



ACHRH

Empowering Communities
through Knowledge & Research

ACHRH Special Edition



June 2016
Newsletter

This newsletter is all about Natak Vihar, theatre aimed at bringing communities together to work through family violence.

Dr O'Connor has written about the project – the strategy and how it got off the ground. A lot of planning went into the events!

Gauri Kapoor has written about the launch of Natak Vihar at the Victorian Parliament.

Theatre Director Dr. Rosemary Blight and actor Stephanie Guy have contributed articles on their reflections on the experience of being involved.

Aparna Ananthuni is an aspiring writer of historical fiction and fantasy for young adults and children. . She was present in the audience at the Albert Park Performance. She has written an

evocative piece on the Natak Vihar interactive theatre experience from the perspective of the audience and a journalist. You can read about this below.



**Manjula
O'Connor**



A strategy to strengthen Australian Indian communities through Community Theatre

Dr Manjula O'Connor, Executive Director



Family Violence is a common problem in all communities, irrespective of race, religion, education and culture. Indian

community is no exception. It is a human rights abuse, causes mental health suffering, and can lead to suicide and murder. For a strategy to enhance debate and prevent family violence, it must speak to the people, preferably if it is their own collective community voice. This was the strategy employed by this innovative project the "Natak Vihar", Sanskrit word meaning divine theatre space. Natak Vihar brought together the community from the Indian subcontinent in the format of community participatory theatre. It is a modified form of 'Forum Theatre', designed by the community and performed for the community. They watch, understand and comment.

Natak Vihar is also a research project. All conversations and dialogues that were stimulated through the interactive theatre workshops and performances were audio and video recorded. This forms the raw research data. We audio recorded and video-recorded the conversations, with the consent of the participants. The tapes are being transcribed for detailed analysis of main themes. The data will give rise to professional and public seminars and academic papers.

The project took careful planning over 3 years. We considered the methodology of the project to ensure it was an authentic representation of the community voice, followed the academic rigors and put appropriate administrative processes. As the first Step we formed a **Steering committee**. The membership of the committee consisted of community members and leaders, academic social scientist, theatre director, National Council of women. Next, the launch of the project took place at the Victorian Parliament House. Read more on the launch by Gauri Kapoor below. Second Step was designing theater pieces by the community volunteers in Theatre **Workshops**. Dr. Rosemary Blight directed the workshops. Dr. Prasanna Srinivasan and academically and sociologically supported the workshops. We held two workshop over Sundays and one on the International Women's Day 2016, at Cross ways restaurant. Each workshop consisted of the same eight male and 12 female volunteers from South Asia. Men played an active role alongside women. In the workshops, the volunteers explored various expression of domestic violence in our homes. After each workshop, the actors provided feedback. A drama scripts was created out of the discussions held over the three workshops. Third Step **three community performances** were performed. About 170 participants took part the project. The three community based performances were held at Craigieburn, Albert Park Hare Krishna Temple, and Senior Citizens Club at the FIAV office Dandenong. Dr. Blight writes about the scenes in her piece below and Ms. Stephanie Guy writes about her experience as a volunteer actor.

From a diverse community audience, with an age range between 14 to 80 years, we learnt about the role of various family dynamics that cause domestic violence, the significance of male and female roles in perpetuation of gender based violence, dowry related violence, and immigration/visa related issues. The audiences joined in discussions and offered comments on plays, helpful answers, barriers to recognition of family violence and explored and verbalized the strengths that lay within the culture on how men can break the taboo of silence, how gender inequality may be prevented within the home. It was inspiring to learn from the community about possible healthier techniques that we can possibly use to express our emotions such as anger and frustration, disappointment and disagreement, instead of choosing violence.

Key conversations were audio and video recorded. The next step is analysis of themes. Outcomes will include DVD for use by community organizations, community presentations, media articles, professional seminars and academic papers. We also aim to make DVD s and work books available for school children. The final goal is to prevent family violence. We hope to demonstrate that Natak Vihar helped to enhance the level of debate and conversation in the community on domestic violence



We are grateful to the Victorian Multicultural Commission for funding the project. We humbly acknowledge the support of the Indian community, participants, and in-kind support from our partner Oorja foundation, Senior Citizens Club of Dandenong and ISCKON Temple. Our sponsors were Speedy Printing and Crystal Solar Energy. Last but not the least we acknowledge the actors without whom this may never have been possible. They were dedicated, creative passionate and energetic.

The project received Ethics approval from the Melbourne Clinic Ethics committee.

Natak Vihar launch - Parliament House

Gauri Kapoor

ACHRH launched its Natak Vihar project at the Parliament of Victoria on Thursday 25 February. A community participatory theatre project that offers a highly innovative, light hearted and sometimes fun way of exploring a serious issue family violence in the South Asian community. Several distinguished Members of Parliament and prominent members of the community attended to show their support for Dr. Manjula O'Connor and her team. ACHRH Chairman, Prof Ian Howie presided over the event.



Prof Howie began proceedings by briefly outlining the many achievements of ACHRH since its inception three years ago. Under Dr. O'Connor's leadership, the organization has raised awareness of serious issues affecting migrants and international students in Melbourne. It has been a strong advocate for family violence victims and has actively supported the empowerment of women. ACHRH has led the campaign to uncover dowry related abuse in the Indian and other ethnic communities.

In his opening remarks, special guest, the Hon Ted Baillieu, acknowledged the organization's hard work. The former Premier of Victoria has proudly supported ACHRH since the start of its journey.

Mr Baillieu officially launched the project by pressing the play button on the first public screening of the promotional video made by the creative

team working on Natak Vihar. The video featured footage of novice actors participating in workshop activities led by Theatre Director Dr. Rosemary Blight. It also included interviews with the organizers of the project, with the brand ambassador and with a survivor of family violence. The video truly captured the spirit of Natak Vihar and reflected the energy and enthusiasm of the people involved in organizing it. It also provided the audience with a visualization of what the project would entail.

In the tradition of Community Theater, a big number of speakers took part, each adding their thoughts to the problem of family violence. Dr. Blight spoke about the power of forum theatre to capture and convey people's stories and ideas on a difficult and complex topic such as family violence. MP Jude Perera



Members of Parliament from different political parties took turns to praise the initiative behind Natak Vihar. Hong Lim MP, Inga Peulich MLC, Jude Perera MP, Heidi Victoria MP, Neil Angus MP, Dee Ryall MP, Nina Springle MLC, Georgie Crozier MP and Gabrielle Williams MP all spoke about how the Arts play an important role in our lives. Many felt theatre could be a highly effective medium through which complex social problems could be discussed. People's mindsets can be challenged in a very direct and confronting way through visual mediums

Dr. O'Connor explained the research aspect of the project. The collected data will be analysed, written up, published, and circulated to the community and Government policy units. Ms. Sheila Byard, President of the National Council of Women Victoria, Mr. Srini Chidamabram from the Victorian Multicultural Commission, and Marion Lau from the Ethnic Communities Council Victoria & Ms. Jess Luter from White Ribbon all spoke to reaffirm the need for such culturally specific research in the community.

Many in attendance came to support Natak Vihar because of its unique and somewhat relaxed way of addressing what continues to be a taboo subject in many migrant communities. The young people formed a strong contingent (left) with MPs Dee Ryall and Georgie Crozier. MP Gabriel Williams (pictured right hand side)



Natak Vihar steering committee

Gauri Kapoor

The Steering Committee consisted of representatives from various community organisations and groups campaigning against family violence. Friends of ACHRH such as the Oorja Foundation and the National Council of Women (Vic) took an active role in advising on the direction of Natak Vihar. The Committee met bi-monthly to plan key elements and to delegate various tasks to members. Promotion of the project, recruitment of participants, selection of appropriate themes to explore theatrically, data collection and the research process were the main topics of discussion.

Theatre Director, Dr Rosemary Blight provided a clear understanding of the dynamics of the stage and the audience. During the first steering committee meeting, there was much debate over whether men should play women's roles on stage and what impact if any that would have on people. Developing scenarios that explored conflicts between mother in laws and daughter in laws also generated a great deal of discussion. Some suggested humour is a good strategy to engage the audience in a robust conversation over this form of family conflict.

Most Committee members agreed that the final script ought to explore the challenges of migration and the clash between the Asian and the Western cultures as contributing factors in family conflict and family violence. The Committee also felt it was important to examine the 'conventional role of the man' in an Indian household. Dr. O'Connor spoke about the need to explore masculine self-image and feminine self-image, its contribution to certain rules and behaviours in our society, and to encourage the audience to verbalize the unhealthy aspects and strengthen the positive aspects of the roles.

The steering committee meetings brought together people with expert knowledge of family violence and led to a highly productive collaboration. Within the space of a few months and under Dr. O'Connor's critical guidance and leadership, the Committee helped transform the project from a rather vague proposal to a fully-fledged production involving many talented and dedicated volunteers.





Above Left Live Performance at Dandenong Senior Citizens club. Above right and below right Albert Park performance. Manjula engages the audience and actors in discussion over this multilayered problem, seeking solutions. Below left ACHRH Natak Vihar Brand Ambassador Bollywood Film Star RanVijay.



Dr. Rosemary Blight Theatre Director reflects on Natak Vihar Performances

Key characteristics of applied theatre/participatory community theatre were evident during the performances, especially in terms of the 'power' of the expression of their ideas. The workshops enabled the volunteer-actors to develop a sense of "agency" around their thinking on family violence within their community and the empowerment that comes from belonging in a group and the ownership of their ideas. The ideas were developed through dialogue and facilitated through an artistic partnership. They wrote their own scripts and had the opportunity to see how effective they were in front of their community. Each scenario, scripted collaboratively across three days, enabled the actor-participants to trust their work and the execution of their ideas in a public forum.



I knew I needed to lead the actors in my role as facilitator for the Forum Theatre style. There was a lot of anticipation and nervousness amongst the audience and a readiness, a receptivity to see the ideas played out.

The fact of the unconventional setting – the community centre – further empowered the performance as it symbolized the themes/ideas were being expressed in the middle of their lives, rather than being removed as they would be in a more traditional theatre setting. Not taking away from the gravity of the themes, it felt like a celebration of community engagement and collaborative relationships, a breaking free from the silence and a coming together to resolve the problems. The audience seemed as much part of the theatre as the actors.

Scenario 1: Ideal Family

This was meant to be quite light-hearted to eliminate the concept of a "perfect family" being possible or desirable. The audience seemed uncertain how to respond initially, but it 'broke the ice' nicely and formed a bond between audience and performers.

Scenario 2: Arranged Marriage

The actors play out a scene where a scene of two families wanting to arrange a marriage despite the clear unwillingness of the respective son and daughter.

The differences in perspective between the parents and children were stark and the audience was drawn to the story. I noticed a man looking distressed and gently crying. In the subsequent discussions he said that parents shouldn't make their children marry against their will and that the parents should listen to their children. He said he'd done the same thing to his daughter.

The actors joined in the dialogue and united the room – a dual purpose of drawing in the community and leading the thinking.

In particular, there were comments about the unfairness for the young woman who was stuck in Australia without any support. While the arranged marriage seemed to suit the parents, the son managed to make his life work regardless and his arranged wife was the victim of the arrangement most of all. This raised the issue of rights between sons and daughters.

It was extraordinary how the scenarios created and developed over three Sundays were so powerful in the context of the Craigieburn community. The central power of the performance was the fact that the actor-participants were co-creators in the exploration and development of ideas; therefore, the themes resonated strongly with the audience.

Scenario 3: Domestic Violence – mother-in-law & son

Momentum carried on into this scenario and the audience participated heartily in the discussion about the mother-in-law and the son and his wife. The unfairness towards the daughter-in-law was extreme and the discussion involved rewinding the scene and asking the actors to take a different

direction. The mother-in-law got up and prepared tea for the daughter-in-law. Replaying the scene created more commentary from the audience and discussion explored the lack of power for both the son and his wife.



Daughter-in-law serves the family.

Groom with his secret Australian girlfriend

Scenario 4 – Physical Abuse Extreme

This violent and powerful scenario had a huge impact on the audience and performers. There was stunned silence. Dr. Manjula O'Connor my co-moderator stepped in and led the discussion with the audience; she asked how they would like to change the ending. Some audience members gave suggestion for the male actor to manage his pathological jealousy and unemployment and drinking habits, first by speaking with his wife and strengthening that relationship by working together on his issues, and then to find support from professionals. The actors with impromptu dialogue replayed the scene with aplomb. The scene ended with a happy conclusion and there was rapturous applause from the audiences.

When we held hands and invited the audience to join us in our goal to prevent family violence, the audience without exception came onto the stage creating a ring of people committed to change. It was a powerful finish to the performance and strengthened the sense of community between actors and audience.



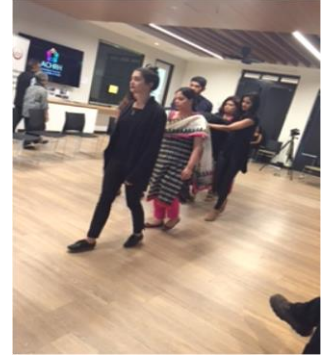
Stephanie Guy - a volunteer actor reflects on Natak Vihar Performance

My acting days started as Little Fish #2 in my primary school musical, and I thought they were going to end there. However, I managed to resurrect my fledgling thespian abilities to help the ACHR and their brilliant cause to deliver my proudest acting moment yet: Natak Vihar.

Having worked in family violence policy within government, I was aware of small organisations delivering grassroots programs to community members. I had assumed this would be limited to working with survivors and providing localised supports. So when I began working on Natak Vihar, I was astounded by its ambition, and its community- and prevention-focus. This was an innovative, thoughtful and evidence-based plan to tackle domestic violence in the Indian and South Asian communities.

Throughout the rehearsals, Dr O'Conner and Dr Blight led our incredible team through a deeply painful issue with a clear vision. From my hesitation to join the acting warm ups (it involved a lot of jumping around!), I left the first rehearsal convinced of the power of community participatory theatre. Suddenly I saw an overwhelming issue become tangible; I truly believed that this haphazard troupe of timid actors could create positive change within the community. And we did.

Three performances later, we've generated deep discussion with insight, clarity and a bit of laughter. It certainly helped me to strengthen my voice to keep saying no to violence. And I am convinced everyone left our performances (even if it was just slightly) better equipped to say no to violence within their own lives, homes and in their community. And to me, that is a job very well done. Maybe I'll have a career in acting yet?



Theater workshops - participants explore the nature of family violence, cultural traditions, the mix of migration and modern education



Reflections of an audience member and a journalist

How interactive theatre can help us understand domestic violence

Aparna Ananthuni

Community theatre presents Natak Vihar, a series of skits that explore the dynamics involved

They carry the body-shaped bundle across the stage, humming low and reverential as they go. They lower it to one side and it stays there for the rest of the performance; it remains out of sight of most of the audience but its message brief, can't be denied.

Women die from domestic violence.



Two women are now killed every week in Australia. The body on stage symbolises these women, says Dr Rosemary Blight, but it also represents the fact that "there are many deaths apart from physical death".

Rosemary, Foundations Studies Drama teacher and Subject Leader at Melbourne University, has trained non-actor volunteers from the community to stage a series of skits as part of 'Natak Vihar', a project conceived by the Australasian Centre for Human Rights and Health and funded by the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

The performance not only explores the dynamics of different types of domestic violence, but invites the audience to participate as well.

"You are going to give us the answers," Dr. Manjula O'Connor, executive director of the ACHRH declares, looking around the small but packed

theatre of the ISKCON Melbourne Temple in Danks Street, Albert Park.

She explains that the audience will be called upon for ideas and possible solutions during and between the skits, which will look at domestic violence in Indian families – although Rosemary was quick to point out that domestic violence is "not just an Indian problem". "The Indian community is taking a lead on this," she says.

Nevertheless, I'm both fascinated and apprehensive as to how it will all go down.



But as the scenarios unfold, an unexpectedly open and eager discussion unfolds with them. After the scene on "Arranged Marriage", where a boy and girl are coaxed into marrying for no other reason except that they'll be "well-settled" – with dysfunctional consequences – several Indian audience members say they recognise this scenario.

Bits of scenes are replayed by the actors as the audience discusses honour and shame, choice and obligation, culture and love, gender equality and patriarchy, violence and jealousy. The actors even rerun scenes, completely off the cuff: in one, we see a working daughter-in-law treated like a servant and an ingrate by her mother-in-law, with no support from her husband, who eventually hits her for calling his mother "troublesome".

At the audience's suggestion, they rerun the scene so the mother-in-law asks her to put her feet up after work, and obligingly goes to make her tea. "This is all very nice, but this never happens in India," an Indian man quips, eliciting wry laughter. "He needs to stop being a 'Mama's boy'," a young Indian woman beside me says.

The last scenario, in which a young woman is killed by her jealous, paranoid husband, has the most palpable impact. I can see one of the other actors, not in the scene, crying silently as the girl is choked slowly to the floor, and the scene finishes on her weeping parents. The audience too is completely silent. There is no applause. And the discussion that follows, around the nature of male jealousy and insecurity, is the most intensive and contentious one yet.

This is theatre at its most intimate, raw, and powerful. Because everyone in the room is a participant in this performance, including the actors, who offer their own thoughts during the discussions, and as they replay and rerun scenes.

And as we watch marriage being treated as an obligation and financial investment, women disempowered by both men and other women, and men allowing their insecurities to build up until they become deadly, we recognise what's happening. This is not just a performance for any of us.

It's all real.

Photos: Hinal Arya

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<http://www.achrh.org/>

Or Facebook (click the follow the link):



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WHERE TO GO FOR HELP **POLICE IN EMERGENCY – 000**

YOUR GP – they are helpful, easy to reach, they will refer you to the right place.

- **NATIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT, DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE COUNSELLING SERVICE – 1800 RESPECT**
- **INTOUCH MULTICULTURAL CENTER AGAINST FAMILY VIOLENCE – 1800 755 988**
- **Safe steps - WOMENS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRISIS SERVICE**
24 Hour state wide line 1800 015 188
- **MEN'S 24 HOUR REFERRAL SERVICE**
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- **VICTORIA IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN'S COALITION**
03 9654 1243
virwc@virwc.org.au, www.virwc.org.au
- **WOMEN'S INFORMATION & REFERRAL AGENCY (WIRE)**
03 9348 9416
inforequests@wire.org.au
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WHY GET HELP?

- ❖ Domestic Violence damages our culture
- ❖ Domestic violence breaks our homes
- ❖ Domestic Violence causes:
 - Anxiety,
 - Depression,
 - Suicide,
 - Homicide in women, men and children

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- ❖ Support those who may be victims
- ❖ Encourage victims to seek help and become survivors
- ❖ Encourage perpetrator to seek help
- ❖ DO NOT BE SILENT ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Say No to Domestic Violence