

WADA Nagara and Sankar VENKATESWARAN (India)

## “Goodbye, and good wishes for your success – a response to *Annihilation of Caste* – (…)”

### Third Report: Performances and Reflection

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This work, with its long title, *Goodbye, and good wishes for your success – a response to Annihilation of Caste – (…)*, went through online rehearsals, rehearsals in Kerala, South India, and Kyoto, and finally reached its performances at Shunjuza on December 10 and 11, 2022.

#### Production Process

Online rehearsals: April–September (1 or 2 meetings per month),

October 21–30

Rehearsals in India: November 3–7

Rehearsals in Kyoto: November 14–December 9

Performances at Shunjuza: December 10–11

#### Summary of the Work

The production is largely made up of excerpts from Ambedkar’s speech and talks based on the actors’ personal experiences. There is a microphone stand and a podium at the back of the stage, and a sofa and a low table are placed in front. The space with the podium at the back of the stage is where Ambedkar’s unactualized speech is *re-enacted* through the actors, presenting a time from the past. The living-room-like space on the edge of stage is a place for *here and now* responses, where the actors freely discuss topics related to the speech from a contemporary perspective.

The performance begins with the three actors making their entrance along the *hanamichi* that runs through the auditorium and “introducing themselves” to the audience at the front of the main stage. The show progresses through reading of Ambedkar’s original speech and follow-up discussions and story developments. The topics brought up in the speech include caste as unjust discrimination against “untouchables” who are placed outside caste by Hindus, the isolation and indifference to others brought about by the caste system, the existence and contradictions of women in the caste system, and other issues related to India’s caste system that are still far from being resolved even after nearly 90 years. In the actors’ talks, it is suggested that these structures of discrimination are not only problems in distant and exotic India, but also in Japan and probably in other regional cultural zones as well. The performance ends with Ambedkar’s words of apology for the speech being too long, with the actors then stating their own names to the audience before leaving the stage.

#### “Quotation” and “Translation” in the Creative Process

This is a creative place where discussions are held on an equal footing without being bound by the roles of actor, director, and dramaturge, using English, Kannada, and Japanese. The talk parts are scripted based on the actors’ personal histories and experiences in Japan and India. In the initial “self-introduction” scene, the three actors switch places. Anirudh Nair (Rudy) says he is “TAKEDA Aki,” and Chandra Ninasam (Chandru) speaks

of his identity as “Rudy” while stating that his name is derived from caste and Sanskrit. Takeda Aki does not reveal a surname because it would make “his” true identity known, and only gives the name “Chandru.” While indicating the distance to caste on a personal level, the aim is to expand the possibilities of theater as fiction by adding the gesture of “quotation.”

Creation was carried out with attention to six relationships: (1) that between the three actors, (2) that with the text, (3) that with a country different from one’s own, (4) that with the audience, (5) that mediated by the voice, and (6) that with the content/topics being spoken about. There was a common understanding of *translating* others’ stories, including Ambedkar’s speech, and showing how they were transformed into one’s own. “Translation” is not just about exchanging words. The Ambedkar texts used included the original English, a Japanese translation (translated by YAMAZAKI Genichi and YOSHIMURA Reiko), and a Kannada translation, which give a very different impression in terms of the sound of the words. The English, which piles on short sentences, is the most powerful, while the Kannada, for which two translations have been published, was translated into a form that is more acceptable to the ruling class, perhaps because the translator was from the ruling class. It is also said to be more difficult to understand than the English. To Sankar Venkateswaran and others on the Indian side, the Japanese version sometimes sounded like a story being told. And then there are the bodies of the actors who mediate those words. As there is no language that all members of the creative team can understand, there was a constant process of translating others’ remarks with explanations, even in rehearsals. This “translation” process leads to showing the boundaries between the cultures of Japan and India, the differences between the privileged class and the discriminated class, and the differences between men and women from different angles. It can be said that this performance was made possible because it took a form of production different from creation divided into roles such as playwright, director, and actor.

#### Thematic Setting: Response to “Incomprehensibility”

Despite dealing with heavy themes such as the caste system in India, the issue of the so-called untouchables, and the structure of discrimination, which are still far from being resolved, the impression one gets from this work is light and cheerful. This is probably intentional on account of the difference in degree of interest on the part of the audience. As the title suggests, the theme of this work is a contemporary “response” to a speech manuscript that was never delivered. The 1,500 copies of the English first edition immediately sold out, and *Annihilation of Caste*, which has been translated into the official languages of various Indian states and the languages of other countries, including Japan, has already become a historical text. The creative team focused on conveying the *incomprehensibility* of this historical text, which has a large gap between the logical context and the reality being told, rather than promoting easy solutions or a correct understanding of the problem.

On stage, even when questioned about Japan’s *burakumin* issue, Aki (Rudy) avoids eye contact and does not try to answer. Although the Japanese side had researched discrimination against ethnic Koreans in the Utoro District of Uji City, Kyoto Prefecture, and the Bank of Yanagihara\* in the Sujin District of Kyoto City during the preparation phase, they had a reason for not lecturing on stage about what they had learned, but instead limiting themselves to gestures of embarrassed confusion. In rehearsals, there was a scene where the Indian side pointed out that they felt

uncomfortable as the discussion proceeded in the direction of learning about caste. Just as being Japanese does not mean one understands the problem of *burakumin* discrimination, being Indian does not mean one understands the problem of caste. The sight of “Aki” being at a loss for words demonstrates the discomfort of being questioned from the outside as an interested party about a problem that “she” was not aware of.

For those living in India, the annihilation of caste in Ambedkar’s speech and the consequent departure from Hinduism mean leaving the community they have spent their lives in, shaking to the very foundations their accumulated being. Hinduism, which is not a proselytizing religion, is passed on in the form of children joining their parents’ caste. Religion is so closely intertwined with culture, customs, and community that leaving it is nearly impossible. However, by showing a response to this “incomprehensibility,” the work attempts to sow small seeds in the hearts of individual audience members.

### The Presence of Women

A part of the speech that is quoted on stage rebuts the claim that the four-varna system of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra is an occupational classification. Ambedkar shows that the exclusion of women from these four classes is based on the relationship to the jobs women take on. When asked about the connection between the text of the speech and herself, WADA Nagara mentioned the internalized discrimination against women in daily behavior as a commonality in the structure of discrimination. Referring to the fact that the treatment of “untouchables” starts with the treatment of women in the house, and that while the upper classes are provided with methods to purify pollution, classes in lower castes, whereas women are not, the issue of patriarchy latent in Hindu customs was discussed during rehearsals. This speech scene reminds us that not only is the issue of women in the caste system unresolved, but also that discrimination, under the name of “distinction,” is internalized even in Japan, where there is no caste system.

The response scene brought up the example of an Indian who landed a job in an IT company, where it is said that there is no caste discrimination because it is not part of the job classification. It shows how even in Silicon Valley, far away from India, caste is transferred as long as there is a Hindu community. The scene where one person recognizes the other’s origin by name, behaves in a friendly manner, and casually touches the person’s shoulder to check for the presence of a sacred thread, a mark of the high caste, is similar to the Japanese attitude of valuing hometown and alumni communities. The cold treatment Chandru (Aki) receives as a person outside the caste somewhat overlaps with the way women are seen in workplaces and elsewhere.

### Post-Performance Reaction

A review by TAKASHIMA Megumu was published in the art museum and art information web magazine “Artscape” (January 15, 2023 issue). Takashima writes, “This work, which gives *voice* to unspoken and suppressed words, presents the duality of how Takeda/Wada make their own voices take the part of this *text of the other*.” She also notes that the play questions the “difficulty in seeing the fragmented discriminatory structure within minorities” through the theatrical technique of proxy (i.e., representation), demonstrating the fictitious and irrational nature of the caste system. The reviewer, who precisely decodes the multi-layered speech scenes, highlights the audience’s participation as “hearers,” and



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highly praises the performance as reaffirming the power of *theater* to think and critically reinterpret together with the audience.

Other positive reactions and comments could be seen on social media and heard in the lobby after the performance. Regarding the ending, some, such as KAWASAKI Yoko, co-director of KYOTO EXPERIMENT (Kyoto International Performing Arts Festival), wondered whether it was okay for the ending of the response to Ambedkar's criticism of Hindu nationalism to conclude with individual identity, and whether there was room for further refinement. On this matter, I look forward to the next work by Sankar Venkateswaran, who dreams of making this a trilogy.

### Potential of International Co-Productions

There are various methods for international co-productions. This attempt involved a meticulous discussion and rehearsal process, including online meetings, without a common language among all the participants, who worked on crafting the script through recording, transcription, translation, and editing as a collaborative effort by all. This production process, which leveraged remote meeting systems, speech recognition software, and automatic translation, is already an interesting challenge to the nature of theater as a language art. International co-productions do not necessarily require a complete understanding of each other's languages. In the case

of this work, there were parts that drew on the inability to communicate in the creative process. The online environment introduced early in the production also seemed to have worked effectively in building a flat relationship not confined to the roles of actors or directors.

International co-productions require different communication skills from conventional productions. The stage is not a place to find compromise with others and reach a conclusion. Therefore, not only knowledge-based communication in terms of language proficiency and cross-cultural understanding, but also the creativity to imagine others through the body and substitute that with shareable expressions is essential. Although communication is time-consuming, including translating and repeating what is understood, highlighting the differences in each other's ideas and approaches is the key to conveying different cultures to the audience. International co-productions open up the possibility of presenting a richer creative future through the participation of people from different cultural backgrounds. This project was a great contribution to considering the possibilities of communication in international co-productions.

\* A bank founded by and for burakumin, a minority group subject to prejudice and discrimination



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