about the safety of our contacts. We were mainly concerned about the consequences their association with us — two Western scholars — could mean for them under the present circumstances. After some days in Kathmandu, I established contact with Bir Bahadur and Deepak, the director and the secretary of the Dalit Kachahari Drama Group Sindhuli. While our theatre friends appreciated our ethical concerns, they encouraged us in our plans to go east. They assured me that the situation was calm and, perhaps most significantly, they emphasised that they had good relations with the local (government) authorities. The group had been waiting for us for a year since our last visit, and local authorities were aware of our imminent arrival. As the eastern area is not one frequented by tourists, and I apparently look Nepali — which they insisted could be dangerous for us — we were provided with an escort from another theatre group who accompanied us on the bus rides from Kathmandu to the town. Thanks to this guide and our Canadian passports, we were able to get through the dozen or so military checkpoints that mark the journey on every route in and out of Kathmandu without incident, and arrived safely in Sindhulimadi.

Though not far from Kathmandu (about 120 kilometres), it takes over twelve hours to access the district headquarters, Sindhulimadi, from the capital and annually the monsoon increases the town's isolation by destroying the dirt road leading to the town. Sindhuli is one of the many sectors affected by the recent waves of Maoist insurgency. Military checkpoints mark all entry points to the town. Some years ago, according to locals, the army and police tried to dislodge Maoists from some of those few surrounding villages accessible by vehicle. Whether as a result of intimidation and/or strategy, army and police now do not venture beyond Sindhulimadi. Due to the presence of the insurgents in the area, the residents of Sindhulimadi and its surrounding villages observe a military curfew. From 8.00 p.m. to 4.00 a.m., people's movements are restricted to their own houses. No one can step outside. Violation of this restriction places one at risk of being shot by the police or military, who jointly monitor movement from vantage points throughout the valley.

Sindhulimadi (population about 5000) appeared to be relatively peaceful. With its throngs of goats, solitary cows and flocks of ducks wandering the streets at all times, and its many colourful shops exhibiting their merchandise, its inhabitants did not look particularly stressed or anxious. At the same time, there were hundreds of troops stationed in town, with a highly visible presence. They ride or walk through the streets in groups throughout the day; their guard posts surround the valley; an occasional helicopter flies overhead. In the morning, we would wake to the sound of hundreds of boots pounding the street marking the start of a series of daily spectacular exercises and patrols into the city. And yet, echoing our discussions with friends in Kathmandu, in Sindhuli there was no war; the war was in 'remote villages', our informants told us.

Such assertions by our contacts were given in spite of almost daily and sometimes dramatic protests from students, journalists and political parties in Kathmandu's streets and throughout the country, including Sindhulimadi. While I was in Nepal, there were daily rallies for press freedom, the liberation of political leaders in jail and the restitution of democracy. A motorcycle rally organised by Nepali Congress Party (*Kathmandu Post*, 31 July 2005), coconut offerings to monkeys in the Swoyanbhunath temple organised by journalists (*Kathmandu Post*, 22 June 2005) and a torch rally against student leaders' arrests (*Himalayan Times*, 30 July 2005) were some of the social and political dramas performed in Kathmandu. In a country experiencing violent, sometimes deadly, political and social upheaval, the reactions of my friends seemed contradictory. I sensed fear and vulnerability all around me. However, there was total silence about the war and life continued as if nothing were happening.

Was I feeling something that was not being experienced by the people in town in general and by my informants in particular? As my sense of fear and vulnerability began to increase, I started to want to know about the people's deep sense (emotional response) of the situation. It became clear, as I experienced life among this community, that 'to an important extent all societies live by fictions ... as reality' (Taussig 2004: 49). Living by fictions and myth as reality helps carry on the status quo. According to Suárez-Orozco (2004: 384), referring to the 'regime of terror' perpetuated by the Argentinean government in the 1970s, 'some people came to believe that there were minor abuses against only the ones who were involved in something'. Thus 'collective silence became part of the madness as if it intervened in the causality of events' (Suárez-Orozco 2004: 384–85). Fear shapes people's social interactions.

For Skidmore (2003), referring to the political conflict in Burma, 'fear is the most common emotion constructed by the regime. At times its generation is an accidental, unplanned side effect of the regime's policies, but the majority of the time, the regime deliberately uses strategic and symbolic violence to engender fear and terror.' (2003: 9) In Nepal, where the symbols of violence are all around, fear — as in the case described by Skidmore — is an instrument of control and domination. The performance of 'neutrality' as an effect of violence could be a necessity of which ubiquity may or may not be conscious.

This point becomes clearer if we consider that, besides brutal force, the main protagonists in the ongoing social and political struggle in Nepal — the government and the Maoists — use theatricality (in national and local contexts) as a rhetorical tool to advance their goals of political and military control. For example, the Royal Nepalese Army has been known to show military strength through the militarisation of cities, towns and roads. Army personnel guard rotundas, plazas and important buildings throughout the nation; however, curiously, in the capital they rarely stop or question those they observe. The army's heavy presence in the country has become an everyday occurrence. The Maoists are also known to exhibit their force with highly 'dramatic' (as both 'actual' and 'symbolic' violent acts) bomb attacks of strategic targets in the capital and other places in the country. It is important to state that these attacks rarely kill anyone. These carefully staged social and political acts are obviously 'real' violence, the main point of which is to maintain power through assertion of military control and fear on the one hand, and the creation of a climate of unpredictable shock and fright on the other. By writing their own 'dramas' and representing them through their own rationalisations of their use of violence, and by casting the citizens in the country as heroes, villains or 'neutral' bystanders, both sides use this 'theatricality of violence and fear' in their attempts to reshape the current Nepali social and political situation.

Regardless of the 'reading' of this spectacularised violence, they can create an atmosphere of fear that allows the power brokers to maintain power. As Diane Taylor (1996) — referring also to Argentina's dictatorial regime — exemplifies, through theatricality power brokers in a nation can maintain power by creating a climate of fear and violence, thus keeping people silent about atrocities committed. The theatre of violence that envelops Nepal blurs the boundaries between rumour and actual events, 'fact' and propaganda, witnessed and suspected atrocities, real and alleged casualties, real and alleged arrests, real and alleged death. This 'theatricality of violence' and fear thus reshapes people's worlds and produces normative changes in society (Taylor 1996). Can the presentation of oneself as a 'neutral' or 'silent' citizen in the political situation be the key to staying out of danger?

Truth and illusion in private and public performances

The theatre group's struggle against caste discrimination should not be seen as taking sides in the political and military situation. As long as its theatre work is not framed as a critique to the regime or the Maoists, the group is allowed to operate — albeit with many restrictions and dangers. It became clearer to

me after several weeks in his village that Bir Bahadur's declaration that the town was 'safe' was a result of his own very intentional positioning within the militarised zone of Sindhuli. Bir Bahadur's understanding — or at least his projection — was that Sindhulimadi was safe for those who observed the military curfew and for those who were not directly involved, or perceived as being involved, in the conflict. As long as the theatre group's work remained 'apolitical', in the sense of not belonging to a political party or the Maoist outfit, its members would be safe. Bir Bahadur assured me that the authorities and the 'second government' knew that the theatre group was neutral: 'Political parties are targeted by the rebels. Our theatre group is not a political party. We do not belong to any political party.'

One day, Bir Bahadur took my wife and I on a tour of his village, an arrangement of about ten houses some distance from one another and surrounded by a hill overlooking the town of Sindhulimadi. While he was (with a luxury of detail) introducing his neighbours to us, we heard a big bang. Later on, while having breakfast, we heard another big explosion. A bit concerned, I asked him about it. 'I think it is the army,' he said. 'They may be training with explosives.' Though visibly preoccupied, Bir Bahadur assured me that Sindhulimadi was 'safe'. Was this part of the silence or a theatricalised response to fear and the violence of the state? Was denying danger a way of establishing a sense of public neutrality that corresponded to the theatricalised violence in the nation? Bir Bahadur's attitude and persona seemed contradictory in light of the context where human rights activists and politicians seeking social reforms were being jailed as allies of the Maoists.

At times, the political situation restricted the place where and times at which the theatre group could show its plays. At one point, Bir Bahadur and Deepak organised a week-long Kachahari workshop in which I took part. The idea was to train local and remote villagers in the use of theatre as a social tool. The group of new actors received a week-long workshop on the history of popular theatre, the uses of forum theatre, voice, movement and stage direction, and a seminar on the history of 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. At the end of the workshop, the group had prepared three different theatre pieces to perform in town: one on gender inequality; one on environmental pollution; and the last dealing with child labour. While they were planning the public performance, they came up against a number of obstacles. At first, the group could not secure a permit to perform in public. As the disappointed participants milled around, Deepak detailed the need to get permission for my benefit:

Our number one responsibility is to the actors. Then the performance. But first we need to make sure our participants are safe. Many participants are from villages. We always need permission, but if everyone here were from Sindhulimadi, there would be less risk. The authorities would know that it's just us, they know us, they know we do theatre, and they would recognise us. But many participants in the workshop are not regular participants in our group. They are new faces. Maybe the authorities don't recognise them and are suspicious. This can be a problem. It can also be a problem because if something happens during the performances, and the authorities didn't know we were performing, they may think we are responsible for a bomb, an attack, or a kidnapping.

Given our failure to secure permission, that day's presentation was cancelled. Under the political situation, any gathering of people needed to receive permission from a government official and the chief of police. The following day, Deepak was able to get a permit, but not before a number of conditions had been imposed by the officials on the public presentation.

In general, to make their work acceptable to the government and the Maoists, Bir Bahadur and Deepak make enormous efforts to publicly maintain politically neutral personas whose main concern is to promote the Dalits' causes. In town, they are friendly with everyone and pay particular attention to those people who are Dalits like them. The presentation or projection of 'neutrality' manifested in public is the key to the group's survival. How did the public personas, obviously performed in public for everyone to see, correspond with their private realms? Was the social and political national conflict structuring or restructuring the daily lives of the members of the theatre group and their families within the home as it was outside it?

My wife and I spent days and nights in the houses of Bir Bahadur and Deepak. In these relaxed and intimate situations, I could sense my informants' and their families' fear of violence and sense of vulnerability. One night, as a way of cultural exchange, I cooked my host (Bir Bahadur), his wife and other members of his extended family *comida corriente*, a Nicaraguan dish consisting of rice, beans, a little

meat and salad. After the meal was prepared, we retired to the second floor to eat, as it was already past the 8.00 p.m. curfew. As we talked, watched some Nepali and Hindi films, and commented on the similarities and differences between Nepali and Nicaraguan food, our conversation somehow switched to the political issues of the day. Venturing into such conversation was like entering a different room. As if invoking a terrible invisible force that punishes you when you do not do things right, the family members in the room physically changed. Their voices became soft. Bodies became tense. Some family members were visibly shaken and upset. One paid particular attention to shutting all the windows to ensure that nobody outside the room would hear the conversation, as misunderstanding could ensue. The words exchanged were not at all critical — they were just discussions of events, news items of the day reported in that day's newspaper. Bir Bahadur and his family were worried about being heard and misunderstood, as though any expression of concern or curiosity about the situation could be misconstrued as 'political' activity, as complicity with the 'wrong' side.

The protagonists of terror cast their audiences (the people) as villains, heroes and sometimes 'neutral bystanders'. The presentation of 'neutrality' in such a volatile system has become a necessary way of life. The members of the theatre group, such as Bir Bahadur and his family, considered it necessary to play the role of neutral bystanders even at home. Otherwise they feared appearing to side with the enemy of the state or the Maoists, and as a consequence becoming victims of the violence. They tried to play a very 'neutral' role as passive citizens with no views about the current situation. At the micro level, as in a small, private, intimate scene of a play, the theatricalisation of violence and fear in Nepal can be experienced in situations such as occurred in Bir Bahadur's home. I believe that these are instances of social control where everyone in town could be considered the invisible eyes and ears of the regime or the Maoists: 'The truly crucial lies in creating an uncertain reality out of fiction, a nightmarish reality in which the unstable interplay of truth and illusion becomes a social force of horrendous and phantasmic dimensions.' (Taussig 2004: 49)

Indeed, there are many instances in which violence has touched the members of the theatre group in Sindhuli indirectly — trying to help a Dalit victim of the security forces or the Maoist violence — or directly — a family member killed in the conflict. For example, during the third day of the theatre workshop, a Dalit woman aged about 35, who had travelled for several hours by foot to the district headquarters, came to look for Bir Bahadur and Deepak. Deepak immediately excused himself and went outside into the garden to see how he could help the woman. It turned out that her husband had been killed by the security forces a few months earlier, accused of being a Maoist. According to the Dalit woman, her husband was not a Maoist; he was a poor farmer caught in the middle of the war. Now, because of ancient patriarchal laws (see Chhetri and Gurung 1999; Höfer 2004), the woman was left without any civil rights for herself and her family. She was looking for some help from the Dalit theatre organisers, who also manage a welfare society for Dalits in the district. Not surprisingly, this case of a Dalit farmer victimised by the security forces' violence was not an isolated incident. In the climate of war prevalent in the countryside, the Maoists also harm Dalits.

Remarkably, the members of the theatre group, though perhaps fearful of violence in their constructed 'neutrality', were not necessarily silent; they were prepared to speak against caste discrimination and the ills of social inequality in their plays. They managed to stage themselves individually and collectively as bystanders to both the Maoists and Royal forces' violence. However, how they perform such 'neutrality' is interesting to understand. The course of their struggle for caste equality, as a theatricalised response to the war through theatre activism, takes advantage of the overlapping social/political zone created by the presentation of the conflict in the nation by both the government and the Maoists.

Theatre, caste discrimination and intentionality

Some questions come to the fore when considering the role of the theatre group as both critical of caste discrimination and at the same time presenting itself as a neutral bystander in the civil war. Why is it that the theatre struggle against caste discrimination is not seen as a threat to the state? After all, the Maoists had made the Dalits' plight their cause. How effective could the group's work be if the issues of inequality they articulated in their theatrical work were of no importance to the state? On the basis of this research experience, I suggest that the answer to these questions lies in the way the group frames or performs a response to the socio-political situation, the spectacularised violence perpetrated by both Maoists and the government. By creating, performing, staging and living a theatricalised existence, one that overlaps with the theatricalised socio-political state of the nation presented by both the government and Maoists, the

group presents and maintains both its social struggle against caste discrimination and a position of 'neutrality'. Who group members are in terms of the social political discussions in the country is also important in the way the group frames itself *vis-à-vis* the history of caste discrimination in Nepal.

In Nepal, 'caste equality', or 'caste harmony', is government policy. Laws have been written that champion the fair treatment of Dalits. It is thus a government policy to — at least rhetorically speaking — defend caste equality and speak against caste discrimination. Within this context, it is the public discourse of the government that all disadvantaged groups in the country, including Dalits, will be protected. For the Maoists, as we noticed before, the cause of all the discriminated and oppressed peoples of Nepal — mainly the Dalits — is also presented as their cause. The Maoist rhetoric is almost indistinguishable from the rhetoric against caste discrimination presented by Dalits leaders. Appearing to be against the fight against untouchability, or caste discrimination, would seem contradictory to their self-image. Thus, it would be, in principle, against the official discourse of both (Government and Maoists) to restrict the work of the theatre group.

The members of the Dalit Kachahari Drama Group are farmers, musicians, teachers, students and blacksmiths. The main theatrical tool they use to critique caste discrimination in their district is Kachahari (forum) theatre. A theatrical expression originating in Latin America, Kachahari (forum) theatre was introduced to Kathmandu less than a decade ago and has spread throughout the country. Implicitly and explicitly, the group's theatrical interventions question the social treatment of Dalits as second-class citizens. A solution to their problems of discrimination and lack of resources is sought through public education (about their rights as human beings and citizens) and through social action (critique of all understandings of caste relations). 'The reason why we do Kachahari drama is to raise Dalit issues,' Bir Bahadur told me:

Slowly, slowly we have become excluded socially, economically and politically. We have become very marginalised. Higher castes treat us as untouchable and don't eat anything we have touched. They gave us a different name. They labelled us untouchables. They marked us with a black stain. To erase this black stain we do Kachahari. For many years our people have been living in a system of untouchability. In my village, upper caste people treat us as undesirables. They say that they don't believe in untouchability but they practise it. They treat us differently in their home. They dig a well and do not allow us to take the water. On the street they walk as far as possible from us. This mentality exists here in our district of Sindhuli. For those Dalits who are economically, politically and educationally discriminated against, we do Kachahari (forum) theatre in their villages.

One of the main strategies the Dalit theatre group has adopted in its quest for social equality, to take advantage of the overlapping social space between the rhetoric of the Maoists and the government towards caste discrimination and the theatricalisation of violence, is the discussion of social issues that can be framed theatrically as Dalit concerns. For the members of the theatre group in Sindhuli, staging a specific type of discrimination such as gender inequality in a play is a good way to link such issues to the critique of caste discrimination. Furthermore, in such a presentation, the critique of caste discrimination is distanced from a critique of any political party. The notion of neutrality thus plays out practically within the performance aesthetic itself. One play prepared during my stay, and later publicly presented, was about gender inequality in jobs, such as the construction of waterways in town where women are paid much less than men. Due to the fact that the majority of women working in these hard jobs are Dalits, the main problematic discussed by the play was framed as a Dalit issue. Because of years of marginalisation, Dalit issues thus correspond with issues of poverty, exploitation and discrimination that are widespread at the local and national levels. Under such circumstances, the theatre group can theatricalise its theatre work as neutral and in support of caste harmony. As such, the theatre group believes that Kachahari theatre has the power to be the tool with which it can reach out and change society. Bir Bahadur states:

Through Kachahari theatre, we Dalits, who live at the margins are trying to create a dialogue with all other groups in Nepal. We do Kachahari to facilitate our fight for Dalits' rights in a peaceful way. We do Kachahari to build and strengthen our community. To transform our internal divisions we engage in Kachahari theatre.

For the theatre director and the rest of the troupe, Kachahari theatre has provided a powerful tool to

express their hopes and visions of their future in their country. For them, their theatrical work has contributed in creating positive changes in local attitudes about their people (Dalits) in recent years. For example, according to Bir Bahadur the whole notion of untouchability, the segregation of activities and areas for praying and eating, has slowly been changing in the town. New generations are now more willing to put aside centuries-old attitudes in favour of new ways of understanding inter-caste relations. A testament to this changing attitude, for the group, is the fact that people from other castes have joined their theatrical work. This does not mean that caste relations have changed significantly. Bir Bahadur and Deepak complain bitterly that people express one thing in public (i.e. that they don't agree with caste discrimination), but their behaviours show another. For example, Dalits are still banned from some hotels and restaurants in town.

The group is perhaps over-optimistic about the changes its theatrical work has brought to Dalits' struggle, but without a doubt its theatre work has opened up new avenues through which to approach life with a grater degree of self-reflectivity. Bir Bahadur, for instance, works against discriminatory practices in his everyday life. He is an excellent cook and helps with the cleaning — both traditionally women's tasks. He has also, against tradition (at least at the local level) and the will of his father and paternal family, married 'down' within the caste system. While he and his wife are both untouchable, she is of a lower sub-caste than himself. Bir Bahadur is aware of the importance of his own actions as a result of theatre: 'Before theatre, I never care about my activities and the impact of my actions on society. Nowadays I am always aware of the repercussions of my actions on the community.' Bir Bahadur insists — and I had the opportunity to observe this — that his relationship with his wife is informed by his theatrical activities. 'One has to be aware of gender relations in and out of the performances, in performance and in the house,' he posits. For the members of the group, such as Bir Bahadur, 'forum theatre' is the vehicle capable of facilitating social transformations that start by transforming the activists themselves.

Concluding notes

As a framework of analysis, the 'theatricality of violence' allows this inquiry to navigate between two very important overlapping spaces of analysis: the theatre of activism within a context of social conflict in Nepal; and the theatricalisation of that conflict within the nation. As a social environment facilitating the creation and imposing of normative changes in the population, this analytical framework highlights very important conjunctural power relations in the country. It is exactly in this normalising framework, imposed by the protagonists of the war in the country, that the members of this theatrical group and others have found the means to defy caste discrimination and systematised historical oppression, and to wrestle against social inequities.

A significant revelation in this research has been the way in which the form and content of social and political materials can theatrically be transformed in order to persist even under politically and socially dangerous circumstances. Groups such as the Dalit Kachahari Drama Group have found a way to use the theatricalisation of the civil war as a tool to advance their theatre activism. Responding to theatricalised violence stemming from the government and political opponents alike, the theatre group has managed to maintain a public image of 'neutrality', giving it a space — albeit small — to continue its social work. The group's public critique of caste discrimination, framed within a rhetorical theatrical form of 'political neutrality', has shaped the group's participants not only in their theatre work but also in their daily lives. The boundaries between theatrical action and social action, between theatre and daily life, have become blurred — perhaps conveniently and reflexively — thus becoming similar to each other. This situation has been somewhat beneficial for the group. It has given its members a degree of reflexivity that is useful to them not only in the theatre but also in everyday situations. As Augusto Boal (1996) points out, 'the most essential definition of theatre is the capacity that all of us have, as human beings, to observe ourselves in action' (1996: 47). Thus, observing ourselves in action is the first step in creating knowledge about our position in a social structure whose main premise is social inequality. For the members of the group, theatre and everyday life have become indistinguishable arenas to play, to do, to act and ultimately to survive.

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