On the making of Rage and Beyond: Irawati’s Gandhari

When professor of Sociology and friend, Gita Chadha proposed that I devise a performance on Irawati Karve’s text Yugant for the final cultural presentation for a seminar on “Feminisms: towards a State of Alteredness” organised the department of Sociology, Mumbai, I was reluctant. I was used to responding to poetry or music. Karve’s Yugant, which has been hailed as one of the first contempoarary re-interpretation’s of the Mahabaharta by a woman Anthropolgist of the 1960 was too prosaic and I didn’t feel any inspiration to begin for several months. But I read and re-read the book, several other material on the Mahabharata, watched Peter Brook’s Mahabharata , read Dharmaveer Bharati’s play Andha Yug, other information on and essays by Karve. When time came to choose a character, the one that called out almost from inside my being was that of Gandhari. There was a curiosity. I wanted to question her and empathise with her at the same time. I had no intention of either glorifying her or essentialising her which often happens especially in Classical dance interpretations of mythological characters. I wanted to bring her out in all her complexity. My trigger question was: What could motivate a woman or human being to wear a blind fold? What does it mean to lose a sense organ? And more over to choose to lose one’s sight?

After mulling over these questions over numerous discussions and teas at Gita’s we came up with an interpretation that Gandhari’s choice was motivated by a rage directed inward as it could not find an outlet. This is intentionally opposed to the popular notion of Gandhari as pativrata who gave up her sight as her husband was blind. Here was story of the Mahabharata being retold by the iconic queen with blindfold, exploring her relationship with her husband, her sons, her nephews, and other characters in the Mahabharata. In my process of embodiment I began with my own sensorial self as the creator of the piece. My process involved grappling with my own senses, touch, hearing sight, sitting with a blind fold, and reliving the Mahabharata as Gandhari. Slowly a script began to emerge, it almost came from my body as much as from my mind. Musical possibilities began to arise in rhythms and silences. I found a track by Coke Studio Pakistan with Lyrics, Naina de aankhe lage that offered me the same intensity as Gandhari’s psychological states. So I decided to use the song. I also began collaborating with music composer and Guitarist Hitesh Dhutia who began entering the space with his live acoustic guitar. There began an exchange with sound and silences becoming triggers for the choreography, much of it improvised to progress through Gandhari’s non-chronological journey. My choreography often uses only ghungroos and tatkar along with spoken bols as percussion along with sung melodies. There are silences deliberately inserted to create an atmosphere.

I went and had long conversation with the head of the department of sociology Kamala Ganesh an expert on Irawati Karve. Karve was a radical who refused to wear a bindi or mangalsutra in her day. She rode a scooter and she dictated Yugant to her colleague much like Vyaas dictated the Mahbaharata. I made a short power-point presentation on Irawati Karve as a culmination to the performance in context of the seminar. I had read Karve’s essay “On the Road” on her pilgrimage in Pandharpur and brought in Kishori Amonkar’s “Maaze Maher Pandhari”at the end the performance as I decided to leave the audience with final image of the 1960’s Irawati in the process of reimagning Gandhari on her arm chair bringing in this layer of writing and rewriting myth.

The only prop I decided to use was a cloth which I begin by tying around my eyes and singing of the “sat rangi sapna”[ multihued dream] that Gandhari had. In the war scene I used this cloth to signify the blood shed and also the umbilical cord. This red cloth took on on a life of its own as the play progressed, becoming alive and potent. Having a physical object to work with reinforced the sensorial approach that I had begun with. The smell, the colour, the texture of that cloth carries so many sensations felt during rehearsals, readings and discussions that all those seep into the performance. I’m almost afraid to wash the cloth lest it lose its potency.

I decided to go with a minimalist approach in costume as well. And wore a black gher-wala ghagra, adeptly stitched by costume designer and dressmaker, Gulambhai. I decided to have a necklace around my head as the only piece of jewellery as I did not want jewellery and prints interfering with the starkness of the script and hindering or distracting from the movement. I have always rebelled against extra ornamentation in the classical forms or saundarya hetu which is unnecessarily stressed on.

All the while Gandhari was being first concetualised, written and choreographed, I was living nomadic existence as my residential building was being repaired, so the script, music, and last of all movement came together on trains, buses, autos, in friend’s houses over jams and meetings. I just got a space three days before the show where I truly began my full-fledged rehearsals . I called my light designer in a day before the show. We discussed ideas and thought we would perform it for the first and last time at the Mumbai University Sociology seminar. To our pleasant surprise the response was tremendous. People began asking when I would perform this again.

beej organised a dance history week in April 2014, and I thought Irawati’s Gandhari was a wonderful way of engaging a meaningful conversation about mythology and history intersecting. This time we performed the piece in an Art Gallery in south Mumbai called Project 88 who generously offtered us their space. The space was very unlike the proscenium theatre of Mumbai university and since we were organising the event ourselves we had to re imagine this gallery completely to encompass a make shift green room, the set had to transported, the audience seating and lights had to be arranged. The senior students of beej got together to do the production, dividing among themselves responsibilities of technical and backstage assistance along with distribution of passes and crowd management.

I was honoured to have senior dance scholars, performers and critics among my audience members like Shanta Gokhale, Anita Ratnam and Gauri Sharma Tripathi. They wrote about the piece in their reviews and were also very generous with their feedback. We also had a very interesting post performance discussion on the making of the piece where spectators offered their responses and asked questions about the process.

As Gandhari further pervaded my conscious and unconscious states, as mythological characters inevitably do I began to rediscover nuances and shades in her character and I wanted to explore her much more. When I was invited by NCPA and the Suruchi festval in Ahmedabad, I began extending the script. A poem arose.

The refrain was…

“My eyes were closed.

My choice had been made

I was Gandhari, the empress with the blindfold.”

I wanted to explore Gandhari’s relationship with the blindfold. Some questions that arose were: Does she see it as her identity? Or Does the blindfold wipe out her identity.? Therefore should I call it “the” blind fold or “her” blindfold? I wanted to portray Gandhari’s reaction to Draupadi’s disrobing by her sons, and the episode of the first time she sees Duryodhana. I now wanted to problematize the reading of history with convenient blindfolds, which we see in today’s day more than ever. I wanted to write about the futility of wars and violence and her last surviving child: her daughter Dusshala, seldom mentioned in the mainstream Mahabharata discourse. So the script suddenly took on a new life.

When the piece travelled to the theatre Festival of Non Violence through the Arts at Mallika Sarabhai’s Natrani at Ahmedabad, Irawati’s Gandhari was rebirthed with completely live music, more live singing, a new lights designer and a new context: that of the festival of Non violence through the arts. The audience discussion post performance was precious. People shared personal stories of self-inflicted violence, some expressed their empathy towards or outrage at Gandhari, others spoke of Irawati Karve and how her sensibility had been evoked in the presentation. This offered me new insights into Gandhari and she’s still growing. There was also an interest in Gandhari as a Kshatriya woman which is explored by Karve and the politics of caste in today’s society.

At about the same time I was over whelmed to hear news of Rage and Beyond: Irawati’s Gandhari being nominated for the META awards in the categories of best actress, best direction, best production, best sound design, best costume design and best choreography. I feel deeply honoured and grateful that I have been acknowleged for my work by the theatre community for this work.

Every time I have performed Gandhari, it has been a different experience. But each time I do it I need to get to a point where I need to shed my identity as “Sanjukta” the dancer, the director, the writer, the actor and make room for the larger than life Gandhari to pervade the space and make certain on-stage decisions for me in the spur of the moment, where unexpectedly, magic happens. It is these moments that makes me trust my experience as an improviser more and more, to continue my research and quest in the field of improvisation in classical dance/ music and theatre. Especially when dealing with myth, we must realise that the performance works at the level of a certain energy of the collective unconscious that pervades the space and therefore one needs to sensitize oneself to this energy and pulse of the character that one portrays.

One area which I am lacking in and my least favourite part of making a production is publicity and application for performances which explains why my work does not travel much. Rage and Beyond luckily has in spite of me. But as independent producers, one must do one’s research in which places to apply and make a good quality video of one’s work and upload it online to send to festivals. It helps if you can get a poster made for publicity and have good quality pictures to send to festivals. I invite people who can offer any advice and help in this department as I too have a lot to learn.

Some advise to young dancers who seek to create their own work:

1. Watch, read, listen, explore across art forms. Be porous and not judgemental as a viewer listener.
2. Read the text and do your research, watch films, plays based on the subject, read articles and related material. Let there be a gestation period before you jump into choreography. In a choreography workshop organised by beej dancer choreographer Rama Vaidyanathan compared the making of a creative project to the birthing of a baby. It needs its time in the womb.
3. Know your strengths and language of expression and what your project demands and start your exploration from there
4. All days will not reap benefits. Be patient and allow the art to breathe.
5. Take time off and come back to the process. Sometimes over investment of time can lead to exhaustion, suffocation or frustration.
6. Trust your collaborators. Discuss and be ready for change.
7. Learn at least the basics of light design and sound design along with the technical jargon, a must for all directors and choreographers.
8. Don’t be afraid of criticism. Gather a bunch of like minded, artistically inclined friends whose opinion you trust and call them to watch rehersals.
9. Ask senior artistes for feedback. I was surprised when Astad Deboo and Akash Khurana came to watch the rehersal of one of my first works Let Her BE Born and offered very positive feedback. Do not be disheartened by brutal honesty.
10. Have a zero show or an open rehersal a week before the performance to guage audience responses.
11. I learned from my mentor, theatre director Chetan Datar: Don’t be afraid to fail. To falter. To fall. Take a risk. Especially when you are forging a new language of expression that is yours, fumbling is inevitable.
12. Learn to draw for yourself the thin line between self expression and self indulgence. Record yourself and watch yourself critically. Distance yourself and non judgementally ask “would you pay money to watch this work on stage?”
13. I learned from my first mentor and initiator into Kathak, Guru Smt. Rajashree Shirke: Surrender your self to your art. Completely. Work hard, relentlessly without expecting anything and you will receive the results.
14. What I learned from my guru in Hindustani Music, Pandi Murli Manohar Shukla which has become the premise of beej: what is precision without love? Learn to infuse love, a sense of ease and respect into your every action. Most dancers tend to be masochists with low self-esteem. Have love and respect for yourself and especially your body: your vehicle of expression. Treat it with care.