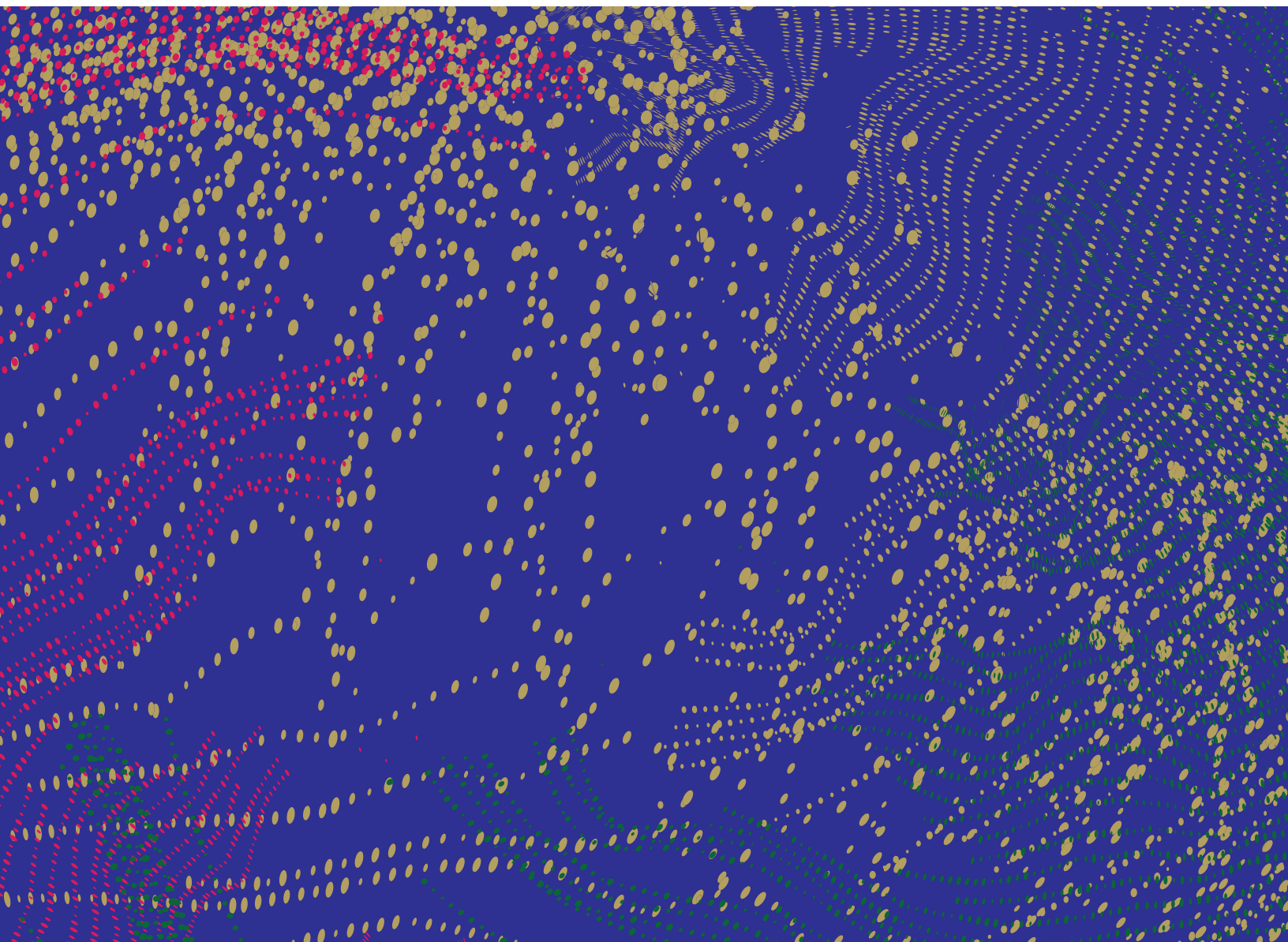


The World Humanities Report
**Performers Meet
the Humanities:
Underground Activists
Shaping the Overground
Humanities in India**

Brahma Prakash



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Performers Meet the Humanities: Underground Activists Shaping the Overground Humanities in India

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Not for me those studies
Not for me that life
I will study
the working class
the factory workers
I will join the union and
I will learn my lessons there
—Gaddar, “Mother, I Will Not Study”¹

The human rights activist and revolutionary balladeer popularly known as Gaddar wrote and performed the above Indian Telugu-language song.² In it he shows a distaste for “studies” that do not engage with the working class and that remain disconnected from society. The revolutionary singer chooses the factory over the university to “study” the working class. As the song suggests, the relationship between the academic and the activist in India has often been contentious. One criticizes the other, accusing them of not recognizing “true” politics. Academicians are described as armchair activists and revolutionaries, and activists are accused of black-and-white thinking. The interdependence, however, deserves closer attention. By thinking through the cultural activism of Gaddar and the Jana Natya Mandali (JNM; People’s Theatre Troupe) of the Indian Telugu region, this essay examines the active connections and leakages between scholarship and activism that have shaped the humanities and social sciences in India.

Founded in 1972 in the Telugu-speaking region of India (i.e., the states of

¹ Gaddar, “Mother, I Will Not Study,” in *My Life Is a Song: Gaddar’s Anthems for the Revolution*, trans. Vasanth Kannabiran (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2021), 61–65.

² Born Gummadi Vittal Rao in 1949, as an adult he changed his name to Gaddar as a tribute to the Ghadar Party, a revolutionary organization that fought against British colonialism between 1913 and 1930.

Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), the JNM was a popular cultural organization associated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) People's War (better known as People's War Group; hereafter, PWG), a radical political organization. Gaddar and JNM became significant against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement in the Telugu region (1972–2005). The Naxalite movement traces its history back to peasant uprisings in the village of Naxalbari in 1967 that were supported by radical communist groups inspired by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The movement spread across India with demands for land redistribution and rights to forests. In 1985 the government imposed a ban on PWG and its affiliate organizations, including JNM, which forced Gaddar and the JNM underground. During this time, Gaddar worked in hiding in other parts of India, including the Adivasi (Indigenous) regions of central India, spreading the message of the revolution and human rights.

The PWG officially dissolved JNM in 1995 because of internal disputes, but in that period, between 1972 and 1995, the organization played a crucial role in mobilizing people around such issues as land redistribution and gender- and caste-based violence. Gaddar had been a cofounder of JNM, and, after its dissolution, he became a prominent Telugu poet, singer, and performer. As a one-man troupe, he performed for various human rights organizations. Feminist poet and human rights activist Vasanth Kannabiran writes that his “popularity and his capacity to captivate crowds with his songs and performances about the suffering of the poor and the need for a revolution made him a much-hated target of the police.”³ In 1997 plainclothes policemen shot him at point-blank range. He survived and continued to perform, with a bullet still in his body. He performed across languages and regions and in many venues, including in universities and colleges, making direct contact with researchers and scholars. Despite the immensity of his contribution to Indian democracy and performance culture, his legacy, sadly, remains neglected. As N. Venugopal and Ramarao Peddy have pointed out, JNM's importance cannot be understood without Gaddar.⁴ He not only introduced new discourses to the humanities and social sciences, but also changed the performance landscape of the Telugu-speaking region. JNM left a deep imprint in the collective memory of the region, especially on human

³ Vasanth Kannabiran, “Introduction: The Bard of the Revolution,” in *My Life is a Song: Gaddar's Anthems for the Revolution* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books, 2021), 16–17.

⁴ N. Venugopal, “Avisranta Janahrudaya Spandana Jana Natya Mandali” [Jana Natya Mandali's restless sound of the people's heart], *Yavanika*, January–March 2003, 20–33; Ramarao Peddy, “Theatre of the Marginalized: Politics of Representation” (PhD diss., University of Hyderabad, 2003).

rights discourse. Gaddar became a household name in the region, with his songs routinely played on a variety of occasions.

Thinking through the works of radical performers in India such as Gaddar, this essay challenges the assumption that academics and activism inhabit two contradictory domains. I draw on the methodologies of performance studies to open up a space between analysis and action.⁵ Academic scholarship is often supposed to offer empirical observation and critical analysis from a detached perspective, and cultural activism is supposed to be grounded in active and hands-on participation and personal connection. This view that scholarship is conceived from above, in the text, and activism from below, in the body, needs a more nuanced understanding in a country like India, where the two—print and orality, text and body, theory and practice, study and struggle—are intertwined. Many exchanges take place between academia and activism through alliances, encounters, and leakages. Here I examine three such exchanges in the context of the Telugu cultural sphere and its progressive cultural politics: (1) moments of encounter between cultural activists and the academic humanities; (2) JNM artists' use of ethnography as a method to understand people and to enact politics; and (3) more recent realizations that the academic humanities and activism are vital to the survival of each in the face of a hostile government. By examining these exchanges, I show that the porous boundaries of universities and the interdependence of activist and scholar have played a major role in shaping both Indian activism and the university. This essay stresses the necessity of this mutually influential relationship.

The Formation of the Telugu Cultural Sphere

Before I examine the specific exchanges between academia and activism, I need to describe the Telugu cultural context in which they occur. The Telugu language has a rich history of performative and literary culture. According to Nannecodudu, one of the earliest writers in Telugu language from the twelfth century, Chalukya kings, who ruled large parts of southern and central India between the sixth and the twelfth centuries, established literature in Telugu

⁵ See Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *TDR: The Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (2002): 145–56.

in the twelfth century.⁶ Literary scholar V. N. Rao describes various literary cultures in Telugu—courtly, public, and temple cultures, as well as *dēśi* (regional) and *mārga* (interregional) language cultures—but none had a division between literature and its performance. Literature was meant for performance. Nannecodudu makes a clear distinction between the *mārga* and *dēśi* literature:

Earlier, while there was the *mārga* poetry,
the Cālukya king and many others caused *dēśi* poetry to be born
and fixed it in place in the Andhra land.⁷

Nannecodudu considered all Sanskrit poetry *mārga* and all Telugu poetry *dēśi*. Other scholars, such as Sumanathudhu, saw Telugu poetry that followed the Sanskrit form of *champu* (a mixed prose-poetry form) as *mārga* and that which followed common people’s language as *dēśi*. It can be argued that sometimes *mārga* and *dēśi* forms of literature carried regional as well as cosmopolitan sensibility in their specific exchanges in premodern time. However, British colonial education that marked the modern education system in the nineteenth century created a sharp divide between *dēśi* and *mārga* and established a new regime of aesthetics and cultural values. As in other regions, the English-educated native elites brought modern impulses to Telugu literature. The concept of “modernity” in literary history depended on the relationship that each Indian language and its literature developed with English; while Sanskrit and Persian literary models were labeled as traditional or medieval, English models were seen as modern.⁸ Although the colonial encounter created new hierarchies and categories, it also brought a new self-consciousness among native elites about their culture and identity, and encounters between Telugu, Sanskrit, and English marked a major new exchange of ideas between the humanities and social movements.

Modern social reformers, who, too, were a product of the colonial encounter, had exposure to both the English language and traditional literature in Telugu and Sanskrit and were the first to bridge the gaps between humanities and activism in the modern period. Kandukuri Veeresalingam (1848–1919), one of

⁶ Nannecodudu wrote *Kumarsambhavam*, which is the earliest extant Telugu *kavya* (poetry) known to scholars. There is no hard date to determine the period in which he wrote, but he is credited with having written extensively on the origin of Telugu literature. See Velcheru Narayana Rao, “Multiple Literary Cultures in Telugu: Court, Temple, and Public,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 384–402.

⁷ In Rao, “Multiple Literary Cultures,” 401.

⁸ Sisir Kumar Das, *History of Indian Literature: 1800–1910: Western Impact, Indian Response* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005), 30.

the earliest Telugu social reformers, not only advocated for the legalization of widow remarriage and the promotion of education for women but also wrote what some consider the first modern novel in Telugu, *Rajashekhara Charita*, in 1880, inspired by Irish writer Oliver Goldsmith's 1766 novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*. His exposure to world literature shaped both his writings and his social engagement. Such exposure to world literature similarly inspired several writers and provided fertile ground to build such connections: most of the nineteenth-century educators and reformists created a dialogue between the humanities and activism. The engagement between the humanities and social activism that we see today draws on this lineage.

Socialist influences of the 1930s have also exercised long-lasting impacts on the humanities and on cultural activism in the Telugu-speaking region. Those influences changed the priority of literature and aesthetics, and social engagement of literature

came to fore. In 1974, for example, the well-known poet and a revolutionary writer Srirangam Srinivasa Rao (1910–1983), popularly known as Sri Sri, became the first president of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee. Other impacts were more complex. When university scholars in the humanities translated Marxist literature, it prompted a rupture in the Telugu literary community. Local activists and poets criticized the deployment of pedantic and obscure language for translations and aesthetic debates. Poets (who were also performers) started attacking hegemonic cultural tastes and rebelling against both colonialism and Brahminical traditions. The movement led to questions about the politics of access, asking, “Who do you write for?” Although saint-poets traditionally played an important role in this region, in the 1970s and 1980s, poet-performers from secular traditions emerged as sources of moral authority and as the conscience of society, a tradition that still continues, and poetry has remained of interest to the general public, unlike in many other regions of India where poetry remains restricted to a small segment of society.

This prominence of poets has shaped the cultural spheres in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Using the medium of song, as well as other kinds of popular media, poetry has been able to reconnect with the community. Today, poets and performers are expected to be the first to take a public position on various issues in

The linkages between radical artistic culture and humanities discourse in universities have been strongest in those states where left or Dalit cultural and political movements have been strongest: Telangana, Maharashtra, Bengal, and Kerala.

the region. Newspapers carry poetry and literature because artists and poets stand at the forefront of social and political action. Poetry and literature did not become the elite practice of academics or limited to only a certain class of people because there was a deliberate attempt to free them from the clutches of one class and make them part of the larger community. As Velcheru Narayana Rao rightly observes, “to claim a poet from their own community is the preferred means for a social group to gain upward mobility.” Thus, Telugu poetry often flourishes outside of humanities departments of the universities and literary institutions. Indeed, poetry and songs have become so widespread and popular that “to receive the dedication of a book of poems is an honor celebrated in public.” Telugu literature also saw a shift wherein the fluid present, instead of the hegemonic past, becomes the criterion to judge works of art and performance. As Rao remarks about noted Telugu poet, playwright, and translator Devulapalli Krishna Sastri (1897–1980), “even great classical poets [like Sastri] were good only because they, the best of them, wrote precisely like the new poets—in a manner that was lyrical, original, free, and following the dictates of the heart.”⁹ Sastri’s work was recognized as “classical” not because it followed the classical poets of the past but because of its newness. How well one’s poetry is able to capture the present becomes a more important marker of aesthetic value than whether it adheres to a certain tradition.

Another modernist development was the denigration of the traditional genre of *bhavakavitvam*, a classical style of poetry marked by excessive emotion and sentiment.¹⁰ Indian students returning from abroad denigrated Bhavakavitvam, which they considered “too otherworldly.” According to Rao, “They rejected the imagined love of Bhavakavitvam, in which external social reality did not exist and images of poverty and economic malaise never appeared. The modernists spoke of a new awareness of social reality that implied class-consciousness, albeit still in the familiar romantic modes of Bhavakavitvam.” This literary movement, inspired by the events of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, led to a blurring of the line between social activism and literary creativity and also shattered notions about what constituted good and bad literature. Telugu poet Srirangam Narayana-babu (1906–1962) declared: “There’s no theme, no word that is prohibited in our poetry—dirty, clothes, bazaar streets, dogs, donkeys, stinking sewers, factory sirens, machine guns, poverty, sick old women—all of them—everything under the sky—are welcome here.”¹¹

⁹ Velcheru Narayana Rao, ed. and trans., *Hibiscus on the Lake: Twentieth-Century Telugu Poetry from India* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), xiii, xiii, 290.

¹⁰ This poetic style emerged in the 1920s under the influence of English lyrics and followed the sentimental style of classical poetry.

¹¹ Rao, *Hibiscus on the Lake*, 288–89, 295.

Against this background, the progressive cultural movement, also known as the people's theater movement, emerged throughout India in the 1940s. Progressive writers and intellectuals had come together to form the Progressive Writers Association of India (PWA) in 1936. Writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Sarojini Naidu, K. A. Abbas, and Anil de Silva had all been exposed to world literature, and they carried that influence into their own work. In 1943 the PWA held a meeting that led to the foundation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).¹² The IPTA emerged as the most influential cultural front of the Communist Party of India. It maintained a close association with students, teachers, and activists and was able to bring together academic and activist engagement. Both the PWA and the IPTA made important changes to the way we understand the meaning of art, theater, and literature in India.

The branch of IPTA that was active in Andhra Pradesh was called Praja Natya Mandali (People's Theatre Troupe, or PNM; 1946–55), and it emerged as one of the most powerful branches in the country. Unlike the IPTA branch in Bengal, PNM had a strong rural base.¹³ PNM considered traditional folk performances the most appropriate medium to reach out to the “masses,” that is, the lower classes, farmers, and agricultural laborers. For this reason, PNM adopted several traditional folk forms such as *burrakatha* and *harikatha*, as well as thirty to forty other folk forms.¹⁴ The involvement of traditional performers in radical political programs pushed the limits of the academic discourse on culture in a specific social context. In PNM experiments, the *burrakatha* emerged as the

¹² The IPTA has been the subject of a significant amount of research that assesses its contributions to the field of theater, cinema, language, and literature. See Sudhi Pradhan, ed., *Marxist Cultural Movements in India: Chronicles and Documents: 1936–47*, vols. 1–3 (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1979); Vasudha Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008); Nandi Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Vakulabharanam Ramakrishna, “Literary and Theatre Movements in Colonial Andhra: Struggle for Left Ideological Legitimacy,” *Social Scientist* 21, no. 1–2 (1993): 69–85; Vakulabharanam Ramakrishna, “Left Cultural Movement in Andhra Pradesh: 1930s to 1950s,” *Social Scientist* 40, no. 1–2 (2012): 21–30; Sumangala Damodaran, *The Radical Impulse: Music in the Tradition of the Indian People's Theatre Association* (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2017).

¹³ V. Ramakrishna, “Popular Culture and Political Mobilisation: The Indian People's Theatre Association,” in *Performers and Their Arts: Folk, Popular and Classical Genres in a Changing India*, ed. Simon Charsley and Kadekar Laxmi Narayan (New Delhi: Routledge, 2006), 188.

¹⁴ Ramakrishna, “Popular Culture,” 192; Peddy, “Theatre of the Marginalized,” 206. *Burra katha*, or *burrakatha*, is a storytelling performance tradition from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The form has one lead performer who is supported by two others performing in a narrative style. *Harikatha* is another popular style of singing tradition in the region. The *kirtan* (cymbals) style of singing remains largely popular for divine singing, but the JNM used it for social and political campaigns.

most popular form; several plays were written in this popular genre. According to Vakulabharanam Ramakrishna, the success of PNM was as much due to “its class composition as . . . to the power of the medium through which they operated, namely, the traditional popular performing arts.” During the Telangana armed struggle (1946–51), a communist-lead movement against the British Indian Empire’s princely state of Hyderabad, PNM reached new heights with the phenomenal success of the stage play *Maabhum* (Our land). This period also saw a significant number of women joining the cultural team as performers. In October 1951, in response to the growing state repression of activists and performers, the Communist Party of India suspended the activities of PNM. The decision led to confusion among the PNM artists and created a contestation between the cultural activists and the political party, which continues today. Even though PNM’s activities came to a standstill by 1955, its contributions in the Telugu regions remained significant. According to Ramakrishna, PNM “register[ed] a breakthrough in Andhra’s cultural arena” and was successful in “popularizing the Communist Party programmes and politics through its performances.”¹⁵ PNM also set the stage for future cultural formations in the region.

Although the group drew in artists and performers from across social classes, its leadership remained in the hands of its middle-class members. Similar to IPTA’s activities elsewhere, PNM in Andhra targeted its activities mainly against colonial and fascist forces, using drama, poetry, and the novel.¹⁶ And although the PNM had led to a democratization of culture through the revival of people’s art forms, its work had been limited, both in its approach and its practice.¹⁷ PNM was more interested in attracting urban middle-class audiences, similar to its leadership, and after the success of the play *Maabhum*, PNM began moving from folk performances to modern proscenium theater.¹⁸ P. Kesava Kumar has noted that the new forms of song, a mixture of oral and written styles and of the language of commoners and the elite, largely reflected middle-class tastes. Nevertheless, despite their shortcomings, they had a huge impact on the JNM.¹⁹

The Srikakulam peasant uprising in northeast Andhra Pradesh (1967–70),

¹⁵ Ramakrishna, “Literary and Theatre Movements,” 78, 55.

¹⁶ Padmaja Shaw, “Counter-hegemony Narratives: Revolutionary Songs,” in *Media, Ideology and Hegemony*, ed. Savaş Çoban (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 152.

¹⁷ Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the “Folk Performance” in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 246.

¹⁸ Peddy, “Theatre of the Marginalized,” 231.

¹⁹ P. Kesava Kumar, “Popular Culture and Ideology: The Phenomenon of Gaddar,” *Untouchable Spring* (blog), February 11, 2010, <http://untouchablespring.blogspot.com/2006/11/song-of-gaddar.html>.

inspired by the Naxalite movements, once again created a demand for new literatures and cultural organizations that could make people aware of their rights, especially the redistribution of land. Several writers and artists came forward as cultural activists, the most prominent of whom was Subbarao Panigrahi (1933–1969). Panigrahi adopted a popular folk form *jamukulakatha* from the Srikakulam region, the content and style of which were entirely folk and deeply rooted in the local dialect. This choice seemed to be a conscious political decision. As a folk form, *jamukulakatha* had many advantages over *burrakatha* (which, as noted above, was extensively used by PNM). *Jamukulakatha* is simpler than *burrakatha* and can be performed with fewer artists. Unlike *burrakatha*, it does not need a stage and can be performed anywhere. That feature suits “underground” theater performers who risk life and limb while performing. Its flexible storytelling style of singing requires minimal props. It can be easily started with any number of audience members and can end at any moment if needed. Panigrahi’s songs and performances were qualitatively different from the erstwhile PNM. Instead of taking language and folk forms from the dominant population, he adapted the genres and forms associated with marginalized communities, and Maoist cultural troupes performed his plays.

In December 1969 Panigrahi was shot dead in an encounter with the police, but his experiment with poetry and performance emerged as a new model for reaching the masses. Because of his commitment to egalitarian politics and arts and the economical performance model he offered for the revolutionary performers, Panigrahi’s life and works would become a model for the JNM. Panigrahi experimented with local rituals and others cultural forms that had been discarded for their “superstitious beliefs,” infusing them with emancipatory messages. Extending Panigrahi’s experiment, Gaddar and JNM later critically recognized and used the power and energy of local cultural forms.²⁰ His important social work was praised by many, and the literati embraced his legacy. His songs were translated into English and various Indian languages, and his songs “Some People Are Afraid of Red” and “Where Are You Going, O Brothers? Wait for Us! We Shall March Together” became popular throughout the region.²¹

In the late 1960s and 1970s, against the backdrop of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the PNM and the Communist Party’s conventional approach to culture provoked a range of debates on issues of form, language, and the rela-

²⁰ Shaw, “Counter-hegemony Narratives,” 152.

²¹ It is also believed that he was inspiration behind popular Telugu movie *Acharya* released in 2022.

tionship between art and politics. With the formation of Vipalava Rachyital Sangham (Revolutionary Writers Association, or Virasam), the debates intensified. Virasam emerged as an important platform for major writers in Telugu. Literary giants such as Sri Sri, R. V. Shastri, Cherabandaraju, Satyamurthy, Varavara Rao, Vijayalakshmi, and Jwalamukhi were all part of Virasam. Most of these poets and writers had a strong background in the academic humanities and had been exposed to their critical debates. With Panigrahi as its role model, Virasam paved the way for the formation of the JNM, which started under the name of the Art Lovers Associations (ALA). Its task was to increase engagement with radical art and literature. The activists involved in the ALA translated many authors from Africa and Latin America, as the radical movements of the time produced a huge corpus of literature. They also organized study groups that invited people from academic backgrounds to discuss important issues of the day. However, the need to reach the masses led to a change in the structure, style, and priorities of ALA. A focus on written poetry gave way to more emphasis on song and oral traditions. Similarly, the middle-class leadership was replaced with members from the laboring class. These changes were a radical break in terms of language and aesthetic engagement.

Performers (En)countering the Humanities

Culture, creativity, and aesthetics are concepts in motion that continuously shift with fresh encounters and changing contexts.²² This section discusses some moments of encounter between cultural activism and the academic humanities that made reciprocal impacts on both realms of activity. Every such encounter produces a range of meanings and effects that continually shape the field. They offer us, moreover, some concrete examples to understand how activism and performance have transformed the field of humanities and vice versa.

To be progressive, poetry had to be communicated to the people. While Sri Sri and other prominent poets had been sensitive to social and political causes, they were unable to reach the people. Under the influence of Gaddar and the JNM, Sri Sri and other leading poets of Telugu literature, such as Cherabanda Raju, were compelled to change how they delivered their poetry.²³ In order to take his poetry to the people, Raju became a performer himself. In an attempt to

²² Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

²³ This is the observation of Narasing Rao, independent filmmaker and one of the founders of JNM, who brought Gaddar in contact with the Revolutionary Writers Association. Personal communication, Hyderabad, January 2, 2011.

merge orality and print, his songs appeared in print as literature but were read and performed in public. The experiments of JNM created a new set of networks with channels of communication between villages and universities, orality and print, and live performance and its textual mediation. New gestures and artistic movements necessitated a search for a language and symbols embodied in freedom and equality, and the dialogue between radical artists and the humanities brought in new ideas of materiality and corporeality. Take for example the *dappu*, an ostracized musical instrument of caste society, which became the symbol of rebellion. According to Kesava Kumar, “the contemporary dalit struggles are translating the condemned lifestyles, symbols and cultural practices into a symbol of protest with pride.” They projected *dappu* “against the Brahminical social order and its knowledge system,” and it has become “analogous to the dalit presence in public.”²⁴ Translation played an important role as JNM attempted to translate Marxist philosophy into common language and accessible songs, which were then translated into other regional or local languages. The sense of urgency and passion felt by the amateur writers and activists made it possible. Thus, songs by Gaddar and JNM were quickly translated so that they could be sung by performers from other regions of India. They often did simultaneous translations in two or three different languages. Gaddar told me how Vilas Rao Ghogre, another popular performer from Marathi region, had translated his song while they were performing together.²⁵ When Gaddar and other such performers performed in the universities outside the region, students or teachers tried to provide simultaneous translation and explanation. Many times, translation was not planned but happened spontaneously in the encounter with the audience when the performers felt the need to connect with their audience or the audience wanted to know more about the performance. Elsewhere Gaddar has explained that the “relationship asked us to engage in the translation and exchange of ideas.”²⁶ This idea of the felt translation—an impromptu translation or translation out of necessity—would later shape the practice of translation in both the academic and cultural events. This becomes especially important in the Indian context where activists and scholars have to engage with people from many different linguistic regions.

The fields of the arts and the humanities in the Telugu-speaking region changed with the radical intervention of JNM and other artists. Though most

²⁴ Kesava Kumar, “Dappu: The Symbol of Dalit Protest,” in *Counter-writings: Dalits and Other Subalterns*, ed. Jetty Bheemaiah (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2016), 117–27.

²⁵ Gaddar, interview by author, Hyderabad, January 27–28, 2011.

²⁶ Gaddar at a book discussion, organized by Asmita Public Forum on Rights, Cultures and Politics, Hyderabad and online, September 3, 2021.

JNM artists were not academics, they were not entirely outside of that world either, as they were in constant dialogue with students and intellectuals and well exposed to the fields of the humanities. Although they were often viewed as critics of the arts and humanities in a caste-based society, their liminal existence created the potential for radical politics and helped to reconfigure both the humanities and cultural activism. The humanities were renewed and reborn in such moments of encounter.

The universities facilitate artistic and intellectual dialogue and collaborations, but intellectuals who work at the universities also face challenges from

Although the JNM performers were often viewed as critics of the arts and humanities in a caste-based society, their liminal existence created the potential for radical politics and helped to reconfigure both the humanities and cultural activism. The humanities were renewed and reborn in such moments of encounter.

cultural radicals outside of academia. Take this recent example. In 2014 Kabir Kala Manch (KKM), a left-Ambedkarite cultural troupe from Pune in the state of Maharashtra, came to perform in Delhi. To unite the politics of caste and class, they combined the slogans of Dalit politics (*Jai Bhim*; Victory for

Bhim, or Long live Bhim²⁷) and the left politics (*Laal Salaam*; Red salute) into one: *Jai Bhim, Laal Salaam*. At the symbolic level, the novel slogan was powerful, but the student and intellectual groups largely remained divided about the possibility of such a union. When the troupe said, “Jai Bhim,” the section of the audience affiliated with Ambedkarite politics would respond, “Lal Salaam”; and when they said, “Lal Salaam,” the students associated with left groups would say back, “Jai Bhim.” While KKM was trying to bridge the two groups in their gestures and utterances together, the Dalits and the left groups present remained divided. This situation posed a challenge to the university intellectuals who found it difficult to bring the bodies and slogans together because of their different ideological underpinnings. Even though radical performers had flagged this rupture, the academic intellectuals in humanities and social sciences remained hesitant until the universities themselves came under attack after Narendra Modi’s election as prime minister in 2014. Today, in this changed landscape, even scholars from the humanities and social sciences are in support of the soli-

²⁷ Bhim refers to Bhim Rao Ambedkar (1891–1956), Indian scholar and thinker who emerged as anticaste icon in India.

darity implied in “Jai Bhim, Lal Salaam,” emphasizing the importance of caste, class, and intersectional struggles working together. As political commentator G. Sampath has noted, “such an alliance of Jai Bhim and Lal Salaam, if translated into a political programme, could mark a significant departure for both Left and Dalit politics.”²⁸ The new combined slogan also marked a dynamic moment of new solidarity and political alliances among both society members and academic intellectuals.

What I am trying to show is that the radical cultural activist groups and individuals such as KKM, JNM, and Gaddar not only challenged but also shaped the academic humanities and social sciences. Activist-performer and humanist Dwight Conquergood has argued: “It is the capacity of cultural performance to induce self-knowledge, self-awareness, plural reflexivity, that makes it political.”²⁹ In this regard, the role of activist scholarship is also very important, because it “demands efforts to change universities, disciplines, and interdisciplinary fields.”³⁰ In the case of the humanities in India, while universities were trying to be more cosmopolitan by engaging with theories of postcolonialism and multiculturalism, activist scholars were trying to tie the universities to specific local struggles. Craig Calhoun has observed that “activism is not just a matter of publicity or reaching broader publics with a message from social science. It is a way of doing social science, often in collaboration with non-social scientists.” The same can be said about the specific practices of activist scholars in the humanities. At the same time, we need to remember that “activist scholarship is a matter of critique, not just advocacy.”³¹ Charles Hale rightly argues that “research and political engagement can be mutually enriching.”³² Both can offer us a wide range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on ways of seeing and perceiving knowledge. In the postcolonial reconfiguration of both activism and the humanities, there has been an attempt to bring the liminal and subjugated to the center of the discourse. In an interesting move, both the humanities and performance have shown their common interests.

In 1990, when the Congress government led by Chenna Reddy lifted the ban on the PWG that had been imposed in 1985, JNM performed at a huge rally in Hyderabad. Reporting on the event, the *Illustrated Weekly of India* wrote:

²⁸ G. Sampath, “When Jai Bhim Meets Lal Salaam,” *The Hindu*, October 14, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/When-Jai-Bhim-meets-Lal-Salaam/article15536866.ece>.

²⁹ Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 19

³⁰ Craig Calhoun, “Foreword,” in *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles R. Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xv.

³¹ Calhoun, “Foreword,” xvii, xxv.

³² Charles R. Hale, “Introduction,” in *Engaging Contradictions*, 2.

On 20 February 1990, Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, was taken over by a sea of rustic humanity. Waving red flags, sporting red shawls or red turbans, they compelled attention by their sheer numbers, as they converged from all directions on the expanse of the Nizam College grounds. The estimated crowd of over two lakhs exceeded many times over previous gatherings at the same venue when electioneering was on merely a few months earlier. And then came the flashpoint.

A hush fell over the multitude as a short, dark man ascended the stage. He looked very much like any of them. Muscular, attired in the traditional garb of the agricultural worker. Bare-chested, with a red scarf around his neck and an olive-green woolen blanket with a red border thrown over his shoulders. He is simply called Gaddar. The man who cherishes hopes of bringing about a revolution—changing the lives of the common folk—with his song.³³

Here, Gaddar (and the JNM) brought the body to the center of the discourse. Their intervention was profound in a caste-based society that assigns the body to the lowly and the mind to the elevated. By bringing the body and labor to the center of the knowledge, JNM proclaimed the body as a site of knowledge.

This centering of the body also created a dangerous paradigm for JNM. The unparalleled state persecution of JNM artists had a lot to do with the “body politics” of the nation and the artists who largely came from a Dalit, or “low-caste,” background.³⁴ The embodied “choreopolitics” of JNM’s lower caste, laboring bodies created a peculiar aesthetic sensibility that offended the upper caste bourgeois sensibility.³⁵ JNM artists were especially vulnerable because the negative conception of the human body—associated with disgust—prompted the feudal and upper-caste Brahminical state to see them as a social danger.

With the arrival of the bodies of radical performers from Dalit and marginalized communities, as in the case of JNM, the body becomes a radical site of knowledge formation. Through the body, and its rhythms, we make sense of agency and mobilization. Corporeality becomes a challenge for the state because

³³ Gaddar went underground after the Karamchedu Dalit Massacre in 1985, when police started harassing the members of JNM. See K. P. Sunil, “Songs of Revolution,” *Illustrated Weekly of India*, March 25, 1990.

³⁴ Brahma Prakash, “‘Dangerous’ Choreopolitics of Labouring Bodies: Biopolitics and Choreopolitics in Conflict in the Act of Jana Natya Mandali in India,” in *Shifting Corporealities in Contemporary Performance: Danger, Im/mobility and Politic*, ed. Marina Gržinić and Aneta Stojnić (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 188.

³⁵ André Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, The Task of the Dancer,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 4 (2013): 13–27.

the body and flesh are linked with the irrational, the unruly, and the dangerous. But because normative discourses see Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities, and women as assemblages of bodies, those very bodies become the site for a new politics. By foregrounding the body as a site of knowing, JNM challenged binary constructions of reason and emotion, objective and subjective, and rituals and democracy so that the body—and not the mind—becomes the site of knowing.

Performers as Ethnographers

JNM artists have learned a lot from humanities discourses. In my interviews with the performers, they come across as if they were trained as ethnographers. They approach the field just like an ethnographer would: talking to individuals in specific communities, understanding their problems, learning and recording their songs, and so forth. Such ethnographic methods have even changed the nature of engagement of the troupe itself. The JNM's very name was a result of this ethnographic orientation. As mentioned above, it had been originally named the Art Lovers Association, but because the locals were not able to connect to the English-language name, they changed it to Jana Natya Mandali (People's Theatre Troupe).

Such ethnographic practice is still strong among radical activists and cultural performers. In the context of Bastar, a district in Chhatisgarh that is part of the so-called Red Corridor in central India where Naxalite groups have a strong presence, radical activist Comrade Venu explained to writer Arundhati Roy how the fieldwork was difficult in the beginning and that it took time and patience to develop a rapport with the local communities and Adivasis. In Roy's words, "the villagers were suspicious of them and wouldn't let them into their homes. No one would offer them food or water. The police spread rumours that they were thieves. The women hid their jewellery in the ashes of their wood stoves."³⁶ Venu then explains how things changed when they gained the confidence of the community. The cultural troupe studied the local songs and, through them, tried to understand the local problems. Sharing stories, singing songs, participating in local rituals and festivals, and making sense of the social composition of the community help overcome the initial fears. Padmaja Shah notes how in new areas where activist cultural troupes want to make an intervention, "songs that ha[d] already become popular and known to the people . . . would pave the

³⁶ Arundhati Roy, "Walking with the Comrades," *Outlook*, March 29, 2010, <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/walking-with-the-comrades/264738>.

way for building the organization.”³⁷ Like a proper ethnographer, they study “the diversity and unity of cultural performance as a universal human resource for deepening and clarifying meaningfulness of life.”³⁸

As a political-cultural project, JNM was founded on the basis of an indissoluble link between art and life. For the founders, performance was a space for dialogue with the larger community. The troupe would often organize musical programs and singing competitions in which they would ask local singers and storytellers to come forward and share their stories. The sharing and performance of oral narratives thus became an integral part of their “ethnographic” project. While

By basing their songs and discourses on marginalized themes, radical performers have played a vital role in bringing visibility to marginalized voices in humanities and social sciences debates, and they have been responsible for shaping the most progressive and radical currents in the humanities in India today.

some JNM members would look to collect empirical data on the socioeconomic problems of the communities, others would try to build an affective bond with them. It is not surprising that many members of JNM had first joined the group simply as enthusiastic singers and performers and only later became

cultural activists. Many members from Gaddar’s village joined not because of shared political views but because of familial and cultural ties and community lineage. Political activists and social scientists within the academy often question cultural activists’ understanding of politics and their political credentials, based on their perhaps unpolished political speech. But cultural activities often find it easier to assert their politics through their bodies and bodily gestures so that when politics is being discussed, they express their politics through gesture and performances. Indeed, performance becomes the most exciting site for them to lay claim to and to practice politics.

When performers perform as ethnographers among a wider audience, they realize the “epistemological potential of performance as a way of deeply sensing the other.”³⁹ A relationship and bond develop in this moment of interaction, which become the first foundation of political corporeality, or what Andrea Lepecki has called “choreopolitics.” Choreopolitics is “the formation of collec-

³⁷ Shaw, “Counter-hegemony Narratives,” 154.

³⁸ Dwight Conquergood, “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1985): 1

³⁹ Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles*, 67.

tive plans emerging at the edges between open creativity, daring initiative, and a persistent—even stubborn—iteration of the desire to live away from policed conformity.”⁴⁰ They often narrate the story and bring the story into immediate contexts and at the corporeal level. In a way, they create a “dialogical performance,”⁴¹ one that bridges the gap between ethnography and performance. The sharing of stories, of suffering created a space for “intimate conversation.” Such was true with the JNM. Folklorist and ethnomusicologist Henry Glassie writes: “Ethnography is interaction, collaboration. What it demands is not a hypothesis, which may unnaturally close study down, obscuring the integrity of the other, but the ability to converse intimately.”⁴² Conquergood has proposed the notion of dialogical performance in ethnography. According to him, “dialogical performance is a way of having an intimate conversation with other people and cultures. . . . Instead of speaking about them, [JNM] speaks to and with them.”⁴³

Through most of the 1970s, JNM activities were confined to the city of Hyderabad. After the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) People’s War, usually referred as Naxalites or People’s War Group, started the *Gramalaku Taralandi* (Go to the villages) campaign in 1979, they gradually spread to rural and Adivasi, or tribal, areas. Several workshops were organized, and hundreds of new members were trained. The Radical Students Union, the Radical Youth League, and JNM undertook a campaign to spread the message of agrarian revolution. In this campaign small groups made up of youths, students, and cultural activists went from village to village singing and performing revolutionary songs and interacting with people.⁴⁴ The campaign resulted in the formation of Rytu Coolie Sanghams (Farmers and Laborers League). As JNM toured all over Andhra, its popularity soared, and several professional and amateur artists joined the team. By the early 1980s every district of the Telangana region had a branch of JNM. This campaign created major points of contact, as students, teachers, performers, and villagers all walked together. Remembering those days, Gaddar says that JNM artists would travel from village to village, interacting with people about their problems, conditions, and, most importantly, about their songs and their culture. He told me: “How could one become a people’s artist without listening to people, without understanding their emotion and frustration? We have to listen and learn from people and communities; they are a source of all arts and knowledge. They are our storytellers.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics,” 22.

⁴¹ Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles*, 75.

⁴² Henry Glassie, quoted in Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles*, 76.

⁴³ Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles*, 77.

⁴⁴ Venugopal, “Avisranta Janahrudaya Spandana.”

⁴⁵ Gaddar, interview by author, Hyderabad, January 27–28, 2011.

Members of the team stayed in villages for days, working with farmers and agricultural laborers in the field and “politicizing” them through performances. JNM artists learned songs while working and went to villages to join peoples’ celebrations and their festivals. They collected stories, songs, and performances, and they discussed their form and content. They adopted what they thought was good and transformed what they found to be reactionary. JNM also discovered poets, artists, and performers whom they trained to spread the revolutionary message. While roaming the forests of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh, Gaddar was influenced by Adivasi society and performed songs about their lives and struggles. Upon witnessing the destitution of one nomadic community, the Lambada, he wrote a song about how a Lambada man goes to the market to sell firewood but sells his daughter instead.⁴⁶ The song later became very popular among the Lambada communities. Gaddar’s “discovery” of folk artforms is in tune with the JNM’s “masses-to-masses” approach. The goals of this approach were (1) to collect material from people’s lives; (2) to adapt people’s artforms; (3) to store the content of people’s lives and songs; (4) to give those forms a revolutionary direction and thrust; and finally (5) to give it back to the people.⁴⁷ This cultural activism brought together two sets of people: one with little or no formal education and the other well exposed to and familiar with humanities discourses. Many of the villagers acquired their first exposure to education in the radical movement and started to educate themselves while participating in it. Once literate, the artists started writing down their songs, as well as their experiences.

Scholar-activists also translated revolutionary literatures from around the world into all major Indian languages (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali, and others) to make them available to the movement. These efforts of scholar-activists’ labors resulted in major works from Africa and Latin America being translated in India, while universities became sites where groups like JNM would often perform. This collaboration helped JNM create social solidarity across knowledge systems by dissolving the boundaries. As cultural translators trying to erase the boundaries between theory and action, they created a new space for collaborative reflection. Being an “observer” without being a “participant” was not tenable for the JNM, which preferred active participation.

When it came to the training of the artists, there was no special criterion for selecting artists; those who showed interest could join the training camp free of

⁴⁶ Anant Giri, “The Calling of New Struggle: A Conversation with Gaddar,” *New Quest*, July–December 2008, 29.

⁴⁷ Gaddar, *The Voice of Liberation* (Secunderabad: Janam Pata Publications, 2002).

cost. JNM believed that artists are not born but made. Their workshops, which ranged from one week–long to month–long programs, had production–oriented trainings in which JNM asked its artists to learn from the people and from the moments and situations of their everyday lives. In these production–oriented workshops, JNM artists usually gave training on a selected song or performance, but sometimes local artists would be trained in specific genres. JNM would then invite local artists and instrumentalists to learn particular dance and music techniques. Hundreds of artists were selected and trained by the JNM in this manner over the years. The group ensured that these training classes happened throughout the Telugu–speaking region. They also conducted these trainings and classes in other states such as in Delhi and Haryana.

Among all forms of performances, songs remained the most significant JNM asset. Participants were encouraged to write and compose songs. While some JNM artists, such as Gaddar and Vangapandu Prasad Rao, excelled in song–writing, most JNM artists acquired training to write and compose their own songs.⁴⁸ When organizing a performance, the group made arrangements with the help of the local community. JNM also organized local song competitions, giving a platform to local community members to come and perform. Sandhya, one of the early women artists of JNM, told me in an interview that though it was difficult for women to come and perform in the beginning, they eventually participated; JNM tried to give them a space where they could be assertive unlike the objectified performances of a feudal culture.⁴⁹ The activities of JNM helped to open up a performance space for the active participation of people who otherwise would have been hesitant to perform.

The Necessity of Exchange

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci once reflected on the question of how the separation between the philosophy of praxis and people’s actual consciousness in the popular domain might be overcome. He suggested a double movement: first, break down the notion of philosophy as an authoritative text, and second, establish a new common sense that would be critical of the existing common sense. One can make sense of Gaddar’s contribution through this Gramscian lens. According to Kesava Kumar, “Gaddar brought politics into everyday life situations and translated terms like ‘working class,’ ‘new democracy,’ ‘revolu-

⁴⁸ For instance, when I met JNM artist and singer Sandhya, she happily shared her own songs with me.

⁴⁹ Sandhya, interview by author, Hyderabad, February 2, 2011.

tion,' 'classless society,' 'bourgeois state,' 'capitalist class,' etc., into the concrete life experience of people." He translated the communist writings of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Mao Tse-tung and the writings of the Indian anticaste activists B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, and Periyar into songs and ballads for the oppressed sections of the society, and he also translated the experiences of the oppressed communities for the middle-class public sphere.⁵⁰

By engaging with both the lowest sections of society and the middle class (including educational institutions), Gaddar's and JNM's performances collapse what Conquergood describes as the "unfortunate schism based on gross reduction" of experience, knowledge, and understanding.⁵¹ According to Kancha Ilaiah, "Gaddar was the first organic Telangana intellectual who established a link between the producing masses and the literary text and, of course, that text established a link between the masses and higher educational institutions."⁵² By including both performance and text, print and electronic media, oral and written, sharing and listening, JNM performances break an essentialized schism between orality and text.⁵³ Similarly, by unifying marginalized identities on the basis of a common language of oppression and struggle, JNM's approach enabled remarkable interconnections between and across "fragmented" identities and struggles, as well as the possibility of their revolutionary embodiment. The emergence of an artist like Gaddar is also crucial because in him we see a subaltern himself voicing the concerns of subalterns.⁵⁴ By giving a space to marginalized communities and cultures JNM played a very important role in the democratization of culture and politics. Furthermore, the role of poets and performers in the Telugu-speaking region was not confined only to performance as such since they also emerged as social commentators whose opinions on sociopolitical issues were respected. They were seen as the activists with a moral conscience who stood for truth and justice.

Gaddar and JNM attempted to create a way for everyday language to be reconceived in the language of philosophy. According to Kancha Ilaiah, Gaddar's "theoretical discourse, which posits *maatti chetulu* (hands that turn mud into food) as the source of all production and social existence, combines Marxism

⁵⁰ Kesava Kumar, "Popular Culture and Ideology: The Phenomenon of Gaddar," *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 13–19, 2010, 61, 64.

⁵¹ Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles*, 319.

⁵² Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, "The Bard Whose Song Is His Weapon," in *Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism* (Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 2004), 46.

⁵³ Prakash, *Cultural Labour*, 263–64.

⁵⁴ Syed Amin Jafri, "The Songbird Who Sings of Revolution," *The Rediff Special*, August 31, 2005, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2005/aug/31spec1.htm>.

and Ambedkarism to show how the *matti manushulu* (human beings who have constant interaction with soil and nature)—have no self of their own.”⁵⁵ JNM experiments brought a new set of performance languages, aesthetics, bodies, and subjectivities, as well as a paradigm shift in the understanding of intellectual engagement and performance.

Gaddar often told me that when I listen to his songs, I should forget that I am a professor at a university.

In their performances JNM artists, despite coming from oppressed sections of society, address not only their own individual subjectivities but also the collective “self.” Marxist cultural understandings have usually denied the salience of individuality in and a leadership role to cultural performances. JNM, however, recognized the role of the subaltern artist in bringing a new subjectivity and language to performances. It is not surprising that as many as 85 to 90 percent of its artists came from low-caste and laboring-class backgrounds. JNM acknowledged the role of individuality and creativity in knowledge transmission, yet its artists also retained a strong sense of their social identities.

Gaddar recently recalled a song that his mother used to sing for him in the Marathi language,⁵⁶

A jasmine grew on a dungheap
It bore a basketful of fragrant blooms
One flower spread its fragrance far and wide
That fragrance roused the whole village to rise and walk
Slowly, the whole village came to the dungheap
And asked for the name of the flower that spread such fragrance
That blossom was Savitribai
That fragrance was Jotiba Phule.⁵⁷

Gaddar knows that knowledge is power, that it has liberating capacity, and he is saying that his family was liberated because of education.

⁵⁵ Shepherd, “The Bard,” 48.

⁵⁶ Gaddar, ““Why Do You Shed Tears, Malanna? Rise like a Sword, Madiganna!?: Gaddar’s Anthems for the Revolution,” March 18, 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/989814/why-do-you-shed-tears-malanna-rise-like-a-sword-madiganna-gaddars-anthems-for-the-revolution>.

⁵⁷ Jotiba (or Jyotiba) Phule and his wife Savitri Phule were social reformers from Maharashtra who advocated for the education and liberation of the oppressed.

Now let us compare this song with the one with which this essay began. In the opening song, Gaddar was mocking the purpose of academic study, as well as the colonial and Brahminical education system and its universities in India's hierarchical society. But here he is advocating for education. Gaddar's songs question the moral and ethical purpose of education and the academic system as a whole. They take an ideological stance against the elite space of the universities, asking how they have ultimately served society. He is critical of education that turns the human being into a machine, that teaches them to be profit-seekers and exploiters rather than play a role in social transformation.

Crossing the Boundaries

Because of social identities and political affiliation, Gaddar, despite being a renowned performer throughout the Telugu-speaking region, was not allowed to perform on several occasions on university campuses in Hyderabad, the largest city in the state of Telangana, even though students on those very campuses were writing dissertations on his poetry and performance. In 2005 the state police of Karnataka killed Saket Rajan, a Naxalite leader, in an encounter killing, or "fake encounter" (a term used in South Asia for extrajudicial killing in custody). At the time, Rajan's two-volume work, *Making History: Karnataka's People and Their Past*, which offers an incisive history of the region from below and was written under the pen name Saki, was part of the university curriculum in the same state.⁵⁸ There are many others, including Saroj Dutta (1914–1971), a Naxalite from West Bengal, and Varavara Rao (1940–), a poet from Telangana, whose writings were part of the syllabus. The art and literature of radical artists and writers continue to be suppressed by the state, and yet their work continued to influence the humanities and social sciences discourses within universities. The linkages between radical artistic culture and humanities discourse in universities have been strongest in those states where left or Dalit cultural and political movements have been strongest: Telangana, Maharashtra, Bengal, and Kerala. However, radical performers have constantly challenged academic discourses, and vice versa. As mentioned above, both groups—performers and academics—have been critical of each other, sometimes to the point of vilification. The relationship between the humanities as a field of study and performance as a field of practice is full of tensions and contradictions, which influence the two discourses through exchange, leakages, and confluences. By basing their

⁵⁸ Saki [pseud.], *Making History: Karnataka's People and Their Past*, 2 vols. (Bangalore: Vimukti Prakashana, 1998).

songs and discourses on marginalized themes, radical performers have played a vital role in bringing visibility to marginalized voices in humanities and social sciences debates, and they have been responsible for shaping the most progressive and radical currents in the humanities in India today. What we often see as a boundary between the humanities and society and between scholars and artists is in fact a bridge connecting the two.

There is no doubt that the humanities and activism actively maintain boundaries and adhere to a strict compartmentalization, but, as this essay has attempted to show, leakages between these two domains make dialogue possible. These leakages point to the possibilities of bringing the humanities and cultural practices together. Radical performers move through the channels created by these leakages and find not only a wider audience but also their own survival amid state repression. Ultimately, their performances are about both reclaiming and risking a social and political space for alternatives to the cultural and political status quo. Despite bans and strict restrictions on the movement of radical cultural organizations, there are enough leakages through which one can see the possibility of dialogical performance. Many times these dialogues are not voluntarily, they are involuntary reactions, and they question, debate, and challenge each other. They make fun of and often negate each other's meaning and purpose. For instance, Gaddar would often make fun of citations in academic writing. He would say, "Why do you people practice 'lift irrigation' [picking from one place and putting it in another place]?"⁵⁹ On the other side, academics will criticize Gaddar and other cultural activists for their sloganeering style and their black-and-white understanding of the world. But these contestations are what creates a dialogical performance. As Conquergood suggests, "more than a definitive position, the dialogical stance is situated in the space between competing ideologies. It brings self and other together even while it holds them apart. It is more like a hyphen than a period."⁶⁰

In this dialogical performance of conflicting and competing positions leakages occur. Even a performative stance does not allow for different voices coming from different sites; Marxist scholars and Dalit activists often want to silence each other. But, as often happens, they do not remain estranged for very long. At the same time, they remain suspicious and wary of each other. With this sense of uneasiness, dialogue creates holes and then bridges those gaps, with

⁵⁹ Gaddar was critiquing the jargon-based and passive modes of writing, usually written in a language not accessible to the common people. He was also emphasizing the importance of direct and immediate knowledge production, rather than the knowledge that comes through indirect references.

⁶⁰ Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act," 10.

the possibility of the leakage of ideas and communications. These leakages and dialogue do not employ fake empathy; rather, they are driven by a genuine sense of solidarity. Feminist and postcolonial theorist and filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha has remarked: “Despite our desperate eternal attempt to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak.”⁶¹ These categories—scholar and activist, theory and practice, university and society—leak despite their “formal” approaches to reject each other without rejecting the boundaries. Undoubtedly, the schisms remain powerful, but these exchanges show how “leakages” become one of the most fascinating aspects of this exchange. They shape the practices of the humanities and of cultural activism in India.

We also need to understand the larger context in which this dialogue occurs. The field of humanities faces major funding crisis in India, and, with authoritarianism on the rise, scholars are also facing problems sharing the radical ideas. Struggling inside university spaces, scholars in the humanities are coming out into the streets to air their grievances, as they realize that they have to engage with the public for the sake of their survival. In fact, in light of the ongoing neoliberal onslaught on the humanities and social sciences in universities, this exchange has become crucial. Scholars from the humanities and social sciences are leaving the ivory tower and marching with the activists and performers in the streets of Delhi, Kolkata, Hyderabad, as well as in the streets of the cities in other parts of the world. These encounters are breaking the existing binary and creating new possibilities. The attacks on institutions of higher learning in India—for instance, on Jawaharlal Nehru University, University of Hyderabad, and Jamia Millia Islamia—cannot be seen in isolation.⁶² The arrests of scholar-activists, who have served as a bridge between academics, activism, and performance, have further amplified the importance of these exchanges. The humanities must now make use of their moral authority to protect these people for the sake not only of preserving their moral standing but also of their very survival.

⁶¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 94.

⁶² Delhi-based Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jamia Millia Islamia came under attack by the Indian authorities in 2016 and 2019. The authorities and media continuously labeled them anti-national institutions. In the assaults, many student activists were arrested, and police torched the university’s campuses.

Conclusion

As evidenced above, state violence has surrounded the cultural work of Gaddar and the JNM. Confrontations between the state and artists are part of the biopolitics of the neoliberal state. As I have asked elsewhere, “Do these brutal repressions merely result from the fact that the JNM was associated with the banned left political movement or does it have also to do with the body-politics of the Indian state and the body-politics of the JNM artists?”⁶³ As we know, most of the JNM artists came from lower-caste and laboring-class backgrounds and faced more violence and discrimination. Their laboring-class background seems to be another reason that their cultural works are not yet recognized in the Indian scholarship, which is more oriented toward the middle classes.

Once I met an intellectual in Delhi who told me that Gaddar was good at singing but that he lacked the intellectual capacity and language to articulate a politics. “You cannot have a serious political discussion with him,” he said. Gaddar told me something similar about intellectuals, including myself:

Who cares if you do not write about me? Pandits did not write about Kabir [India’s great saint-poet from the medieval period], but that did not stop him from flowering in peoples’ minds. Upper castes tried hard to hide the compositions of lower-caste Saint Tukaram [another popular saint-poet from Marathi-speaking region in India]—but did they succeed? Who cares if you do not write about me? Who cares if you do not engage Kabir, Tukaram, or for that matter Gaddar in your great university? People have kept us; people will keep us in their memory.⁶⁴

And he has often told me that when I listen to his songs, I should forget that I am an intellectual or a professor at a university.

In this essay I have shown how the humanities and cultural activism in the Telugu-speaking regions of India have shaped each other. Despite the schisms of theory versus practice, academia versus activism, and textuality versus orality, which operate at different levels, powerful leakages operate across them, through cracks in boundaries and porous categories, and dialogues begin. Because these exchanges have shaped both the humanities and cultural and political activism in India, they present a challenge to the ways that the humanities and performance have been understood in India. When we contemplate the future role of the humanities in this moment with multiple contemporary crisis, such inquiry is crucial. Can we in universities possibly separated our “studies” from action?

⁶³ Prakash, “‘Dangerous’ Choreopolitics of Labouring Bodies,” 185.

⁶⁴ Gaddar in an informal discussion with the author in 2016.

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