



## **Ideology's Language on The Stage: In Conversation with Prasanna Heggodu**

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During my fieldwork in performance anthropology, I had the opportunity to study the work of Prasanna Heggodu, through an assignment in the town of Heggodu where he had successfully built an all-women weaving co-operative called Charaka. Prasanna's work was mostly situated at the grassroots of theatre, weaving through his activism and ideology with effortless ease. In a video-taped conversation, he discussed the touchpoints of theatre with life in general and labour in particular.

This interview was conducted as a taped conversation with Prasanna, which in itself offers a layer of visual interpretation different from an audio-recorded or transcribed interview. For one, Prasanna was interacting with the camera to respond to the verbal cues or topics that were given before the recording. Moreover, while the conversational aspect of interviewing was reduced, it offered more technical details relevant to the subject than what would have been possible in a verbal interview. The images in this photo-essay were created at the same time of shooting the video, making it 'real-time' and unposed.

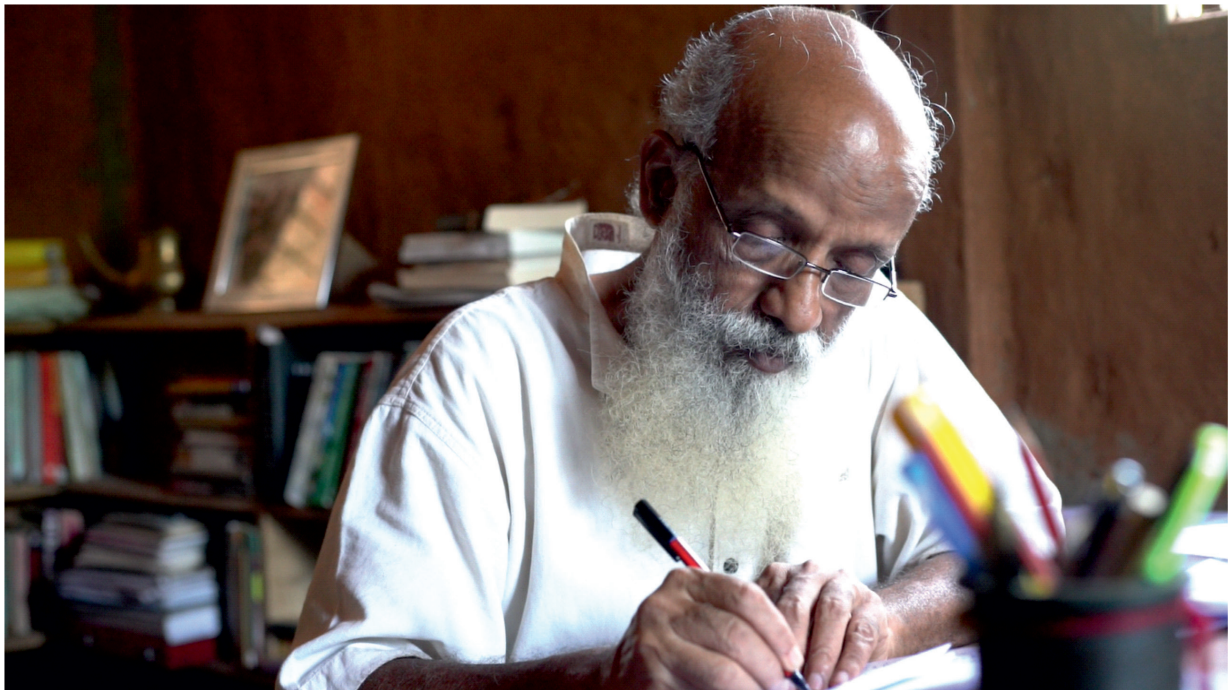
Visual ethnographers in theatre have long relied on stories to narrate their fieldwork, and this essay is no different. McAuley stated [1998: 8] that there is no way to present the process in print or film without transforming it into a story of some kind, the visuals in this photo-essay leans into this considered 'point-of-view' of the observer.

Prasanna, a noted activist and theatre personality in India, left mainstream 'city-led' theatre at the peak of his directorial career. Of this, he said "I was tired of doing theatre in big cities, I wanted to do theatre where people live. And in India when you do theatre in small towns and villages you can expect to get 2000-3000 people. If your show is able to manage in that space, with that money, people are very happy, they appreciate you, they are willing to lift you up and celebrate you. Problem with Indian theatre is, it has become so tuned to

Delhi, Bombay. It is so tuned to machine made entertainment. Every actor and theatre director puts his finger in a bit of everything else.”

Prasanna broke away from the theatre circuit in Delhi, Bombay and moved to the small town of Heggodu in Karnataka’s Shivamogga district. What’s interesting in Prasanna’s engagement with the stage, is his unrelenting desire to uplift the people and environment in Heggodu. To this effort, he started a handloom co-operative called Charaka, that used sustainable weaving and dyeing practices to manufacture clothing, before these terms were commercial buzzwords.

Of this, he said, “I’ve been a theatre person all my life. I’ve been training actors, I’ve been taking acting classes, writing plays. So my work used to take me a lot to big cities, I would live in big cities. It was becoming too boring. So 25 years back, I decided I’ll quit Delhi. I approached a gentleman by the name of Subanna, to procure me some land so I could live more permanently in the village. Subanna had helped to build the Nina Theatre Institute, where I used to come here quite often to direct plays. However, once I had moved to the village I realised I couldn’t be doing theatre there all the year long. I travelled to larger cities and started thinking and looking around, and when I looked around I saw a lot of environmental disaster(s).”



[Fig 1.1] *Prasanna at his work space.*

"I further looked around and I realised the disaster was not so much because of big industries and big roads but because of poor people who didn't know anything to do except agriculture. So in this region in the western ghats there is a lot of agriculture being done, much more than the ecosystem can take. This ecosystem should ideally have 10% of agriculture and 90% should be forest land."

"So I said why don't I do something where they can shift their profession without much problem - shift their profession into something more friendly ecologically. There is another reason why I thought of this idea - because I always wear handloom and it was getting difficult to get good handloom kurta anywhere so I said, well there is at least 1 customer here. Actually it was very funny - I didn't start with the looms - I started with a tailoring unit. I had a little money saved from my theatre activity. I started a little tailoring workshop and got handloom cloth from others. So CHARAKA really started like that."

"It's not only a production place, it's also a cultural space. Culture and Production. Factory and Theatre. They merge when you go into a rural place."

These pictures demonstrate the place where the factory supports theatre and livelihood. They were taken at Charaka.



[Fig 1.2] Gently dyed indigo yarns are carefully laid out by hand at Charaka.



The process of making indigo-dyed fabrics is long & gruelling, often taking up to 10 washes (or more) to obtain a vibrant blue colour. The painstaking attention to detail & the loving hand-made care that goes into the making of every fabric & garment, demonstrates the incredible human effort that goes into making a garment.



[Fig 1.3] A worker at Charaka carefully creating block-print patterns onto fabrics using a wooden hand-block.

Hand-block printing on fabrics is another decade-old art that's being preserved in Charaka, in its effort to create value through 'made by hand', in a market that's flooded with quick machine-made garments.

The walk-through Charaka as it bustles with its everyday activity is a stark contrast to 'factory' as we know it. Here, 'factory' is not just any means of production, but one that values the humanness of workers in the process of production, through which the product gains value that's more than just the cost of its parts. Labour is sacrosanct, revered and disciplined.

It's not only labour that's valued at Charaka, this consideration extends to the environment around it. Areca nuts are the most cultivated cash crop in this



[Fig 1.4] One of Charaka's oldest workers demonstrating the weaving process.



[Fig. 1.5] Dyed yarns laid out to dry at Charaka.



region, and its discarded parts continue to be used to create earthy brown dyes for yarns. Charaka uses other dye materials like jack wood, madder root and pomegranate to dye yarns in the shades of yellow and red.



[Fig. 1.6] *The dyeing process is captured in progress.*



[Fig 1.7] *A woman uses the spinning wheel that's synonymous with Gandhiji's Khadi movement.*

One of the reasons why Charaka's production cycle is a great example of living in synergy with nature, is that none of the tools or machinery are devoid of human touch. There is a human touch at every step of the dyeing and garment making process.

A Gandhian in practice, it was no surprise to spot the spinning yarn at Charaka's facility. Pre-pandemic, Charaka produced approximately 20,000 metres of handloom fabric in a month. The fabrics were distributed through its other arm called Developing Ecologically Sustaining Industry (popularly known as DESI).



[Fig 1.8] A closer look at the yarn in the spinning wheel.

This idyllic picture of a self-sustaining rural collective is not all there is to it. To build his vision, Prasanna stayed in touch with his activism at every step of the way. In one instance when the government tried to change the definition of handloom to include fabrics created through power looms, Charaka & Dastkar Andhra successfully held hunger strikes and padayatras across handloom hubs. He has since been leading the call for a Handloom Reservation Act.

Charaka has become Prasanna's ideological belief conjured into reality, and he has used this rich ethnographic narrative to create and extend the dialogue on stage. Following are some images from his play called *Taayavva* adapted from Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother*.



[Fig 1.9] A still of noted singer and performer MD Pallavi on stage during a production of *Taayavva*. Photo Courtesy: Graam Seva Sangh, via Scroll

Through weaving ideology with theatre, and the ‘humanness’ in labour and its relationship with machines & factory, Prasanna has deftly brought together complex concepts across different areas of governance, society & economy on stage, through a story.

‘Theatre’ here is the whole chain of events that lead to the director’s message presented as performance on stage, right from Charaka – the creation of an economic model he believes in – to the suggestion of a shared means of production that’s come alive on stage through *Taayavva*. Babb’s work on visual interaction makes a case for anthropological understanding of culture through engaging via context and content as Gordon Gray points out (2010: 120). While Charaka is an example of context, *Taayavva* is the content.

These images are from a play directed by Prasanna called ‘*Taayavva*’, an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s ‘*The Mother*’, presented by the Gram Seva Sangh in Bangalore. In this play Prasanna explores the relationship between factory & theatre as a means of protest, while highlighting the importance of man-made, over mass, machine-made, prompting an increasingly consumerist society to value human labour.





[Fig 1.10] A still of the cast of *Taayavva*, directed by Prasanna. Photo Courtesy: Graam Seva Sangh, via Scroll

## References

- McAuley, G. (1998). Towards an Ethnography of Rehearsal. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 14(53), 8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0266464x00011751>
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