

# TEACHER PRACTITIONERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SUSTAINING THEATRE AS AN ART FORM AND ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE.

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## ***Abstract***

*There is a dire need for teacher practitioners to validate the academic practice of theatre so that the craft can sustain and flourish. This paper will address the above need to recognise theatre as an academic discipline. Society needs this academic validation to sustain or to believe in this art and respect it as much as any other profession. The question arises as to who will be able to do this and how it must happen. The answer to this question is 'teacher practitioners' because they keep the enquiry and academic research while keeping theatre alive as a discipline. The teacher furthers this through academic scrutiny, research and publication. The challenge however, is that theatre is not just a discipline but also an art form, thus the teacher needs to be present in the team defending the art form through theoretical academic practice. The practitioner here becomes a pivotal character in keeping this balance, redefining the role of a tutor as not only a practitioner or a teacher anymore. The definition of an educator has changed with the advent of the digital age where the characteristic feature of being a knowledge provider is not enough in the subject of Theatre Studies. Students may have access to information, without the teacher. However, they need to be present to show the optimum usage of the knowledge through academic principles and practice learning. These observations are not just based on archival research but questions generating from personally experiencing the theatre practices and the advantages it has provided in comparison with non-practitioners.*

**Keywords:** *Teacher Practitioner, Academic Validation, Sustaining the Art form, Brain Drain.*

Locating theatre as an academic discipline is often challenging within university systems, particularly in India. A subject like theatre requires an institute to make a significant investment in setting up a department as the properties used, the space used and the people required to train the student is significantly higher than any other department in the University. Given the adversities and challenges one may face in the successful setting up of the department, one would need certain unique advantages. An institute is generally able to gauge the investment with regard to the interest the public may have towards the course being offered. However, in the circumstance of Theatre, the initial few years of the department in the University will generate an interest towards the course and after the performance of the alumni in different areas of

professional excellence; will the course be able to attract its desired target audience. We can clearly see the problem of the lack of an element that can make this initial system of setting up as Theatre was never regarded as an art form that mandates formal training. Thus, we can say that the requirement of a 'Teacher Practitioner' comes into play. The answer to the problems of initial setup, generating interest towards the course and justifying the importance of the subject matter being propagated by the department will be validated by the presence of the 'Teacher Practitioner'. An individual or a collective of people who would impart their expertise to keep the enquiry and academic research while keeping theatre alive as a discipline. The teacher furthers this through academic scrutiny, research and publication. The 'Teacher Practitioner' needs to be present to show the optimum usage of the knowledge through academic principles and practice learning. Thus, the presence of the 'Teacher Practitioner' will promote that initial stir among the applicants to justify the department in the university structure.

Theatre is not considered a profession that requires formal training or academic proficiency. Due to the developing status of the nation, the previous statement has a dual effect on the mindset of the people. Firstly, one can pursue a campaign of excellence in theatre without looking at a large investment as an obstacle. Secondly, one doesn't consider being a 'theatrewala' an occupation, even though the most stereotypical labor postfix 'wala' tails the word as an act of "Indianising" pursuers of the profession.

Both the effects pose challenges on the path of the craft becoming more than just a hobby in the country's opinion.

These interpretations, largely propagated by the conservative minds of the older generations, becomes an even greater hurdle to the limited number of people undertaking the challenge of the pursuit. Thus, universities are unable to sustain programs due to the sheer imbalance between the investments in a theatre department and the income from having a theatre department.

Furthermore, Dadabhai Naoroji's 'Brain Drain Theory' has been influencing young 'theatrewalas' to pursue their passion abroad for an experience of learning without misplaced prejudice and the constant pressure to prove themselves.(Commander 2004) This theory adversely affects the number of pursuers in the craft even further. Students find themselves learning the craft in a foreign land under western concepts, rules and regulations. The equity system of salaries makes the prospect of jobs in the city of higher education even more lucrative and inevitably creates a feeling in the student to continue the struggle elsewhere, apart from India, making the availability of resource personnel in the home country dedicated to furthering the craft even more scarce than it is. This is just from the performers point of view. Teachers are constantly in two minds about teaching in India as well, due to the restrictions and lack of support towards the arts, making the possibility of channeling their craft in a different country a lot more appealing. These are just the newer distractions of migration, simple add-ons to the existing reasons for departure from the home country.

The need to validate oneself in the craft of theatre is an excellent stimulus to improve, but the ever-present shadow of doubt in India proves counter-productive to the process. Furthermore, having been colonized for a little less than three centuries where pursuit for art was considered a form of rebellion, created a colonial hangover where theatre as a legitimate profession is not accepted.

All of these reasons point to how important it is for professors of theatre studies to be professionally active in their areas of expertise, to update the students about the ever-changing scope, challenges, developments and prospects of theatre. The tutor's presence in the craft as a livelihood allows the students to be constantly acquainted to the craft whilst preparing and training to become even better. The method of having retired theatre professionals as tutors does grant the student access to a plethora of skills but disallows the updating of the craft in the minds of the students, making the limited availability of the subject among Universities look pale in comparison to other subjects. As opposed to established professions in India, whose academic counterparts resort to a pleasant mix of old and new faculty for the successful execution of the subject matter, Theatre faculty are largely retired personnel with very few youngsters. Today, the world has progressed so that in cities like London, Paris, New York, Moscow and Berlin, established hubs of Theatre, they are progressing to departments run by fully active theatre professionals and a combination of established alumni in part-time, part-time professionals working in multiple schools and adjunct faculty recruited for their specialisations. However, in the context of India, there is still a larger prerogative towards hiring a multi-faceted teacher rather than specialists which in the case of subjects like Drama, Dance and Music can prove to be extremely counter-productive. It enforces decisions for pursuers of the craft to look at studying abroad or doing it themselves.

Theatre is a combination of talent and practice. This practice can be created much by oneself just like any other profession. The general outlook is, however, contradictory. An average Indian citizen will not consider preparing/practicing for theatre as a worthwhile usage of time as the perceived income is disproportionate. This necessitates the importance of a change in mindset which can only be started by learning the nuances of the craft through good education. A trained artist will be able to articulate how all seven Chakras activate in the rehearsal of theatre in comparison to only a combination of Chakras being activated for any other profession. There is a need to change the misconception of struggling to become a theatre artist as a waste of time. The Vedic Chakras were conceptualized between 1500 and 500 BC giving the country or region almost exclusive privilege to understand the human body, mind and soul. Theatre is a profession that treats the body as an instrument and it is almost comic that citizens of the future in this very same country are having to seek expertise outside the country due to the lack of institutes specializing in the craft. A land where world renown knowledge centres like Taxila and Nalanda Universities were established for all-round excellence. A country where Natyashastra by Bharata

details the intricacies of theatre in a way even the Poetics by Aristotle pales in comparison. The same country is struggling in the upkeep of its theatre pursuers. A primary reason for the same could be how a number of Institutions in Greece dedicated centuries into the implementation of the rules and regulations of the Poetics, using it as a guide and nurturing the young talent to understand, practice and propagate the learnings of the Poetics. However, the same, if not more valuable instructions in the Natyashastra did not receive the same treatment due to the lack of propagation in the educational spheres of Theatre in India. This example almost perfectly captures the importance of 'teacher-practitioners' for the purpose of theatre. In a hypothetical situation where a person using the Natyashastra as a guide to character work, direction, gesture and posture development and maintenance of the physical body in the professional world simultaneously campaigns to teach the same Natyashastra in the educational world using the live and contemporary examples of the work he is handling, would result in keen interest in the subject by all the pursuers enrolled in the classroom.

The next few years could be the Renaissance of theatre in the world around us due to the political tragedies that are self-destructing on almost every continent. A world resembling the times of Greek Tragedies. A world where plays were written to simulate future reality and project disastrous outcomes without running out of time in the present times. Hence, teachers now than ever before need to keep themselves engaged in the craft while teaching the craft for the simple reason of practice and pertinence to the subject matter. Just like the hypothetical situation of the usage of the Natyashastra. A teacher as mentioned before has transcended the mere role of a knowledge provider. A teacher is someone that provides a unique and distinct point of view on the subject matter. This view may be good, bad, triggering or calming. Regardless, it creates a reason for the student to question. A teacher as a presenter of facts ceases to retain the ever-shortening attention span of a student while a teacher defending his/her point of view or opinion challenges the students attention span. The student while listening to a view will formulate his/her own views to debate the lecturer and create a more sustainable learning environment. The attitude will shift from not paying attention as the student can research the material on their own, to paying attention to an aspect of the subject matter unavailable on the Internet. Adding on to the various advantages of teacher-practitioners, students find themselves using teacher practitioners as valued mentors to their respective career paths. Apart from making the classroom experience far more nurturing, students will look forward to the said sessions with the teachers. Teachers will be forced to maneuver their teaching strategies from holding attendance as a bait to students into holding debates and discourses with regard to their own area of expertise. This would contribute to an increase in the rate of growth and increasing the number of graduates taking up theatre as full-time profession.

A teacher without regular practice will eventually fail to deliver the truth of it. Unlike accepted sustainable professions, the statistics of the condition of theatre cannot be projected through graphs and regular news updates, but the need for it is ever increasing and the need for

technical injections into the talented pursuers even more important. This will enable the present generation and the generations to follow accessibility to skills that make the hours of rehearsal productive and enhancing. Creating a new wave of artists that can mould their talent to their advantage. This would speed up the process of removing the cloud of doubt that instantly forms upon people trying to make it in the craft.

The presence and acceptance of Universities to employ professionally active tutors will kick start and boost the productivity of the pursuers and create a demand for formal training. (Wagner 2016, Mages 2007) This in turn would create a positive image for the 'theatre-walas', as the general mind-set will change to accept theatre as significant as any other profession, since it requires a similar, if not more wilful struggle. This will erase the misconception of the luck factor for success and juxtapose it with training and practice.

Moving forward beyond the areas of advantage to the students, the world of theatre and its importance and the benefit of educational institutions. The teacher-practitioner model for performing arts faculty is a massive excellence model for teachers as practitioners. (McCammon 2010) As one traces the growth of a practitioner, there comes a point in the learning curve when variations become increasingly difficult and makes a practitioner struggle in the 'world of creation', which is arguably a synonym to the 'world of theatre'. In the craft the most common advice one might come across is to 'think like a child.' The insinuation with the phrase 'think like a child' intimidates an individual to mentally challenge their selves without fear, inhibition and insecurity. It forces one to think outside the box and remove societal confines and march forward on the path of creating something unique. These workshop sessions for the purpose of directing, acting, singing, dancing and choreography among others, allows an individual to create. However, there are challenges to this process of learning. A practitioner, much like a writer, comes across different phases of a block. Having the assistance of the students in the parallel world for the teacher proves to be of immeasurable value at a time like this. The student group can provide quite a few variations to a supposedly exhausted strife.

This similar mechanism of trial and error with the student groups will allow for the creation of new work pertinent to the current generations and for generations to follow. The students will feel the confidence to pioneer newer teaching/learning styles and schools of thought. The presence of teacher practitioners like Konstantin Stanislavski and Yevgeny Vakhtangov created an empire of schools propagating the thought across the world. Indian artists should not cease from exploration among foreign texts as that would be completely counterproductive. However, we should also resort to teaching our traditional styles in greater detail, have professionals in the areas of expertise part-time, promote participation in research/practice of the different crafts and refer to our historical texts and allow India to be a destination for pursuers as well.

Teacher-Practitioners have within their power the ability to academically create a regard for Theatre on an International level and attract the participation of different countries to the institutions in India.(Mitra.S 2014) The connections the practitioners make through their performance on different platforms and the associations that accompany a performer shall allow the department they belong to, to benefit from the exposure and tackle the mismatch in income and expenditure of the department and Institution alike. The notion of having theatre in an institution will not be seen as a financial liability, but rather as an asset. Teacher-Practitioners will have found a space to nurture their skills and constantly update the same with the progress of the craft in the world at large. The space of the University will become a breeding ground for new thoughts and ideas to keep the spirit of theatre alive.

Thus, we can see how the presence of Teacher-Practitioners will allow a holistic development for students, institutions, craft and self. The process of maintaining oneself as a teacher practitioner will necessitate the individual to constantly adhere to sustainable and healthy lifestyles, leading by example with the knowledge that would be propagated to the students. The versatility of the tutor will allow students to use the mentoring to their advantage to foster the growth and propagation of new ideas in the spectrum of theatre for entertainment, research and educational purposes. This will definitely see the improvement of the craft in the eyes of the people and the requirement for preparation, practice and training as essential steps to secure the goal of becoming a Theatre Professional.

### **Funding Disclosure/Acknowledgement**

Partial Funding

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Ninad Samaddar, born in kolkata India is a theatre enthusiast, freelance actor and teacher practitioner at CHRIST(deemed to be University). He completed is BA in Theatre Studies and went on to pursue his Masters in Actingat Drama Centre, Central Saint martins, UAL. Ninad has taken part in several professional productions in the capacity of a stage manager and an actor. His most recent production,TAJ EXPRESS the bollywood musical, toured North America between Aug'19 and Dec'19 where he was featured as the lead actor. Currently he is assisting with International Collaborations at the University whilst teaching and striving as a professional actor in the craft.

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