Poonam Trivedi University of Delhi

**Framing Lear’s Fool in India: ‘Doth any here know me?’**

The Fool in King Lear is considered the most complete approximation of this quintessential Shakespearean role. Yet, curiously, there is no actual consensus about his place and function in the play and disagreements abound. Lear’s Fool is variously characterised as a ‘natural’ or a village idiot, a clown, a professional jester or a courtly wit and cast in performances as either a young boy or an adult, or even as an old man, like the King. He is interpreted multiply as a servitor, or friend, or alter ego, or an external critic. His disappearance half way through the play, though seen by some as necessitated by the practice of the doubling of roles (here with Cordelia), or held to be replaced by Poor Tom / Edgar, adds to the confusions around his character. The variants between the Quarto and Folio versions, the additions to the Fool’s part in F, and deletions from the Q text, further increase the fluidity of his conceptualisation. Some productions see him as a dispensable character, cutting him out altogether.

This paper will track Indian versions of *King Lear* through their reconfigured framing of the character and role of the Fool. These almost always domesticate the play, often preferring, not a tragic, but a happy ending. They often conflate other characters with the Fool. They also take divergent views of the Fool, coloured by similar figures familiar from Indian drama (classical Sanskrit, folk theatrical and modern plays), in which he appears in many guises, playful, provocative and pungent. The Fool figures of Indian theatre are, more often than not, subaltern and subversive. The paper will explore the intertwining of these performative traditions and parse out the shifts and new collocations of meaning arising out of such transcultural encounters.

To this end, the paper will glance at the history of *Lear* performances on stage and on screen in India, narrowing for detailed consideration three films, *Gunsundari Katha* (Tale of the Virtuous Woman, 1949, Telugu), *Rui Ka Bojh* (Weight of Cotton, 1997, Hindi) and *Natsamrat* (Actor King, 2016, Marathi) and their recasting of the Fool, his relation to Lear and the play as a whole. It will supplement this with the redactions of filmed stage performances which today may be seen on the digital screen, *Iruthiattam* (Play of Endstop, 2001, Tamil) and *Badshah Pather* (Play of the King, 2013, Kashmiri) to bring film and digitised performance in conversation and to further pursue the difference technological and transcultural interlocution brings about.