

The village of Mundigesara in the state of Mysore (now Karnataka), where K. V. SUBBANNA was born on 24 January 1932, rests high in the cool, evergreen-covered hills of the Western Ghats. Here his parents, K. V. Ramappa and Savitramma K. V., cultivated rice and tended a small grove of areca palms and betel vines. They were reasonably well-to-do by local standards, employing laborers to help them with their crops, and were literate, if unschooled. As Havyaka Brahmans, they were members of a priestly caste among whom the ancient Vedic hymns were kept alive and transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Reflecting on the social orbit of his childhood, SUBBANNA says that in many ways his caste was quite parochial, without access or exposure to the world. But in another sense, they were active participants in a “vast pan-Indian cultural background.”

As a boy, SUBBANNA learned to read and write from his parents. They bought him a primary school textbook in the regional language, Kannada, and simply told him to “read it.” They instructed him informally whenever they had time. In this way, his primary schooling occurred in the context of the daily round of rural home life. He also memorized the Sanskrit mantras and hymns in the Havyaka Brahman repertoire that were repeated daily in the household.

Although in some ways remote, Mundigesara and the cluster of villages and small towns of which it is a part were not isolated from the social and political ferment of the times. As subjects of the British Raj in the princely state of Mysore (which in 1956 became part of Karnataka), SUBBANNA’s parents were in tune with the movement for responsible government and independence then sweeping India. Some of his relatives served actively in Mysore’s representative assembly—a political innovation fostered by the state’s progressive maharajah. Young SUBBANNA was alert to these modern happenings, but he also witnessed the tenacious hold of India’s tradition. For example, his mother’s sister was married at the age of nine, but a year later her husband died. By the Brahmanic code, this ten-year-old widow was forbidden to remarry. That she later did was a very bold act.

SUBBANNA's formal schooling began in 1943 amidst the shortages and uncertainties of World War II and the independence movement led by Mohandas K. Gandhi. The town of Sagar, ten kilometers away, possessed a government middle school and high school. Therefore, SUBBANNA was sent to live with relatives who resided five miles from the town, so he walked daily to his lessons. Although Kannada was the medium of instruction, SUBBANNA began to study English, a language neither of his parents could speak. Through it, he was soon introduced to the pleasures of Western literature. Shama Rao, a teacher at the middle school, taught Shakespeare, while G. K. Narsihma Achar at the high school had his students read *Les Misérables* and other Western classics. SUBBANNA's interest was aroused. Nevertheless, he chose to concentrate on the sciences, devoting most of his school-time hours from 1946 to 1948 to chemistry, botany, zoology, and mathematics. Outside the classroom, however, he joined in school theatricals and enjoyed the professional theater company that played in Sagar.

SUBBANNA had grown up watching a traditional form of theater called Yakshagana. This operatic-style dance drama, based on the Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, was popular with amateur theater clubs in the region's hamlets and towns and was the mainstay of the itinerant players who crisscrossed Karnataka performing in village squares, fields, and beaches. The Company Natak that performed in Sagar for a month each year offered a newer stage-based dramatic form called "proscenium theater," which had been introduced to India in the nineteenth century by troupes of traveling Parsi actors. The colorful, highly stylized melodramas, based on stories from such diverse sources as Shakespeare and the *Arabian Nights* and adapted to Indian tastes, were immensely popular. SUBBANNA relished the opportunity to see them.

After high school SUBBANNA returned home. He was restless and took to gathering with other young men in the nearby town of Heggodu. Excited by India's recent independence, he and his friends organized themselves to build a rudimentary meeting hall and to launch a newspaper. The *Ashoka Weekly*, with a circulation of five hundred, was printed on a cyclostyle machine and carried news and commentary on local and national events. Looking for yet another sort of outlet, SUBBANNA thought of the theater. Heggodu had once possessed an amateur Yakshagana group, but it had been defunct for ten or fifteen years. SUBBANNA suggested reestablishing the club to perform both old and new plays. The young men talked things over with their elders and SUBBANNA's own father became the first president of the group, which they named after the area's presiding deity, Sri Nilkanteshwara Natyaseva Sangha—Ninasam, for short. Bending to popular tastes, the

group's first productions were historical plays in familiar styles SUBBANNA describes as "colorful, stylized, and musical."

SUBBANNA worked with the newspaper and the theater group until 1951, when he went to the city of Mysore to attend university—the first member of his family to do so. Although he was to maintain a lifelong interest in science, especially in its philosophical aspects, from then on he would concentrate on the arts, with an emphasis on literature. Then, as now, he took a holistic view of learning. "Theater," he says, "was not just theater for me. Literature was not just literature, and science was not just science. Very broadly, my interest was in building a new India, our own independent India." Lodging in a hostel with other students of a literary bent, many of whom later distinguished themselves as writers, SUBBANNA immersed himself in university life.

The university at Mysore was particularly strong in the field of Kannada literature because the faculty included a great literary man and award-winning poet, K. V. Puttappa. Under his tutelage, SUBBANNA developed an appreciation for the depth and range of the Kannada literary tradition and for its centuries-long cultural interactions with Sanskritic, Islamic, and folk influences that made it so rich and harmonious. With the help of a teacher, SUBBANNA and his university friends formed a dramatics club that put on three or four productions a year. Delving more deeply into theater, SUBBANNA explored the works of modern Western playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, both of whom used plays to address contemporary political and social issues. This approach, SUBBANNA concluded, would be good for the people of Heggodu, and he resolved to introduce such works into Ninasam's repertoire.

Ninasam had languished in his absence, as SUBBANNA discovered when he completed his bachelor's degree with honors in 1954 and returned to Heggodu. Under his leadership, the amateur group soon came to life again. But SUBBANNA found, to his disappointment, that the Western plays he so admired did not go over well with local audiences, nor did the new realistic plays by Kannada-language playwrights; the people were used to colorful, stylized, mythological plays. SUBBANNA compromised by offering historical plays that touched upon contemporary themes but that could be staged colorfully and to music. This formula worked, and SUBBANNA became adept at writing such adaptations. "Ninasam's audiences," he says, "taught me to balance new theatrical elements with older ones and the importance in art of working from one's roots." Producing plays in the traditional style (in which all parts were played by men) solved a practical problem as well: in those days there were no women actors.

Shortly after SUBBANNA's return from the university, a Brahman writer of his acquaintance suggested that SUBBANNA marry his daughter, Shailaja. When SUBBANNA initiated his courtship with a letter, she responded. Soon letters were flowing back and forth. In this way, he says, he and Shailaja "came to understand each other," and they were married on 3 March 1956. Three years later Shailaja gave birth to a son, their only child, to whom SUBBANNA gave the Sanskrit name Akshara, meaning indestructible.

SUBBANNA's years at the university had peaked his interest in Kannada-language literature. This was an ancient tradition that had bequeathed several great writers to India long before the modern, English-influenced period began. His own model was the contemporary Brahman writer Shivarama Karanth, both an innovator in traditional theater and author of some forty novels, who carried on his prolific literary interests while dwelling in the countryside, away from universities and urban institutions.

Although SUBBANNA directed most of his own literary impulses toward the theater, he was alert to new trends in poetry and fiction. In 1958 he established a small publishing house called Akshara Prakashara to bring out the works of poets who were experimenting in writing Western-style poems in Kannada. These writers admired the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Stephen Spender, for example, as well as works by Western literary luminaries such as Maxim Gorki and Bertolt Brecht. Among the local authors SUBBANNA published were Karanth and Anantha Murthy, a friend from his university days.

In the early 1960s, people in SUBBANNA's area were interested in establishing a new college at Sagar. Town leaders proposed approaching a certain wealthy banker known for having funded several private colleges elsewhere. But SUBBANNA, who had already helped set up a high school in Heggodu, objected to soliciting the intervention of an outsider. Instead, he and some friends started a movement to establish the new college on their own. They planned the new school and gained the support of a local member of parliament who became its first president. Lal Bahadur College opened in 1963 and for four years SUBBANNA served as its full-time secretary on a voluntary basis, commuting ten kilometers daily from his home. In 1967, however, after a political falling out with one of his colleagues, he resigned from the school and redirected his energies to Ninasam and to a new and growing passion—the movies.

SUBBANNA was a university student in 1952 when India's prime minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, sponsored the country's first international film festival. This festival brought many good films to India;

some of them circulated widely. Three reached Mysore where SUBBANNA saw them: *The Bicycle Thief*, *Bitter Rice*, and *Rashomon*. He was fascinated by the possibilities of this medium. In 1955, when Indian director Satyajit Ray\* came out with *Pather Panchali*, the first of his famous Apu trilogy, SUBBANNA arranged to have it shown in Sagar and took his Ninasam friends to see it. At the time, there was no film projector in Heggodu.

Subsequently, while working for Lal Bahadur College, SUBBANNA and a friend formed the Rare Taste Club to show "art films." In 1967, the year he left the college, UNESCO organized the first film-appreciation course in India, and it was held in Pune in the neighboring state of Maharashtra. SUBBANNA attended the six-week course which, to SUBBANNA's delight, included films by Ray alongside other world masters.

India's National Film Archives is in Pune, and through the UNESCO course SUBBANNA learned of their vast collection. He began borrowing films for showings in Heggodu and embarked on a new literary career: translating into Kannada scripts of such movies as *Pather Panchali*, *Rashomon*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. These he published along with other works on film-making and film history on his own press.

Meanwhile, he carried on his work with the Ninasam Theater Company, gradually expanding its repertoire. Through children's plays, he introduced young people not only to good theater but also to theater production. In time, some of his young girl players matured into Ninasam's first women actors. Even as the company's repertoire and stagecraft became increasingly sophisticated, however, its physical facilities remained primitive. In 1971 SUBBANNA conceived a bold plan to build a genuine theater for Ninasam. He approached Karnataka's finance minister, Rama Krishna Hegde, who was a friend of his, about a government subsidy to build a theater in Heggodu. Hegde readily agreed, giving Ninasam 50 percent of the total project expenditure.

The new auditorium was constructed in 1972. It seats eight hundred and is complete with a stage large enough for elaborate sets and plentiful rehearsal space. This new theater, located as it was in a small town and serving a largely rural audience, was unique in India. It soon became the center of Ninasam's ever-growing presence in the area. SUBBANNA named it the Shivarama Karanth Ranga Mandira, after Karnataka's grand old literary sage whom he so admired.

\*RMAF Awardee in Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts, 1967.

The theater was also ideal for screening films. Ninasam's film society soon instituted weekly programs, borrowing as before from the film archives in Pune. These showings proved quite popular, and in 1978 SUBBANNA decided to stage a full-fledged film festival. For ten consecutive nights, hundreds of villagers watched classic films by Ray, Akira Kurosawa,\* Sergei Eisenstein, Federico Fellini, and others, with SUBBANNA supplying viewers the gist of the plot and dialogue in Kannada. Even though Heggodu's people were inexperienced filmgoers, and critically unsophisticated, SUBBANNA found the response extraordinary. In his view, the villagers' lack of experience and exposure to the movie-going fare of India's cities allowed them to appreciate these art films without bias. He concluded that the opportunity existed to create a community of discerning rural filmgoers.

The following year, he repeated the film festival and added a film appreciation course. Students of the course attended lectures by day and studied the reaction of audiences to Indian and foreign films at night. SUBBANNA brought experienced teachers from Pune to conduct the classes and to train locals to conduct them in the future. For a few years he continued to "dub" the movies himself, but after the festival became a popular annual event, he trained a team of young people to do this as well. Meanwhile, SUBBANNA expanded Ninasam's collection of scripts, many of which he translated into Kannada to use in the film courses. He also wrote and published a Kannada-language guide to some eighty movie classics, giving a three-to-five-page synopsis of each one.

In choosing films for Heggodu's audiences, SUBBANNA was adventurous, convinced that any true work of art would find an appreciative audience. For example, he himself greatly admired *Joan of Arc*, a silent film made in 1926 by the German director Karl Drier. "It's a film about a great lady," he explains enthusiastically, "and it's all in close-up." Even such films, he admits happily, "are very well appreciated by our people."

As Ninasam's film programs began to flourish, SUBBANNA turned his attention once again to theater. Although India possessed a prestigious National School of Drama (NSD) in New Delhi, no school existed in Karnataka for training students who either could not meet the requirements and costs of NSD's three-year program or preferred to study in Kannada rather than in Hindi. He therefore determined to establish a school, modeled in some respects after the national institution. Through his son Akshara, who had completed NSD's three-year course, SUBBANNA had become familiar with the NSD program but

\*RMAF Awardee in Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts, 1965.

thought that three years of training was unnecessary. “India is a very poor country,” he says, “and it cannot afford to spend so much on theater education.” He believed theater training, especially for rural students, should be “as cheap as possible.”

Founded by SUBBANNA in 1980, the Ninasam Theater Institute (NTI) compresses the curriculum into ten months and accepts only ten to fifteen students a year. In order to cover the full range of subjects—acting, stagecraft, dramatic literature, and theater management and production—students must study fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. Theoretical subjects occupy the mornings, practical ones the afternoons, while evenings are devoted to research and actual productions. Ninasam’s students are expected to stage four plays each year.

SUBBANNA guided the NTI personally in its pioneering years. For a time, it had only one full-time teacher and occupied a temporary cottage attached to the theater building. Eventually SUBBANNA relinquished day-to-day matters to a professional staff, among them three NSD graduates including Akshara. The institute’s students, one-fifth of whom are women, are selected carefully. Although a high school diploma is required for admission, SUBBANNA noticed that college graduates fare better in the school’s theoretical courses, and ordinarily more than half possess this qualification. Moreover, even if Kannada is the medium of instruction, a knowledge of English is essential in order to make use of reference materials and interact with non-Kannada-speaking instructors and directors. The primary qualification for entrance, however, as SUBBANNA clarifies, is a “discernible passion for theater.”

The NTI is financed almost entirely by state and national grants, which are supplemented by fees from extension courses and donations from the Karnataka Nataka Academy and private foundations. The institute’s students receive monthly stipends of two hundred rupees from the state government to cover their expenses. Students mostly come from nearby towns and villages and return to them after receiving their diplomas. In this respect, the institute’s impact is wholly different from the NSD’s, whose graduates tend to gravitate toward India’s cities, especially Bombay. Thus, living and working within their home state, Ninasam’s students become agents, as it were, of SUBBANNA’s hope to establish a homogeneous theater culture among the people of Karnataka.

In 1983 an unanticipated windfall enabled Ninasam to expand its influence dramatically. SUBBANNA learned about the United States-based Ford Foundation through friends at the film archives in Pune. Although the foundation expressed an inclination to help, he had some misgivings: A large country like India should not “go begging to another

country," adding ruefully, "but you can't help it." Moreover, practically speaking, "when we take money from other sources, we tend to overlook our own resources." Nevertheless, SUBBANNA and his colleagues proposed a two-year project that would not affect the funding of Ninasam's core activities but would make possible an ambitious outreach program. The Ford Foundation agreed to fund the project, which SUBBANNA named Ninasam Janaspandana.

Through direct assistance, the Janaspandana project linked individuals and groups outside of Heggodu with Ninasam's goal of promoting a literate theater culture in the state. The idea was to take Ninasam's plays, theater training, films, and film appreciation courses on the road so that even distant villages could partake of the opportunity now routinely available in Heggodu. SUBBANNA formed a traveling theater company to crisscross the state to perform plays and conduct six-week theater workshops so that local people could then mount productions on their own. He formed a similar team to bring films and film appreciation classes to smaller communities. About half the Ford grant was invested in equipment, i.e., a sixteen-millimeter film projector, a slide projector, a duplicating machine, a tape recorder, two typewriters, and, most importantly, a bus to carry Ninasam's players and equipment from place to place. The rest of the money was used to fund the productions themselves, as well as a sixteen-millimeter film library. Through scrupulous management and cost-cutting, the Janaspandana project outstripped its original targets. Twelve six-week theater workshops were projected; thirty-seven were actually conducted. Moreover, Ninasam's traveling players and local actors produced some fifty plays in thirteen of Karnataka's twenty districts. Prominent directors and faculty members of the Ninasam Theater Institute participated in the program, which reached dozens of communities never before actively involved in drama.

In the city of Davanagere, Akshara led a group of factory workers and union members in a rendition of Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother*. And NTT's principal, Chidambara Rao Jambe, organized a group of reclusive black-skinned outcasts in a theatrical rendition of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, adapted for them by SUBBANNA himself. Other workshops targeted blind children, delinquent youths, untouchables, and rural women. Under the Janaspandana project, Ninasam's film program was also expanded and was able to underwrite four times the number of individual projects than the original proposal called for.

As is his habit, SUBBANNA kept detailed records of Janaspandana's expenses. He reported these to the Ford Foundation and also made them public. Accepting money from the Ford Foundation was something that some Indians frowned upon. By scrupulously accounting for the

funds and showing the fruitful way they had been used, however, SUBBANNA managed to quiet some of the criticism against accepting the foundation's help. As for the Ford Foundation itself, it was delighted with SUBBANNA's exemplary management of the grant.

Janaspandana's success led to another, smaller grant from the Ford Foundation, which SUBBANNA used to establish six rural "theater banks" scattered around the state, each one stocked with the rudimentary lighting and sound equipment needed to stage plays locally. These were entrusted to local theater clubs, some of which had been formed on the initiative of Janaspandana. As part of the theater-bank program, representatives of each club were required to attend a fifteen-day workshop at Ninasam's headquarters in Heggodu. Although the Ford Foundation continued to show an interest in assisting the organization, SUBBANNA decided against accepting further grants, believing that they should rely on their own means. His ability to do so was proven dramatically in Ninasam's next venture.

Ninasam Janaspandana's success had proven beyond question that rural people were receptive to theater. SUBBANNA considered the means by which audiences far from Heggodu and Ninasam's main theater could enjoy professionally produced plays regularly, for the thriving theater companies of earlier years had all but vanished. He pondered this in connection with another nagging problem: the dearth of employment in the working theater facing the institute's graduates. Therefore, he resolved to experiment with a professional company of traveling players. Under the direction of Akshara, a new project called Ninasam Tirugata (Peregrinations) was launched in 1985.

In May 1985, SUBBANNA and his team canvassed NTI's former graduates and other trained actors in the state and selected a company of fifteen players (eleven men and four women). They contacted more than three hundred individuals and organizations around the state whom they hoped might sponsor local performances. Anticipating a deficit, they also put aside a fund to cover eventual losses. Next, they chose four plays on the basis of variety, style, and historical period—avoiding those that might be too boring for inexperienced theatergoers. These included *Lokashakuntala*, a lively, stylized musical drama based on the famous Sanskrit classic in the Yakshagana tradition, adapted especially by SUBBANNA, and directed by Jambe; *Sambashiva Prasahasana*, a farce directed by Akshara; *Tadroopi*, a new Kannada-language play written and directed by the well-known dramatist Prasanna; and *Neeli Kudure*, a children's play adapted from a story by the prominent Kannada director B. V. Karanth and directed by Akshara. Rehearsals began in July and ran seven days a week until October. The new troupe's players not only had to rehearse their parts and learn the

songs and dances but, as members of a traveling company, each one was also responsible for other elements of the production (i.e., lighting, sets, costumes, make-up, equipment). Meanwhile, Ninasam's tour manager visited prospective venues around the state, inspecting local theaters and other facilities. From Heggodu, SUBBANNA communicated with local sponsors and organizations, negotiating performance fees and other expenses. By pre-selling their shows to local organizations, Tirugata avoided having to handle local ticket sales and other complicated logistic problems.

Tirugata premiered its new plays at the theater in Heggodu in mid-October to enthusiastic receptions, and a few days later it embarked on its first road tour. The company traversed Karnataka, traveling 5,200 kilometers in ninety days and performing in every one of the state's districts. Altogether it performed 121 times mostly in small towns and villages outside district capitals. Proper theaters in such places were nonexistent, so the company relied on local schools or village multipurpose halls. Occasionally it performed in the open air. As the players moved from site to site, they learned to improvise: some stages were too narrow, some had no dressing rooms, some possessed inadequate electricity, and several times the company experienced power outages. Despite these handicaps, a grueling schedule, and the lack of understudies, not a single performance had to be canceled. And what a reception the plays received! Nearly everywhere the company played to full or overflowing crowds, with an average audience of seven hundred people per performance. The experiment succeeded financially as well. Healthy gate receipts and careful economizing enabled the company to cover its expenses. The fund established to cover potential losses remained intact.

Reporting jubilantly, Akshara wrote, "it is the conviction of Ninasam that our theater, touching the chords of all the rural masses, should become a repository of our folk culture and experience, open to everyone. That this is possible, Tirugata '85 has proved to us."

The following year, Ninasam raised the pay of Tirugata players and expanded the number of its performances to 152. However, it largely retained its original format, selecting three plays from varying traditions, including SUBBANNA's adaptation of two Kannada classics and his translation of Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*, plus the children's play, *Alibaba*. This sort of combination has proven to be a winning formula that Ninasam employs up till now, permitting it to finance Tirugata's program independently of other Ninasam projects. In addition, every year Ninasam hires some fifteen NTI graduates to work within the organization.

Today, Ninasam's many enterprises (film society, theater institute, amateur theater company, Tirugata, and publishing house) all thrive under SUBBANNA's meticulous and watchful eye. Heggodu's Ninasam complex now boasts not only the Shivarama Karanth Theater, but also the institute, a separate rehearsal building, a library, an office, and a garage. The commonplace sounds of a rural Indian town—birds, cows, and vehicles—are mingled with the sonorous strains of voice exercises and the raucous noises of the rehearsal hall. The town is literally filled with theater. Its citizens are regaled with some twelve new theatrical productions a year, as well as frequent movies.

The Ninasam Theater Institute possesses a formal management and professional staff under its principal, Chidambara Rao Jambe. Each of the other Ninasam components is governed under its own by-laws. Despite this, SUBBANNA describes Ninasam's planning and decision-making process as resembling those of a family. "We don't have regular offices," he says, "we sit anywhere, work anywhere." Decisions emerge from ongoing discussions and are ratified formally in subsequent meetings. But, SUBBANNA insists, "we try to make it as much as possible a family-like thing, without hierarchy."

SUBBANNA himself is obviously the presiding spirit in this ongoing process, but over the years he has consciously trained and cultivated a team of fellow enthusiasts. Wherever possible, he has attracted experts and leading lights from the outside as directors and instructors. Moreover, members of the Ninasam team perform a number of roles simultaneously. As principal, Jambe runs the institute and directs plays for Tirugata, while SUBBANNA translates and adapts material for all of the groups. Akshara teaches at the institute, directs several plays each year, and helps his father with important administrative work, especially in connection with Tirugata.

Indeed, Akshara has emerged as a key figure, something that delights SUBBANNA, but which he says he did not encourage. However, exposed since childhood to his father's enthusiasms, it is not surprising that Akshara was seriously drawn to the theater. Upon graduation from the university, he attended the National School of Drama in New Delhi and proceeded on a British Council scholarship to Leeds University in England, where he took a master's degree in theater arts. Continuing in his father's footsteps, Akshara eschewed the life of an urban professional and returned to Heggodu where today he, like his father, spends half of each day at Ninasam, the other half looking after the family groves and fields—their livelihood, since father and son are both strictly volunteers where Ninasam is concerned.

Volunteerism is central to the ethos of Ninasam and one reason that SUBBANNA succeeds in sustaining many enterprises simultaneously without becoming dependent on outside grants or loans. Although several people associated with the organization's projects are paid (e.g., Tirugata's actors and the institute's staff), the lion's share of human effort that drives Ninasam is unremunerated. Like spare-time actors who carry on the oldest of Ninasam's endeavors, its amateur ensemble, they "just do it for fun."

Although SUBBANNA clearly loves plays and films for their own sake, he is also motivated by a broader social vision, which is to develop a "homogeneous theater culture in Karnataka," or, put another way, "to make theater a language by which any Karnataka man can speak and have a dialogue." This is why at Ninasam there is no sharp line dividing the professional from the amateur theater and why so many of Ninasam's activities are geared to exposing ordinary people to the pleasure of plays and films and, when possible, involving them actively in making and evaluating them. SUBBANNA clearly connects advancing the idiom of theater with advancing India's social democratization. He recognizes that theater—a medium of expression and communication that requires no literacy but that possesses broad public appeal—transcends both class and caste.

The Janaspandana project's workshops for lower-class and outcast communities provides some dramatic examples of this practice. The Siddhi people constitute one of Karnataka's least visible minorities, and one of its most powerless. Living primarily in small forest settlements in the north, these descendants of African slaves work as field hands and domestic servants for landowners. Otherwise they rarely interact with non-Siddhis. Jambe encountered a small community of them while directing an amateur production of *Antigone* in the town of Manchikeri. Through intermediaries, he approached them about participating in a play. Although none had ever seen a play before (and few, a movie) thirty-five Siddhis volunteered to take part, including eleven women. To make certain that doing so imposed no economic hardship on these very poor people, Jambe paid each player a daily wage equivalent to that of a field laborer. The play itself was carefully chosen: *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's classic African tale of imperial conquest and enforced assimilation. It dwells upon power relationships that resonate with the Siddhis' own experience—although, in fact, the community seemed to know little of its own history or of its relationship to other Africa-descended people in India or elsewhere. SUBBANNA wrote the Kannada adaptation, replete with song and dance, and Jambe taught his players their parts by patiently reading the lines aloud until the players memorized them. He encouraged his novice actors to improvise rhythms and movements of their own. Ninasam then staged ten perfor-

mances of the play in Manchikeri, Heggodu, Mysore, and Bangalore, exposing several members of the cast for the first time to the world beyond their local community.

*Things Fall Apart* not only drew the Siddhis into a wider world, it raised awareness among other Indians of the group's existence and plight. Afterwards, the Indian government included the Siddhi among the "scheduled castes," which qualifies them for "positive discrimination" under the Indian Constitution. For Ninasam, the experience was also rewarding. When Jambe later returned to Manchikeri to stage another play, fifteen Siddhi volunteered to join the cast—this time without pay. They had discovered the pleasures of theater.

Reflecting on this experience, Indian director Rustom Bharucha wrote, "the Siddhi had to be seen on stage before they could be recognized more fully as human beings in their own right." And, as SUBBANNA observes, the experience may also have changed the Siddhis' attitude about themselves: they lost some of their meekness and their employers say that they have grown arrogant now. All this may be part of the necessary process of democratization, an essential precondition of which is, SUBBANNA believes, better understanding between people. As a medium of communication, as a *language*, theater can play an important role, for, as he says, "it is through language that [one] man becomes equal with the other man."

SUBBANNA possesses a rich sense of the Kannada literary tradition, an important feature of which is its openness to influences from the outside. Through the centuries it has evolved in dialogue with the classical Vedic traditions of northern India and the folk traditions of the south, serving as a bridge between them. As disparate forces such as Islam entered the subcontinent, Kannada's literati absorbed the new influences, blending them with the old. In this way, for example, the poems and songs of Muslim Sufi mystics were integrated in Karnataka with mythic Hindu hymns, the tales of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and local folk ballads. So, as SUBBANNA explains, "We have a cultural churning of the Vedic culture, the Islamic culture, the local culture." Moreover, this literary culture blossomed and flourished not only in the cities and royal courts but also in the countryside, where rural Brahmans sustained a tradition of literacy and literary life. The modern period brought a new wave of influences to India from the West through the medium of English: science, industrial technology, political democracy, and socialism. The churning continued, and all over India people of intellect created a new cultural synthesis that was true to the old and yet alert to the new. Among the giants of this modern renaissance were the Bengali genius, Rabindranath Tagore, and twentieth-century India's great moral mentor, Mohandas K. Gandhi—

both of whom, SUBBANNA points out, established communities for reflection (and in Tagore's case, art) in rural areas. In Karnataka itself, SUBBANNA's own literary model, Shivarama Karanth, who was part of this living tradition, likewise chose to dwell in the countryside.

SUBBANNA lives and works in the stream of this great evolving tradition. Rooted firmly in the Indian classics, he is also an adventurous explorer among the cultures of the world, avidly studying and introducing to his neighbors fine plays and films from Europe and Japan. That he does this from a small town is thoroughly in keeping with tradition. Besides, SUBBANNA says, the perception that rural people are different from urban folk is a myth; the appreciation of art does not depend upon formal education. "The villagers," he points out, "also understand Kurosawa, Bergman, and other great artists in the same manner that an urban person does."

As a cultural impresario in rural Karnataka, SUBBANNA moves with the confidence borne of the region's tradition. Keeping that tradition alive is an exercise not in preserving but in expanding and adapting it. This is why widening the exposure of rural Indians to foreign plays and films is good and why he opposes censorship of all kinds. ("This is the world we have created. Why fear it?") Western science is also necessary to India, he believes, because "without it . . . we will not get to the modern age." Still, Indians will always seek a balance and, Western science notwithstanding, the Indian "mystical" perspective of man will endure. In the same spirit, SUBBANNA freely meddles with classical Indian plays, adapting them for Ninasam's productions and bending their ancient characters and themes to address contemporary issues. The tradition is, thus, not static, it is alive.

Indeed, this is the reason that SUBBANNA refuses to claim any personal credit for Ninasam. He states, "Many people say that I have done something in Heggodu. But it is not I myself. Ninasam is a product of a social phenomenon that is going on." This is a tradition Tagore, Gandhi, and Karanth have all been part of and is "something which is working all over India." Ninasam, he adds, emerged from within a rural community of which Heggodu is merely the focal point and of which he himself is an organic part. No less than anyone else, he is immersed in the life of his town—its economy, its agriculture, its way of life. "Living in a community with intensity and sincerity," he admits, "gives me a zest for life. And if you live intensively, you will be changing others as well."

September 1991  
Manila

REFERENCES:

- Akshara, K. V. *Ninasam Tirugata: A Second Step (Report of the Experimental Theatre Repertory Organized by Ninasam)*. Heggodu, Karnataka: Ninasam, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Thus Was "Tirugata '85": An Experimental Professional Repertory and Production*. Heggodu, Karnataka: Ninasam, n.d.
- Bhat, Bolanthakodi Ishwara., ed. *Namma Subbanna: A Collection of Articles on and Interviews with K. V. Subbanna of Heggodu in Kannada and English by Various Writers*. Puttur, Karnataka: Karnataka Sangha, 1991.
- Jadhavi, Jaswant. *Ninasam Janaspandana: Rural Theatre and Film Project, 1983-85*. Heggodu, Karnataka: Ninasam, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ninasam Tirugata, Fourth Year Report, 1988*.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ninasam Tirugata, Third Year Report, 1987*.
- Mellegati, Pramod. "Search for the Relevant." *The Hindu*, 26 July 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Success Story of Theatre Experiment." *The Hindu*, 26 July 1991.
- Ninasam: Culture to the Countryside*. Heggodu, Karnataka: Ninasam, n.d.
- "Rural Historionics to the Fore." *The Hindu*, 29 November 1987. 17, 19.
- Subbanna, K. V. Interview by James R. Rush. Tape recording, September 1991. Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Manila.
- Various interviews and correspondence with people familiar with K. V. Subbanna and his work.



*Reynolds*