

IRIS Report, 2025

In the summer of 2025, the IRIS award offered me the opportunity to begin preliminary ethnographic research in Mannheim, Germany. My larger Ph.D project focuses on Dalit theatre and performance traditions, and as such is quite particular to the socio-political landscape in India and even more particularly to Karnataka. Central to this research is Jangama, a contemporary arts organization based in Bengaluru, Karnataka whose widely popular plays have upended the theatrescape and raised provocative questions of Indian theatre history in the recent past. Unexpectedly, the Mannheim National Theater which hosts the biennial Schiller fest as a tribute to the 18th c playwright Friedrich Schiller had invited KP Lakshman, co-founder of Jangama to adapt Schiller's play *Kabale und Liebe* to open the festival. Lakshman was to work with a team at National Theater, and an assemblage of actors, Indian and German, to produce what would eventually become the multilingual play, *Still I Choose to Love*. To begin my ethnographic research with Jangama, and Lakshman himself in Mannheim instead of Bangalore, which is my home and the home base of Jangama and the political antecedents of their aesthetic, excited me for different reasons:

As a devised play on intercaste love, far removed from the immediacy and political urgency of structural oppression in India, I was sure that the process of staging this play would extend the possibilities of articulating caste as a universal problem. Second, I was cautiously optimistic about how the long legacy of cultural labor borne by caste-oppressed communities would translate into propositions for a modern articulation of performance aesthetics. More interestingly, adapting a 18th century German text in an unfamiliar language, with a German team would be unfamiliar territory for Lakshman. I believed this temporary displacement for me as a researcher and for Lakshman, would be a provocative beginning for ethnographic inquiry. So, for six weeks I assumed the same schedule as the team, attending rehearsals, training, discussions, and finally seeing the show itself.

My initial plan was to conduct formal interviews with the members of the team, and perhaps utilize my time with Lakshman to interview him about his previous plays. Instead, the generosity of the entire team took me by surprise. I quickly became part of the team, cautiously participating in the making of the play and exchanging many conversations of my own understanding of Dalit cultural histories, lives and livelihoods. I was also able to travel to Zurich and attend a talk on Caste and Law, where the Alternative Law Forum in India had been invited to present the unique complexities of constitutional law in a caste-structured social system. The learnings from the talk, particularly about inter-caste marriages, (dis)honor killings and caste atrocities painted a larger picture of why a play about love is anything but simple in the Indian context. However, as an ethnographic approach, there were two main complications

to this equation: One, I was aware that the experience of translating caste and establishing trust in his theatrical process was a monumental task for Lakshman, but my presence as an academic acted as expert validation. Two, conversations, “hanging out”, everyday interactions and my familiarity with Lakshman and one of the other actors Chandru displaced my position as researcher to friend. While the problematic power differentials of the first complication added to the long history of unequal relations in colonial and postcolonial intercultural exchanges, the latter is still a question I am grappling with. The many stories that were shared with such openness by both Lakshman and Chandru might never have been revealed through formal ethnographic methods; they were shared with a friend. I am interested in exploring the dimensions of friendship ethnography now with greater interest, approaching it both as a method and as a way of breaking institutionalized research methods while heading down paths that are yet undefined by research. I have also been selected for a working group at the American Society for Theatre Research conference, to present a paper and discuss the pitfalls of this intercultural collaboration and the complicated figure of the “friend as researcher” within such a process.

Besides the complications with my own research, I cannot overstate the sheer luxury of having been in the middle of a theatre festival with easy access to much of Europe’s art and cultural life. I was able to watch other plays during the Schiller festival, even variations on the same Schiller play that Lakshman was adapting. I watched a beautiful Iranian play by a filmmaker I admire, Mohammad Rassoulof. Lakshman’s play, *Still I Choose to Love* was a great success, even an unusual success. It ran houseful for all seven shows and moved audiences to tears, to writing love letters, to staying night after night for artist talks. I have watched a few of Jangama’s productions that opened to a celebratory, festival energy in Bangalore. It was humbling to see traces of a similar love for their play, so far from home. It reiterated something essential about art, something universal about the insight that comes from oppression, and the affective immediacy of theatre in creating a community of spectators.

This summer in Mannheim has perhaps been one of the most crucial turning points in my academic life, and will continue to fuel me for a long time to come. It has helped reiterate the foundational logic of my research, grounded in both Dalit cultures and in the Dalit resistance movement in Karnataka. Narrowing my focus to a specific geo-political location and time, was also an unusual realization during an international collaboration. But I have come to realize that the only way to understand the universal dimension of oppression is to truly familiarize myself with the particular. Furthermore, the latent inequality in the relationship between the upper-caste researcher and oppressed caste “subjects” may not be flattened by friendship and intimacy but tease out its necessary, inevitable conflicts with greater transparency. Going forward, I hope to build on my relationship with the team at Jangama and with and through their support, work on archival and documentation that can hold space for speculative histories.