

Ranganath Kulkarni

INFORMATION CARD

Theatre Personality

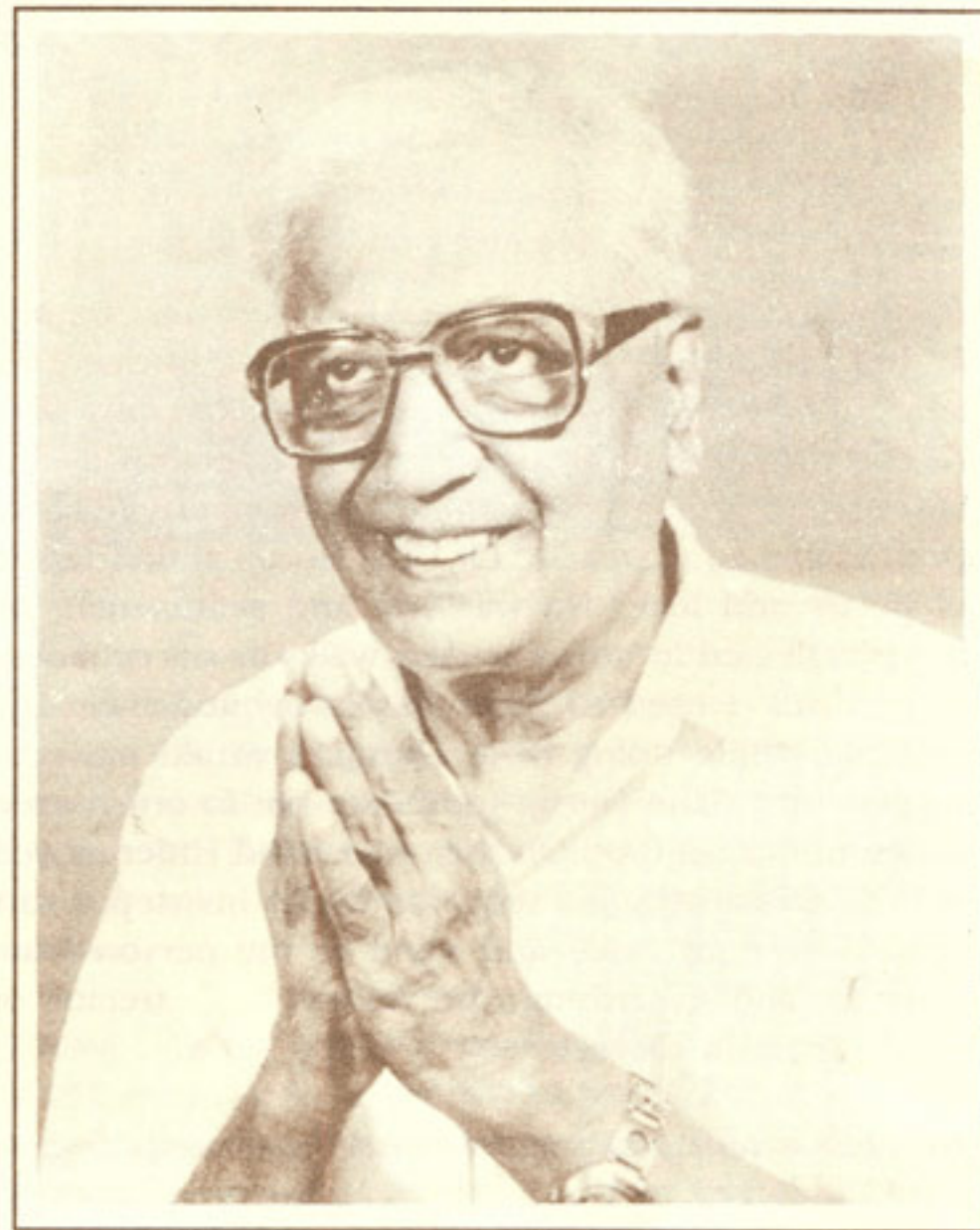
Name	:	Ranganath Kulkarni
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Bio-data

Name	:	Ranganath Kulkarni
Place & Date of Birth	:	Chalisgaon, 17th November 1926
Residential Address	:	35, Chirantan, Shivakripa Kurla (East), Bombay 400 024
Profession	:	Journalist, writer & critic
Education	:	B.A.
Languages known	:	Marathi, Hindi and English
Language of theatre work	:	Marathi
Period of theatre activity	:	1956-1989

How did you begin as a one-person performer?

We have a long tradition of *keertan*, *bahuroopi* and *vasudev* etc. It is not true to describe my presentations as one-person performance. Actually it should be identified as a *bahuroopi* performance, a performance in which one person becomes many . . . I think this is particular to Maharashtra . . . I am not aware of any other region having such *bahuroopi* performances in thousands.



Ranganath Kulkarni

You select a work of literature and decide to present it. How do you process a script etc.?

One of my friends wanted to make fun of me and he said, "You are an ass and, therefore, you take up Krishnachandra's story of an ass!" I purchased the book and liked it immensely. I realized that Krishnachandra, while writing it for "Shama", a cine journal, wrote it rather loosely, journalistically. I was more selective and while adapting took care to include only that which can create a character. I believe in writing a good script . . . When I read the script to some of my friends they liked it . . . I write and rewrite scripts taking into consideration spectators', critics' responses. Also retain topical touches and hence my script changes repeatedly.

Do you move away from the original work?

No, I maintain the foundation, the skeleton . . . as if I add a bit of salt here or pepper there for taste.

From the original script what do you retain?

Something which can hold the spectator. Something which catches the human touch. Let me define the kind of attempt that I am doing. It is an experiment in intimate theatre to be enjoyed on an intellectual plane. The satire which I include might have incidents or personalities as their base. The audience has to catch them . . .

I feel that in *baburoopi* presentations, narrative should be kept to the minimum, dialogues to the maximum. Situations must be varied and punches should be flexibly added . . . Without humour you cannot think of a *baburoopi* show. It is to be admitted that the average mental age of our spectator is not above 16-17 years! No Marathi spectator, let alone an Indian, can stomach anything serious for more than 15 to 20 minutes. In fact from the seventh minute onwards the spectator starts getting restless!

How do you rehearse?

My script moves near a film script. What a camera does in a film, narration achieves here. A performer should not appear to recite mechanically. Sometimes I rehearse before spectators . . . On occasions I have rehearsed for nine hours at a stretch.

How is the response?

In places where the people lack intellectual and cultural stimulus response to the show is immense. Places where good Marathi is rarely heard also welcome my shows . . . whether Shirpur, Barshi and such odd places or in America or England the response is invariably encouraging . . . My theatre is the smallest theatric unit. It can reach audiences not otherwise accessible. In fact when generations change, once again I get a new audience. I have been doing *Garib Bichare Purush* for the last 14 years. The younger generation now becomes my patron . . . There is a perceptible difference between urban and the rural.

Do the auditorium conditions and other external matters affect?

Invariably. A big hall with 25 people sitting near the back walls would never allow a performance to succeed. I insist that the distance between me and the first row of spectators should never exceed 5 feet. . . It is not the number of spectators which matters but their capacity to respond . . . The audience can be of various levels . . . Education, age and many other factors influence the responses. For example, one is performing on a terrace and a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are sitting side by side. The daughter-in-law looks at



Ranganath Kulkarni in Garib Bichare Purush.

the mother-in-law before giving us a responsive laugh! In other words, the family unit sets limits to the kind of humour that I can employ. Things which I can safely say in Shivaji Mandir can hardly be used in a family audience. I always analyze the number of laughs I get.

I learnt a lot from the two Krishnas . . . Krishnachandra and Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar. Both of them make you laugh but there is an educational content given to them as sugar-coated quinine . . . I do not think that this kind of theatre will ever be outdated. Who wants today to listen to a lecture? The story always interests even if it is about day-to-day matters.

Do you teach your skills to others?

Yes. I tell them to read first. Then to write to allow a total permeation. Then I take a reading again which is to be followed by an introduction of action etc. This is the process which may ready a person for a one-man show in about a year's time.

What kind of technical help you take?

After many years of performing I realized that to impress the last, say the seventh level of audience with its limited intellectual capacity it helps to have some costume. That created more effect . . .

About yourself . . .

I hail from Ahmednagar though I was born in Chalisgaon (Khandesh). I was educated in Ahmednagar, Sangamner and Daund. College education in Ferguson College, Pune. I came to Bombay and began working as a journalist in the daily *Navakal*. I had decided at an early age to be either a journalist or a professor. I could not be a professor because my father died in jail. In 1930 the railway workers were organizing for a major strike. About 95,000 workers, spread over an area of 1,500 miles, were to go on a strike simultaenously to drive away the British. The national leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhaschandra Bose and other trade unionists, however, waited till the strike was crushed by the British rulers. Then began a phase of individual *satyagraha*. My father was naturally black-listed by the British and unemployment became a stark reality. We began migrating from place to place in search of work. My mother used to get employment as a school teacher somewhere sometimes. My father had a broad kind of socialism in mind. At the same time his love for theatre and *tamasha* was compelling. For example, when he was an Assistant Station Master in Ahmednagar, a seat in the Bagde Theatre was always reserved for him when Bal Gandharva's troupe was performing. He was a repeat audience for all the plays. He as well as my mother had a good voice. Even I try to break the monotony of my shows by introducing some snatches of songs . . . My father was a founder member of the Communist Party of India. He was fondly called D.B.K. Russian commrades who visited India at that time praised him immensely . . . I was involved in the movement because of my love for him. He never imposed his opinions on me. Even when he became a marxist, communist he maintained that basically he was a trade unionist. After 1942 there was a great difference of opinion between him and me. He said, "Take your own decision but you may follow Limaye, Phatak and others. They are studious." Around 1943, i.e. when I was about 16-17, I worked in Navjivan Sanghatan today known as the Lal Nishan Party. My education had to take place under conditions of poverty. My batch was the first morning batch . . . Even though I was underage, I became a telephone operator. After the Intermediate Examination, I took a job in the military accounts. I chose History Honours as that allowed me to continue my job. My mother was also an activist. My mother was jailed in 1930. She was described as a dictator in the Ahmednagar District. When she stood in the docks with my younger brother who was ten months

old, the judge asked her, "Don't you feel any compassion for the child?" She replied, "No, you can punish me as I deserve." She was given three months rigorous imprisonment. Everybody was talking in my house about how the poor, the underprivileged should benefit from a change in the social and political systems. These were the ideas which were impressed on me. I grew up with them . . . My journalistic career began under the influence of these ideas. First year I worked with *Navakal*. My father had died recently and I had to look after my mother, brother and sister. I had a small house in Dombivli. My salary was Rs 125 and I could hardly make both ends meet. So at the first opportunity I joined *Loksatta*. I worked there for nine years. The authorities there stopped my promotion by saying "You are a communist". I could see through the situation and I said, "I don't think Mr Goenka knows this, but if you don't want me to continue I will leave!" By that time the Soviet Information Centre had started functioning in Bombay. I had done some translation work for them. They asked me, "Why don't you join us? We need a person to look after our public relations". So I left *Loksatta* and joined *Soviet Land*. I worked there for 12 years and was the first Indian whose name appeared as an editor on one of their publications.

How did you turn to theatre?

As I told you my father was a theatre buff. I participated in school plays and also wrote. In Ahmednagar people were enthusiastic about theatre. Any new play performed in Bombay or Pune was immediately produced in Ahmednagar. I had played a singing hero in *Phoolpakbre* written by Nagesh Joshi . . . In 1955, one of my friends in Bombay (Karmarkar) gave me a script of the play, *Lost Letter*. Originally Romanian, it was quite similar to Gogol's *Inspector General*. At that time Vijay Tendulkar helped me a lot in writing a script. Consequently I completed a play titled *Ticket* in December 1955. Its first performance was in December 1956. At that time theatre shows were taxed. I had to pay off the tax and suffered a loss of nearly Rs 800. A big amount at that time. The actors were amateurs but other production expenses were to be taken care of. We had two performances. Later we also presented it with a professional cast including Dattopant Angre, Joglekar, Vimal and Gaja Joshi, Sakharam Bhawe etc.

What made you turn to the one-person format . . . or bahuroopi?

The amateur and the professional artistes, I came in contact with, appeared to be attracted by non-art values such as publicity, money etc. They were hardly interested to present what I wrote with so much intensity . . . Finally in November 1964 my play *Zep* proved a

failure at the Thane centre. The play was on the theme of marriage difficulties faced by women. Yet another original play I wrote was *Udand Zbale Pani* which dealt with the Panshet disaster. In this play we showed the entire stage filled with water . . . The play was directed by Kamlakar Sarang and Nandkumar Raote, Lalan Sarang, Raja Bapat, Ramesh Honavar, Datta Mone and Vinayak Joshi took part in it.

In the competition my serious, sincere and original treatment was pooh-poohed . . . I have also adapted *The man who came to dinner*. . . . By 1986 it had become a regular practice to earn money in *baburoopi* shows and lose it in producing experimental plays. In the centenary year of Maxim Gorky, in 1968, I presented a sound and vision show on Gorky's famous work, *Mother* . . . Yet another experiment was in a way of 'no-man show'! I got the idea from a news in Russian papers. Three scientists trapped on the North Pole. You see their faces on a screen 24 x 24. Action is only of opening and closing doors and all narration is through readings of telegrams. I had Salil Chaudhury to compose music, M. S. Sathyu for the set-design, Visu Raje as the director and Daji Bhatavdekar, Datta Bhat, Mai Bhide, Neelam Prabhu and Ravindra Divekar to provide voices. I spent Rs 16,000 on a show of one hour and for a single performance!

In 1960 P. L. Deshpande began giving performances of *Batatyachi Chaal*. He said that he was impressed by Emlyn Williams' show in England. I wonder why Ganpatrao Bodas' readings of full plays in one sitting, and Suhasini Mulgaonkar's presentations are not to be mentioned! That decided me to take to this smallest unit of theatre. I had read a novel in Russian by Lazar Lageen . . . I presented a show based on this . . . The first performance was on 26th January, 1966. The show titled *Suraitala Rakshas* received an overwhelming response . . . had more than 300 shows. These shows meant for children were hardly remunerative. For example, I presented it for the Sane Guruji Kathamala in Amalner. The S.T. ticket cost me Rs 5 and I was paid a total sum of Rs 15 . . . I want to stress that I was not doing the shows to earn money. Often people ask me, "Why don't you do something to entertain more mature, adult audiences? That would enable us to pay you something" . . . This minimal theatre saved me from financial losses as well as disillusionment with people who lacked in theatre commitment.

Your performances seem to be based on text and high literary quality. Why?

I asked myself, 'With whom would I be compared?' P. L. Deshpande and Suhasini Mulgaonkar. Compared to them I was a small fry, as an actor as well as a person'. So I felt I must have a strong text . . . It was an uphill task because five of my plays had failed earlier and I

was branded as a theatric failure. This is the reason why I insisted on the quality of the script.

Would you say that your presentation is different from an imitation, a mimicry?

Definitely. Even in my personality-oriented programmes, I never imitate. For example, the programmes on Dr Ambedkar and Shri Chavhan have aroused interest in spite of there being no imitation of the personalities involved. I presented a programme about Dr Ambedkar or Shri Chavhan as I understood them and as I appreciated the validity of their thoughts. The aim is to communicate, convey serious thoughts via humour. Charlie Chaplin has given us an idea of how to achieve this feat . . . In my programme on Charlie Chaplin I narrate his life story—in day-to-day attire . . . I am nearly obsessed by the idea of celebrating centenaries. For instance, I did Gorky or Kolhatkar etc. While presenting Kolhatkar's *Sudamyache Pobe* (a collection of humorous essays in Marathi) I had three problems. Firstly how to link these separate essays. Secondly, how to modernize, how to provide them with contemporary references. And thirdly to edit. Please remember I do not have a ready play-script to play with . . . I have also been slightly innovative about my formats. In case I am able to give a full-scale presentation, i.e. my *baburoopi* show, I use the occasion for giving a kind of lecture-demonstration though the subjects are the same.

To what extent the conditions, the actual exigencies of performance places put limitation on your ideas?

Some changes are gradually introduced. For example, Suhasinibai Mulgaonkar could never have hoped to look like a Balram! I could never produce a feminine voice unless for a momentary distraction! But as I told you earlier, discerning audiences know how to sustain their disbeliefs temporarily . . . Shri P. L. had attended a performance and he suggested to introduce some decorative and suggestive elements for the seventh level of audiences I had already referred to. Therefore, I began using a shirt with a donkeyface painted on it . . . I was compelled to use the whole body and not just facial expressions etc.

What are the other one-person shows you have seen and how do you assess them?

Batatyachi Chaal by P. L. Deshpande, of course, stands high above other similar shows. He and the presentation have become a legend already. However, I feel that the last contemplative portion (*chintan*) leaves the deepest impression and yet its thought content is reactionary. I do not understand why it is so necessary to glorify the crumbling feudal values! Nobody would accept that affection dwells only in chawls and not in blocks . . . But P. L. is versatile and knows his audiences

well. In Nagpur and Delhi he edits out references which hold particular appeal to Bombay audiences . . . Laxman Deshpande's presentation has no purpose! When I wrote to him he replied that his shows are merely for entertainment. Sadanand Joshi's presentation of Atre has been unnecessarily diluted. It would be a good imitation if shortened properly. I liked Suhas Joshi's *Smritichitre* the best . . . Sushma Deshpande's show on Savitribai is also sincere and good.

You have written bahuroopi scripts for others too. Do you keep a particular actor in view on such occasions?
Yes. Otherwise a performer would not feel the script to be his own.

In what proportion do you keep the entertainment and the educational content that you have repeatedly spoken of?

I decide on the end result first and then I may write and rewrite even seven or eight times!

Earlier you had mentioned that Ghaar Hindte Akashi was originally written for Shantabai (Jog).

Yes. She had agreed to do so initially. But then she was offered important roles in *Natsamrat* and *Himalayachi Savli*. Consequently she opted out. I had seen Suman Dharmadhikari in a competition and I felt the propriety of her doing *Ghaar Hindte Akashi*.

I heard you have some differences of opinion with her.

Yes, unfortunately about the amount of royalty. She would not pay for all the shows she did.

What kind of publicity did you employ for your shows?

I insist on publicity, may it be minimal or mas-

sive . . . publicity is investment . . . The 'hammering' that people refer to is a fact of the entertainment industry. . .

How did the critics receive you?

Being a journalist myself led to many advantages, as well as disadvantages. While some journalists supported me, some critics ran me down consistently almost for 25 years! However, some of them are showing some change of heart these days! They do condescend to pay compliments to me on my delivery or on my language etc.

On one point you said that the Marathi spectators/audiences love to talk about theatre than to see plays!

Actually he cannot afford theatre. However, people do try to spend on theatre. Though obsessed with 'complimentaries' are government officials, ministers and the like.

What about the management of your shows?

For the first 15 years I managed singlehandedly, but now my son helps me—correspondence, phones, adjustment of the honorarium according to the budget, so on and so forth . . .

Any future project?

I want to present a variety show titled *90 years of Humour*, because Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar wrote his first humorous essay in 1902 . . . I do not feel I will ever retire . . . shows keep me young, healthy and humorous.

Interviewers: Chetan Datar
and Shubhada Shelke

Ranganath Kulkarni : List of Productions

Sr. No.	Title	Subject	Language	Ist Performance	No. of Performances
1.	Suraitala Rakshas	Based on a Russian novel by Lazar Lageen	Marathi	1966	400
2.	Eka Gadhvachi Kahani	Based on a novel by Krishanchandra	Marathi	1966	800
3.	Sudamyache Pohe	Based on the Essays by S. K. Kolhatkar	Marathi	1971	400
4.	Garib Bichare Purush	Day-to-day incidents	Marathi	1978	800
5.	Goshti Babanchya, Bol Babanche	Dr Ambedkar	Marathi	1981	25
6.	Goshta Charlie Chaplinchi	Based on the biography of Charlie Chaplin	Marathi	1988	25
7.	Saheb	Yashwantrao Chavan	Marathi	1991	15