



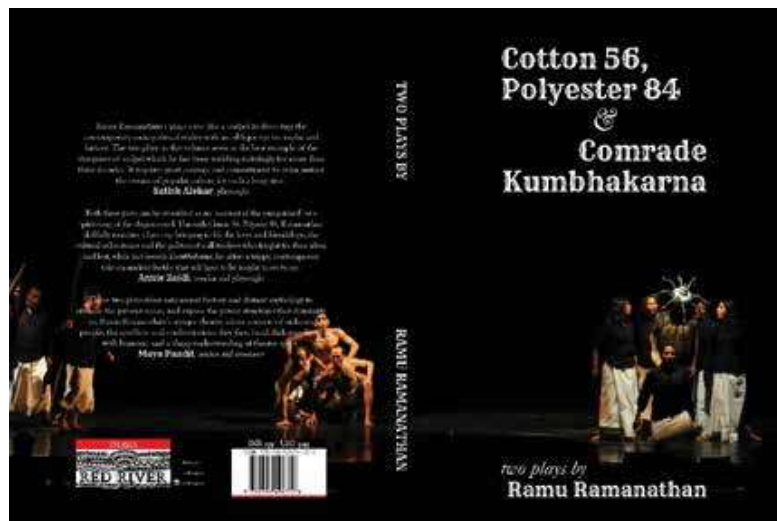
PREVIEW 1

Cotton 56, Polyster 84
& Comrade Kumbhakarna:
Two Plays by Ramu Ramanathan

Ramu Ramanathan

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With more than thirty thought-provoking plays to his credit, Ramu Ramanathan's theatre makes a mark as it provides aesthetic reflections of a modern society that can interrupt, interrogate, and redress systemic exclusions (based on caste, class, gender, and religion intersecting in complicated ways) towards building a new sensitivity to address and dialogue with forms of repression and domination. The play *Cotton 56 Polyester 84* was staged for the first time in 2005. Highlighting the issues of "redevelopment" of mill land and the marginalization of the mill workers in the city, the play bagged the META Best Play and Best Playwright award in 2006. Austere in its production demands and meticulously researched, the play provides a critique of technocracy (excessive political, social or economic control by elite technical experts). Its reflections remain as urgent and relevant as ever, as it etches Mumbai's (then Bombay) forgotten histories, events and its people who continue to combat local and global discriminatory political forces.



Author's Speak: Ramu Ramanathan on Cotton 56 Polyester 84**HEADLINE: COTTON 56 POLYESTER 84****Intro ...**

#

In my hometown in Kerala, there is an art form called Chakyar Koothu. In it, the Jester steps up on the stage; and questions and mocks everyone and anyone. No one is spared, be it, the king or his sidekick. The Jester's utterances are protected under the law of the land. No one can commit violence against the Jester.

Flashback to 7 March 2005.

It would have been nice to be a Chakyar Koothu Jester in front of the Supreme Court, after their Judgment on the Sale of Mill Lands in Mumbai. The Jester would have narrated a modern-day folk story to the High and Mighty People In Their High and Mighty Posts.

"Many years ago", the Jester would say, "There was a city that rose from the sea. As it happened, this city was sitting on Seven Islands, which couldn't take the burden of the buildings and skyscrapers and new constructions. Once, it was a splendid little city, with a fortified fort, and a cluster of community homes, 150-year-old mills. It's a city that once was and that now is gone. It disappeared.

"Hey', shout the peasants and fishermen and workers. ' You're buckling under your own weight, you're collapsing.

"But the city dwellers don't listen to them, they even laugh and make fun of them: 'You think you're pretty smart, trying to scare us into running away from our houses and our land so you can grab them instead. But we're not that stupid.'

"So they drive their cars, shop, marry and consume content on OTT. They go to the temples and pray for their inner self. When they feel the island shudder under their buildings, they don't think much about it. 'Just the traffic. Quite normal', they say, reassuring each other.

"The water from an Unknown River enters their streets. 'Watch out, you've got water up to your ankles', shout the Local People. 'Nonsense, that's just drainage water from the sewerages, say the city dwellers, and so, slowly but surely, the whole city is swallowed by the water.

"Gurgle ... gurgle ... splash ... they sink houses, men, women, buses, trains ... gurgle. Undaunted, business continues and the Sensex keeps rising. The fortified fort disappears, the community homes vanish, and the mills are gone.

"Even today", continues the Jester, "if you look down into the water from an airplane, you can still see - incredible as it may seem! - the submerged city, with its streets still intact and even the inhabitants themselves, walking around and glibly repeating to themselves on their cell phones: 'Nothing has happened'.

The city dwellers have reached rock bottom, but as far as they're concerned, nothing has happened at all. This is the City That Was Mumbai!

In a way, this is the theme of the play that I wrote two decades ago which was called COTTON 56, POLYESTER 84.

#

The pre-text to the play

Every play that I have tried to write is a response to the times we inhabit. The stage is important but the offstage is even more important. The heroes are crucial, but the voices in the wings are equally critical.

Before I started to write COTTON 56, POLYESTER 84, I could sense the voices around me that were evaporating.

I attended a seminar on 16 February 2005, in Mumbai, the aim of the seminar being to find a comprehensive solution to the issue of mill lands.

It was a Wednesday.

A statement was read out.

“WE, citizens and stakeholders in the city of Mumbai who are gathered here, resolved to place the following resolution before the Government of Maharashtra for immediate consideration:

The Mill Lands are the historic industrial core of today’s Mumbai Metropolitan Region. As the city authorities and state government seek to transform Mumbai into a global city, the government has not recognised that these valuable lands were entrusted to mill owners to develop the textile industry and provide employment, not to speculate in real estate. This important fact has been repeatedly overlooked in the rush by mill owners and builders to cash in on the commercial value of the Mill Lands. In 1991, the Maharashtra Government addressed the issue by allowing the sale and development of mill lands under certain conditions, framed in the Development Control Regulations of Greater Mumbai (DCR). In Section 58 of the DCR (1991) mill lands were to be shared in more or less equal thirds between the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) for civic amenities; Maharashtra Housing Area Development Authority (MHADA), for public housing; and the owners for modernisation and development of the mills.

Author’s reflection: Yes, even as late as 2005, there was hope.

As recently as 2001, the DCR was amended, and a provision was introduced that within the land provided for public housing, 50% would be set aside for housing textile workers, and an additional provision made for job opportunities for the family members of the textile workers. These provisions were included in response to demands made by the textile workers, who lost their jobs due to mill closures in Central Mumbai.

However, these provisions will only be on paper, since the land now made available under the amended DCR is so miniscule.

In the amended DCR of 2001, the land share of the mill owners has increased several times beyond the original one-third. The land share of the MCGM, meant for creating open spaces and other facilities, as well as the land share for MHADA, meant for public housing, have been reduced by more than 90%, often to nil. This was done by making the one-third divisions applicable only to vacant open land in the mills and removing land on which structures are, or were, standing, from

the purvey of the one-third division. This would have made sense if the mills were still running. Since the mills are closed, the land made available should logically be the entire land, not just open spaces or those on which structures stood. These structures have been or are being demolished, to make space for a real estate bonanza for mill owners and builders, development which gives nothing to the workers, or the city's citizens.

The closure of the mills has deprived the workers of their livelihood. The new modifications proposed to the DCR, while claiming to strengthen these rights, will hand over the mill lands to the owners, to do as they wish. The proposed amendments to DCR will also deprive the citizens of Mumbai of badly needed open spaces in a congested city. We maintain that the textile mill lands are different from other kinds of industrial land in the city, and require different treatment.

We also feel that the amendments to the DCR do not constitute, as the Government claims, minor modifications in the Maharashtra Regional and Town Planning Act (1966). Any planning of 600 acres of land in the centre of the city constitutes a major issue. The modified DCR is an attack on citizens' rights to space and workers' rights to livelihood.

The committee appointed by the Government of Maharashtra and chaired by Deepak Parekh to inquire into the mill lands issue is compromised by the interests of mill owners, builders and financial institutions. Any representation by textile workers on the committee is conspicuously absent."

The voices are evaporating.

And so, 20 mill worker organisations demanded:

1. The land share of public housing and open spaces in mill lands, as per the 1991 DCR, should be restored and stringently applied, not just to vacant land or open spaces, but to the total land area of the mills. It should be seen that the 50% share for public housing is maintained for textile workers, and the 2001 condition that workers' families be given jobs should also be retained and implemented.
2. The Government must immediately freeze the permissions for building construction on the mill lands until the report of the Deepak Parekh committee is released and discussed with the various stakeholders, including mill workers and

citizen groups. This should be implemented with retrospective effect, applying to permissions already given under the original 1991 and 2001 amended DCR.

3. The Government must disclose the list of the mills that have been already given or to be given clearance for development or redevelopment -- including intimations of disapproval, commencement certificates, approved/proposed drawings, true 7/12 extract of land ownership, and related permissions -- along with their respective dates.

4. The Government must disclose, mill-wise, the list of the dues that have been paid to the workers of the respective mills (or are still to be paid) so that this amount can be juxtaposed against the profits generated through the development of the mill land. This will help verify the government's stated rationale that the increase in land share through the modification of section 58 is to pay the workers their dues.

5. The Government must publicly disclose all information on the land ownership, leasehold and/or freehold status of the land, and the terms and conditions/covenants of every mill. The terms of reference of the Parekh committee should be extended in order to obtain and analyse the rights associated with mill owners' use of the mill lands.

6. For purposes of these demands and resolutions, the mill land being considered includes both the mills of the National Textile Corporation as well as private textile mills.

On 16 February 2005, the 20 mill worker organisations resolved ...

1. To set up an independent committee/study group of citizen groups, workers organisations and labour and housing activists to investigate these issues and publish a report on its findings into the full range of issues relating to the mill lands. This committee will access

all documents and information relating to land ownership, leases and tenures, development plans and building proposals cleared under the original and modified DC Rules. The committee will represent independent views and

have a wide term of reference to include land ownership, urban planning and comprehensive integrated area development of the entire mill lands.

2. To distribute and publicise this set of demands and resolutions across a broad section of the public, civic organisations and social movements and to convene another meeting on the issue within a fortnight of this meeting.

And so, it was.

One more meeting.

And one more meeting.

#

The Importance of One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices

To begin at the beginning. Meera Menon and Neera Adarkar had penned a book (One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices). Meena wanted to organise readings from the book. I was not very keen on a celebrity event. I told Meena, I would prefer to write a play. Fortunately, Sunil Shanbag agreed to be part of the process. And was willing to direct the play. So everything fell into place.

I've met remarkably resilient people during those days. It's a pity I can't include everything since that would entail that I would have to pen a 100-hour play. And as all of us know 100-hour plays are not permitted.

I began by attending court hearings in Room No 56 of the High Court (Justice Radhakrishnan's courtroom). The lawyers on either side were the who's who in India - Iqbal Chagla, Goolam Vahanvati, Arun Jaitley, Soli Sorabjee, Mukul Rohatgi, Abhishek Singhvi etc. No dearth of talent! The Bombay Environmental Action Group were the petitioners.

Later, with Irfan Engineer, I attended hearings at the Labour Court. Again, I met many workers (attending hearings for years on end) who were seeking their just dues. I walked through the streets of Girangaon, Lalbaug, and Parel, visited chawls, documenting conversations, chit chats, and song and dance.

In the past few months, I have visited a few colleges and presented my documentations to young students. My talk (with 67 pictures) is called: Mumbai - The Forgotten City. For me, it has been surprising - not to say worrying - to

discover their ignorance about the city we live in. I tell them about how the girni kamgar built this city. And today, how they have become outsiders. When I tell them there's been a death (starvation, unemployment, depression, suicide, encounter, etc) in almost each and every girni kamgar family, the students are astonished.

They had never heard about it. But what is truly impressive is, that neither have the teachers nor professors present heard of it. And this is happening in Mumbai – not Kyiv nor Palestine, nor even Libya nor Morocco, yet no one had heard of the systematic obliteration of an entire generation, of an entire class.

It is true, that the widespread ignorance of events is the main buttress of injustice. We've all become absent-minded.

#

But what is the beginning?

There is a wonderful account by SS Mirajkar in the book by Meera Menon and Neera Adarkar. Mirajkar who became a leading union leader, and later mayor of the city; came to Bombay at the age of 13 with his widowed mother in 1914. This is a posthumous account of his arrival in Bombay.

"I remember that coming from my village to Bombay was an arduous journey. My village was off the Bombay–Goa road in Konkan. From the village, it took three to four days to get to Bombay. First, we had to go to Nagotane by bullock cart, and from there by ferry boat to the Dhramtar pier and then by ship to 'Bhaucha Dhaakka' (Ferry Wharf) Bombay.

Today, (he died in 1980), it takes eight hours. From Ferry Wharf, we walked to Null Bazaar, my mother with a bundle containing all our belongings, and I, wide-eyed from the sights and sounds of the big city; both of us barefoot. My mother found a job as a cotton picker in the mills. The money was not enough to cover my school fees."

Mirajkar adds, "I loved the horse-drawn trams. The horses would be changed near Byculla Bridge. You still had to walk a long distance to get where you wanted because the trams did not go everywhere. I stayed at Null Bazaar. It was a poor neighbourhood. I would walk to Girgaum for school. I was impressed by

the magnificence of the city- you could hear different languages, the people of different regions in India, all together, with their own identities and yet together- Parsi, Marwari, Gujarati, English, Christian, Bengalis, Punjabis... Everyone was represented. This city had a unique character, a pace, a passion, an industriousness. This city could attract anybody."

Mirajkar says, "Beyond Parel there was no Bombay. Just trees, coconut trees and some occasional houses which belong to the Parsis and Gujaratis. The rich lived in Cumbala Hill and Hanging Gardens, while the workers lived in Lalbag-Parel. The air in Parel was not so suffocating then. Which is why, the managers of the mills lived in Parel as well."

After Mirajkar started working (in a bank) he had become active in the trade union movement, he would often get home late. Mirajkar says, "It was dark outside Dadar station in those days. No lights, only coconut plantations, and if you were not careful you could collide with the coconut trees. Once when it was raining I walked from Churchgate to Dadar. When I reached Dadar it was 4 in the morning. There, I saw my mother sitting on the railway platform in Dadar station, lantern in hand, waiting for me..."

Later as part of a TISS project I met poet laureate Narayan Surve who shared with the video archival team that, "The year was 1943, just after the Quit India movement. I had no job, no home, no family. I joined a mill, Kohinoor Mills No.3, as a winder. There I met Vaman Samant. He was a writer and a union activist. I collected union dues for the GKU. My bond with the workers was therefore organic because I was a worker."

Later Surve joined the Red Guard. The Communist Party office was in Raj Bhavan in Girgaum. This was the era of PC Joshi. Surveys used to stand at the gate and check out visitors. That was his job. The CPI took care of his food and shelter. Surve said, "There was a woman there whom we called 'Mai' (mother) who cooked the food. That is the way I joined the party. The World War was still going on. We had a paper called Lokyudh, and many other publications which came to the office, and I would read them. I became politically educated this way."

Surve said, "The party wanted to use the cultural medium to reach people. They started collecting people for this purpose. Annabhau Sathe, Amar Sheikh, and

Gavankar were brought together and Lal Bawta Kalapathak was started. They wrote povadas, lavnis and songs."

The point is, it's this city of povadas, lavnis and lok shahirs that has been forgotten. A city in which people's theatre was everywhere.

It sprang up in maidans like the Jambori Maidan or Kamgar Maidan which hosts a month-long Kamgar Fest (the oldest theatre fest in this city). This is not a new phenomenon. This city has always had its greatest actors from amongst the underdogs and working class. There was a time when this city celebrated the Kalapathak of Amar Sheikh (the bard whom Pablo Neruda wanted to meet - and met). Or as Madhukar Nerale loved to narrate, Tamasha shows at Hanuman Theatre and nine other theatres. Everything has been squashed. We have a collective amnesia about the contribution of Shahir Krishnarao Sable (singer, writer, performer, Loknatya producer-director). We've forgotten Sheikh Janu Chand (a bard who led a group called Amar Kalapathak); Shivaji Divte (who runs a bhajan mandali but is a tailor by profession); Maruti Gyandeo Satkar (an activist with the Pimpalgaon Gaonkari Mandal situated in Lower Parel).

Around that time, I attended a meeting of Tamasha Groups and Tamshgirs (the Jesters in Maharashtra) at the run-down Hanuman Theatre. A scary scenario is unfolding.

The Supreme Court ruling (Again, says my friend, the Jester!) which bans loudspeakers between 10 pm and 6 am is affecting Tamasha groups. Raghuvir Khedekar, a Tamashgir, says, "The show begins at 9.30 and ends in the morning. if we perform for only 30 minutes, the local audience will burn our tents." As audiences are aware, a single night's performance during a Mela or Jatra includes Lavani, Vagnatya, and so on. This entails a longish performance.

Apparently, a single Tamasha group spends Rs 15 lakh, each. An estimated 1,60,00 artists and other group members earn their annual livelihood through such performances. Most Tamasha artists do not own a field or have a roof over their heads. At the moment, the turnover is Rs 15 crore, and yet all the Tamasha companies have heavy debts. They don't get loans from banks or other financial institutes. They pay interest of 5% per month. A loan of 10,000= 16,000 in a year. There are 30 big companies and many small companies. The license fees are

exorbitant at Rs 26000 per annum. It's checkmate. For Tamashgirs, for Lok Shahirs, for Girni Kamgars, and for the citizens of Mumbai.

#

A tribute to Datta Iswalkar – Veteran Trade Unionist

Datta Bhau worked in Modern Mills, as the General Secretary of the independent textile union GKSS.

He passed away on Wednesday, 7 April 2021. I penned a tribute for him.

THE STORY OF A MILL

(For Datta Iswalkar 1949–2021)

It was the talk of the town

Till they closed it down

The simple reason is, when all had their fill

They terminated the New Great Eastern Mill

So what is the problem - you will say

The way of the world - you will say

The workers were not paid their gratuity

They wanted their dues, not your sympathy

Instead the workers had to rely on their wives

The others, generally speaking, lost their lives

Memory is life; and life is strife - you will say

All this has happened to others too - you will say

One day, the workers decided enough was enough

The workers at the mill became very tough

They stormed the New Great Eastern Mill gates

Whose mill owner had disappeared, in any case

*There was no working class clause
That said don't scale the factory walls
Because they had truth on their side
Their actions weren't deemed false*

*They cleaned the looms
They washed the rooms
They started those engines
All of Bombay heard the machines vrroom*

*This is not done, all this is quite shocking - you will say
Well, the truth, its shocks the naive - the workers will say*

*The owner who was hiding underground
He complained to the PM and CM, O Zounds!
The workers were locked up and put in jail
Not a single Mumbaikar paid for their bail*

*Why should we pay for the workers strife - you will say
There's no such thing as a free wada pav - you will say*

*One worker cited the Industrial Disputes Act
This, dear comrades, is quite a well-known fact
Which says, the textile mill cannot be closed
Unless you get permission from the government*

*New Great Eastern Mill had to save its face
It had to defend its honour in a court case
It wasn't the only mill; there were many of them
Who frittered their workers wage at the horse race*

*So what is the problem, after all, its the owners money - you will say
This was a horse race whose results were known to all - the workers say*

The issue was raised

The judge was dazed

The workers, they cited the Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction

The lawyers told the BIFR, save the poor mill owners, save our democratic nation

Shadows of the mill gates fell across the night

The workers, they put up a real good fight

But whosoever is in power, Left or Right

Kamgar families dispossessed, never-ever saw any light

All the mills, each of them were declared sick

By creditors and bankers who were ever-so slick

That's how they closed, mill after mill

Sealed deals, for which the workers are still paying the bills

Survival of the fittest, an operational necessity, that is what you have to say

*The greatest cruelties of our lives are the cruelties of decisions, inked inside a
babu's room , the workers say*

If you have the time, I will tell you many-a-tale

For that you will have to listen to all the details

How a mill with many departments

Closed down all those departments

In the name of reorganisation

In the name of rehabilitation

They reduced the workforce

They deployed brute force

So what is the problem - you will continue to say

The way of the world - you will continue to say

#

And finally, why the play is the thing?

When COTTON 56 POLYESTER 84 did the number of shows that it did, it reached out to middle people, and gentrified audiences. The play helped them decode the Supreme Court judgement.

The mill workers, and mill area residents were shocked by the Supreme Court judgment on mill lands. The implications of that judgment are far-reaching. It means simply that the city of Mumbai, is imploding without space to breathe, without low-cost housing that can rehabilitate those who have no option but to live in slums and dilapidated buildings, without open spaces, civic amenities, parking space, infrastructure, and public transport will be faced with even more overcrowding and total collapse. Two and a half lakh mill workers evaporated into thin air because of the closures of the mills. Two and a half lakh mill workers who were promised land rights and housing in exchange are now cheated of their rights.

This is what Datta Bhau and many like him were saying.

That "The 600 acres of mill lands in the centre of Mumbai which was given to mill owners, mostly on lease, a century ago, will be left to the mercies of the people who are responsible for the lack of planning and the collapse of Mumbai city- the powerful builder lobby including the mill owners who have also turned builders."

The Maharashtra Government which issued a circular to reinterpret the 2001 amendment to the Development Control Regulations 1991 is the agency that is mainly responsible for this act of violence against Mumbai and the mill area.

Mumbai city needs radical measures to become liveable. The disasters were caused by the chicanery of the builder's lobby. Where the planning standards for open spaces is 16 sq. m. per person, Mumbai's island city has an abysmal 1 sq. m per person. The right to a clean and wholesome environment is inherent in the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution.

Mumbaikars were beginning to ask these questions. Whatever their politics and ideological position, the play tried to do so.

Did we succeed?

I don't know.

Nimesh Mehta and Hridaynath Jadhav who essayed crucial parts in COTTON 56 POLYESTER 84 jotted down their thoughts about the play.

Nimesh Mehta says, "When Sunil Shanbag called me about COTTON 56 POLYESTER 84 neither did I know him, nor did he know me. When he met me he asked me a few things about myself and told me some details about the play. Later he asked me if I could sing, and I clearly said no. I thought that would be the end of our association. But he called me back for the first reading of the play on 29 December 2005. To tell you the truth, for the first 15 to 20 days I couldn't understand the play at all. I just couldn't understand the structure or the rhythm. Sunil had given us some notes to read but I couldn't proceed beyond the first ten pages. I could not identify with any of it. How strange is this that I have lived in Mumbai all my life, and I am ignorant of and have no connection with, the very thing that has created this city! Whatever I knew about mills and institutions connected with it, was limited to what I saw in the movies. But the reality is something else."

Mehta adds, "After becoming part of this play I got a glimpse about the world of the mill worker. Ramu Ramanathan, who has written the play, would tell us about the mill workers. Our two main actors, Kumud Mishra and Nagesh Bhonsle, spent time at the Labour Court and visited couple of old mills. One day all the actors went to a workers' meeting in Dadar near Chabildas Hall. There we learnt about the circumstances that mill workers are faced with, and about their long running fight with mill owners. Until then what I knew was limited to what I had seen in the movies. But from the meeting and from the play I began to understand the role of the workers and forces such as the owners and the mafia. This was an eye-opener for me. When my brother and sister-in-law the play they made a remark that it was through the play they got an idea of the world of the mill workers. Something they knew nothing about. I am sure this is the case with 90% of people who saw the play."

Hridaynath Jadhav said, "My father would tell me when I was young – and even more recently – that many of our elders worked in the mills. They were mill workers. Though no one is one today. Father would tell me that in those days a job in the mills was considered very prestigious. It feels very odd to hear that in today's times. Much of my childhood was spent in that very area – in Girangaon. It was the same then – a ten by ten-room with 15 to 20 people living there. I am from the scheduled castes so I understand their point of view. In 1983, five lakh mill workers lost their jobs. Their lives were devastated. Five lakhs – that's not a small number."

Because of the play, Jadhav attended a meeting of mill workers. He said "Personally, I don't believe that mill workers have a future, I don't believe that anything good is going to happen for them. Sitting next to me was a mill worker. When I asked him he told me that like so many others he too was relieved of his job because of some false reason, and he'd filed a case against the mill. That case was still on ... after many years. I asked him, "What do you think will happen with your case? Do you think you will win?" He laughed and replied, "We will see ..."

Jadhav said, "I was amazed. After so many years he had not given up. He still hoped he might win."

We still hope ...

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