

Vasant Potdar

INFORMATION CARD

Theatre Personality

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Bio-data

Name	:	Vasant Govind Potdar
Place &	:	
Date of Birth	:	Jabalpur (M.P.), 6th September, 1937
Residential	:	18, Dehmandir
Address	:	Shrirangnagar, Gangapur Road Nashik 422 005
Profession	:	Writer, Journalist (Hindi, Marathi & Bengali)
Education	:	Arts Graduate
Languages known	:	Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Urdu and English
Language of theatre work	:	Same as above
Period of Theatre Activity	:	1964 onwards

Where do you hail from?

We hail from Ratnagiri, the middle alley. Originally we were known as Orpe. Some time during the Shivaji period we got associated with *pot* (ship) and we came to be known as Potdars. I remember that the Potdars owned Sanoda and Madhi, two villages in Madhya Pradesh near Sagar. My father was in G.I.P. Railways as a traffic canvasser. The railway at that time needed to canvas for getting business. He toured a lot and also enjoyed many transfers, the last one was at Jabalpur. I was born there, his eleventh and the last son. After retirement he shifted to Indore on his friend's suggestion . . . My mother was not educated but had a good knowledge of Sanskrit from her parents. She taught Gayatri recitation to her own sons going against the prevalent taboo that women should not learn/teach Sanskrit . . . I was educated in Indore . . . passed my B.A. (3rd Class) at Holkar College. In Indore there were a number of cultural activities. The Sharadotsav (the autumn festival) was a major event. Many dramatic



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troupes from Bal Gandharva to Damuanna Malvankar used to perform. The troupes usually stayed for two to three weeks as Tukojirao Maharaj Holkar was a generous patron . . . By the time I grew up this tradition of theatre had become weak. Though we had P. K. Atre, G. T. Madkholkar or Anant Kanekar and such other Marathi writers invited, the festival was confined to three days and nothing else after that. Indore also celebrated the Ganesha Festival. That invariably attracted five or six groups presenting drama or music programmes etc. Arun Date (a well-known singer), Achyut Potdar (actor and my elder brother) were involved. The plays used to be mainly historical and I did not become theatre-struck. I graduated in '59.

When did you turn to one-man shows?

My first show took place on the 26th of September 1963 in the presence of the Vasantrao Naik Ministry in the Secretariat . . .

What inspired you?

My brother had invited Shri P. L. Deshpande to the Holkar College. P. L. was becoming known at that time. *Amaldar* (based on *Inspector General*) had been staged. He stayed with us and the germ of his famous play *Tuze Aabe Tujpasbi* perhaps owes its origin to this stay. He stayed with us for nearly three weeks and I was his valet, doing massage and everything for him. He gave me a copy of *Amaldar* as a present . . . this

was around December 1953. At that time he gave a presentation called *Chor Chor*, also sang his songs from *Gulacha Ganpati*. He went to Dhar to meet sculptor Phadke then to Dewas to stay with Kumar Gandharva and further on to Shivmangal Singh 'Suman' at Ujjain. I accompanied him throughout the tour. Staying with him created in my mind a love for Marathi as a language. I also developed an interest in drama. After B.A. I was working as a teacher in Nagzar (Ratnagiri District) to understand Maharashtra. There I seriously studied Marathi as a language. From that village the nearest cinema theatre was 22 miles away and the nearest railway station was at Kolhapur, 80 miles away!

I used to visit P. L. Deshpande occasionally at Bombay when he was staying at Worli. I asked him, "What should I do? I do not want to continue in a service!" P. L. said, "I wanted to narrate *Mahabharata* of the revolutionary India to people. But I have been branded as a humorist, nobody would listen to me talking about revolutions and revolutionaries. Why don't you do it? From 1857 to 1947 trace the period through Chandrashekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh, Chaphekar and Savarkar etc." I asked him, "How would you help me?" P.L. said, "Bring me their speeches, I will edit them for you." But he could not find time to edit the material I compiled on his advice. So one morning I sat down and wrote the script of a complete programme. He read it, liked it and also wrote a preface for it. The form was different and a person of P.L.'s stature had applauded it. I began getting engagements. However I had to get over stage fright. In the initial stages I used to conceal myself partially behind a lectern so that my shaking legs would not be seen by the people.

When and why did you decide not to serve anywhere etc.?

I was never a very intelligent boy and I did not value education as such. My mother used to censure me for my lack of interest in education and challenged me! I accepted the challenge, got a degree, but after many failures . . . I was just not interested in settling down, doing normal things etc. My narration of the exploits of the revolutionaries proved popular. I performed all over Maharashtra by sale of tickets. The shows were housefull, I used to earn about 200 to 250 rupees per show. After notching up 5,000 in about 29 years I have stopped counting the number of my performances . . . I had arrived at a deadend doing the programmes in Marathi so I switched over to Hindi and then to Bengali. Later I produced a programme focussed on Chhatrapati Shivaji, but in Hindi. *Sher Shivraj*—as poet Bhushan had described him. I scripted the programme and gave more importance to the historian T. S. Shezwalkar's exposition. He is more objective. I also learnt how to recite Bhushan . . . The programme was about three hours duration.

Your programmes were based on different ideas and personalities. What was the general process you followed to create a programme?

If you are talking about revolutionary events there is not much scope to change the events etc. However in case of personalities you can introduce an *attitude*. For example people usually end up by portraying Shivaji as anti-Muslim. I took a decision not to do so. Hence though he was Hindu he is not to be shown to be working towards founding a Hindu Empire . . . In my programme the historian Kafi Khan and his praise for Shivaji would find a place. Or his revolutionary step of reconverting Netaji Palkar to Hinduism would have to be included. Or take his remarriage to his own wife at the time of coronation! He was 44 at that time and according to the convention he would have been compelled to marry a young girl of 8-9 years old. This is the reason why, to avoid child marriage, Shivaji married his own wife! Such highlights to be included require a certain attitude on your own part. The show has enough scope if you want to spread poison in the society! You can bring about communal riots! I could have effectively achieved these results through my voice and identification with the character. I chose not to do so. For me Shivaji is noble and a social reformer. Similar situation exists about Swami Vivekananda.

This is about the content. What about the choice of words, scripting etc.?

You must have words that draw a picture. You are alone, without a tape recorder, make-up, sets etc. How would you hold the audience? You do not even have good looks! Hence words. You are a television screen on which words are the changing pictures.

How do you reach the script phase?

Reading takes 2-5 years. Then I collect all statistical data in one place. For example birth date, the conquest of Torana fort, the year of marriage, time and death of Afzalkhan's death etc., etc., till death. Secondly I fill in data on his campaigns and wars. Thirdly data on his family. Fourthly his life as a king. Fifthly his reforms, his founding of the Maratha navy etc., etc. All reference is well charted. Who says what, where . . . Once this is done it is the final foundation . . . I did not have anybody else to do this work for me. The programme script is easy and I wrote it sitting even on a platform . . . For one-person show one must write one's own script. this is what I feel. If *you* write a script for me I will be acting it out. This is not what one-person show is about. In it I myself narrate with some imitative talent included. This is why some change of voice etc. P. L. in his *Batatyachi Chaal* created characters whose voices came naturally to P. L. On the other hand Suhasini Mulgaonkar or Sushama Deshpande used male voices . . . If there are three males they would have to produce



Vasant Potdar in performance.

three voices . . . While writing a script, this aspect can be taken care of. People are impressed but the performance moves towards mimicry . . . In drama an actor holds the audience on the strength of his *abhinaya*. This is not so in a one-man show . . . I have history to narrate. Emotional involvement with the character is important. But not total enactment. For example Rani of Jhansi dismounts, takes up her child and feeds it . . . If I show these or such action to dramatise I will lose.

What about learning by heart such long parts?

I have a good memory from my childhood. My mother is responsible for my learning by heart many things. I have memorised Jigar Muradabadi, a lot of Rabindranath, nearly everything written by P. L., correspondence of Roman Roland and Tolstoy and Khalil Gibran. In Hindi too, whatever I like I memorise. I do not write it down . . . Even while touring I have exercises for memorization. For example a well-learned script I decide to recite 100 times, sectionally and aloud! If present, before friends otherwise alone . . . I do not believe in any external help from tape-recorders, recorded music etc. If you have full belief in what you are saying it becomes the truth greater than any fiction.

How do you rehearse?

After memorising the script (this was the first step), stand on the stage. Thirdly you must begin *feeling* what you are saying. Perhaps with a good director my programmes would have been different! However that was not to be. I have been doing it alone. And yet in my 29 years of performing I have not interrupted my performance even on a single occasion to have a sip of water etc. . . . People do not come to see how I drink water! To that extent I have lost stage-consciousness.

Use of your body etc.?

Nobody has told me about it. Satyadev Dubey in one of his workshops introduced me thus: 'My principle is not to move while delivering a dialogue. Here is a man who moves all over the stage like a hunted tiger and speaks. His body movement does not convey anything and hence I have invited him to speak to you . . . I am not aware of any such principle!

What about voice?

I employ three kinds of 'throws'. Sometimes voice should land on a word as lightly as a rubber balloon minus its gas. Or it should come to grips with a high note as if you are singing the note with precision. Or it should move in a detached way in the middle range while narrating etc. While scripting I keep in mind these three possibilities.

But what about minor variations?

They are of 2-3 kinds. For example a person like Ramakrishna Paramahansa will never be able to shout . . . that means I breathe out completely and then talk. On the other hand Vivekananda can be heroic or sarcastic etc. . . . Of course when I write dialogues and when I have to follow an existing script (such as Vivekananda's printed lectures) the matters are different. The main thing to remember is that nobody would bear monotony. You must use gimmicks to the extent people can tolerate them. But one must remember that voice modulations are more tiring than speaking at the same pitch for a longer duration. As you know to field in cricket is more tiring!

In your programme on the revolutionaries did you effect voice changes?

Batukeshwar Dutt was a gentle creature. Bhagat Singh was an intellectual so both would not shout. Sukhdev was, from what I read about him, irascible. This would affect his dialogues. Dhingra, Chaphekar, Kanhere were volunteers . . . but Subhaschandra was a very mature person . . . Savarkar is available on tape . . . And yet I never do mimicries. In fact for a number of years I advertised my programmes specifically mentioning that my presentations were no acts of mimicry . . . Apart

from *Vande Mataram*, *Shivaji*, *Yoddha Sanyasi* I also produced *Rana Pratap*, *Khanabadosh*, *Screams of the Conscience* (on Baba Amte's life). The programme on Baba Amte was to help his cause where I did not accept a single paisa . . . I discontinued programmes on Baba Amte's various institutes because many of the projects I collected funds for (such as Gokul, Uttarayana) did not progress satisfactorily.

How would you differentiate between your performances and theatre?

Theatre requires teamwork . . . Theatre also involves people with more ease . . .

Did you ever think of doing theatre?

No . . . I have been so disorganised a person that it would create difficulties for a team operation as in theatre . . . I am happy because I am competing with myself.

Most of your programmes have patriotism as their theme.

Yes, but Vivekananda's attitude was more humanitarian (than patriotic). Further my programmes do not have the content of spiritualism. Authorities in Ramakrishna Mission have often suggested that I should talk about Ramakrishna's *Kundalini Yoga* etc. I rejected the idea because I do not have that experience.

What was the reason for doing the programmes in Hindi and Bengali?

If you count 100 martyrs 75 would be Bengalis. I learnt Bengali in 3 months. Stayed in a mess on Rs 80 per month. One cot, fish, soup and rice . . . twice a day. Five inmates per room. In other words everything around was Bengali. No television and radio on all the time! As a result one fine morning I began speaking in Bengali . . . Sunil Gangopadhyay, the well-known novelist in Bengali, is a friend of mine. He guided me about scripting the first performance. Since then I have been on my own.

Have your interests in music, literature etc. been of any help?

Literature, not of much use. Music, yes. Literature is a closed discipline. I might have read a lot on Michaelangelo, Van Gogh . . . I cannot even refer to them metaphorically in my scripts because I am a narrator of history. On the other hand I use music. I sing Bengali songs in *Vande Mataram*. Even in the programme on Vivekananda I sing . . . In *Shivaji* I recite Rabindranath Tagore's long poem on Shivaji Utsav.

Any future projects?

To teach more and more children who would give these performances. I have taught Anjali Dike, Sagar Khare (12 years), Kshitij (9 years) . . .

How do you teach them?

I observe what parts of my scripts they tend to forget! Then I tell them to rewrite the script . . . This gives me an idea of their grasp and attitude . . . I insist on their doing physical exercises. The children come to me in their growing age. Without good height their talking about revolutions would be absurd! . . . This also helps them in their speech . . . I teach them *pranayam* . . .

Maharashtra may be said to have developed a tradition of one-person shows. What about other regions? Except Babban Khan and Tripti Mitra not many . . . Mostly because we have amateur as well as professional theatre traditions strong enough. That's not so elsewhere . . . The strong *kirtana* tradition in Maharashtra has also been a great help.

Do you feel you tend to be more emotional or sentimental in your presentations?

I evoke emotions, but healthy ones. There is no place for fundamentalism of any kind in my performances.

Interviewer: Chetan Datar

Vasant Potdar: List of Productions

Sr. No.	Title	Subject	Language	1st Performance	No. of Performances
1.	Vande Mataram	Armed Martyrs	Marathi/Hindi/Bengali	1964	6000 +
2.	Sher Sivaraj	Chhatrapati Shivaji	Hindi	1971	700
3.	Yoddha Sanyasi	Swami Vivekananda	Marathi/Hindi	1975	2500
4.	Maharana Pratap	Maharana Pratap	Hindi	1978	9
5.	Khanabadosh	My wanderings	Hindi	1980	2
6.	Akrandan eka Atmyache (Pukar ek Atmaki/Screams of Conscience)	Baba Amte's Life	Marathi/Hindi/English	1984	80