Shabd Leela – The Interplay of Words / Manohar Khushalani


Mystical Piety

PERFORMANCE

Text of The Review by Manohar Khushalani Published in IIC Diary

Directed by K K Raina, conceived, scripted and narrated in Hindi by Ila Arun, '***Shabd Leela***' is a partially dramatized reading of the script, which contains selected extracts from the works of the well-known poet and playwright **Dr. Dharamvir Bharti.** Picking up prose from his works, such as, *'Kanupriya','Ek Sahityik Ke Prem Patra'* and *'Andha Yug',* Ila Arun created a biographical sketch of Bharti, focusing on his relationship with two women. Trying to see a resonance from Krishna's life, wherein, even though Rukmani was his wife, yet, only Radha's name is linked with Krishna and taken together with his. Ila justifies Dharamvir's simultaneous dalliance with his first wife, Kanta Bharti and Pushpa Bharti, his paramour, who became his spouse in an informal unconventional ceremony. The three, Dharamvir Kanta and Pushpa, took a vow on the banks of Ganges, that they will always be inseparable. That is why the unconventional consensual bigamous wedlock had a certain mystical piety about

it. Yet, in the construction of the play, Kanta, his first wife, and the third arm of the triangle, was largely ignored.

Ila took up the role of the '*Sutradhar'*, allowing Raina to dramatize the play, unsuccessfully though, because the blocking had a static quality about it. A symmetrical set consisting of two desks on either side of the stage and a covered bench in the middle added to the monotony.

However, the visuals projected on the cyclorama were really beautiful and carefully chosen by the Director to enhance the beauty of the poems. The script was well crafted, interspersing quotes from the letters, poetry and drama, with Ila's own critique about them. Actors Rajeswari Sachdev, Varun Badola and all the others read out the pedantic Hindi verses and prose with well punctuated, clearly pronounced dialogue delivery.

The finale of the play was a performance of Andhayug. It highlights the last day of the Mahabharata war, when Kurukshetra was covered with corpses, the ramparts were in ruins, the city was in flames, while vultures hovered menacingly above. The few hapless survivors of the defeated Kauravas were overcome with grief and rage. Written immediately after the partition of the India, the play is a profound commentary on the politics of violence. True, Andhayug showcases Bharti's versatility as a writer craftsman, but, the conclusion appeared to be a departure from the overall theme of the enactment of a complex relationship between three creative and sensitive souls.

Despite everything, the pristine beauty of Bharti's Shabd Leela is what remains with you after the performance

Let the whole world know that Radha;
was not merely a note in your Song-
Radha was The Melody, The Music;
I have come to you my Dearest!

You who weaved fiery blossoms into my tresses!
Tarry not anymore;
To weave meaning into History!

Acoustic spaces of a Delhi Neighborhood

Acoustic spaces of a Delhi Neighborhood
by
Joya John





When we think of solitude we associate it with silence. It is in the sounds that we generate that our sociability is located. Voices, speech and other sounds linked with living indicate so much about people. Generating sound is an extension of our socially constituted selves. Luxury is the ability to choose the kind and extent of sounds we hear. It is however a luxury few can exercise in a metropolis. For some the cacophony of other sounds is comforting, the confirmation of community. For others sounds can be ‘invasive’, ‘crude’ or just simply ‘noise’. Sounds demarcate the public from the private spaces.

My neighborhood is a plethora of sounds and voices. Its middle class status effortlessly strides the uncomfortable gap between the westernized university student tenant and the more conservative Punjabi families, who lease out houses for rent. Houses climb up to four storeys and sounds carry easily from one home to the other. Brawls break out between families over parking place, children's fights taken up by over anxious parents and the highly contentious issue of where garbage gets thrown. Late evenings are often marred by violence behind closed doors. High pitched voices and shrill screams indicate a marital dispute that assumes catastrophic proportions, sometimes in full view of neighbors. Fake walkouts are staged, while neighbors intervene piously and send women back into the same hell. Loud crying often gives a moral vantage point to the battered wife and generates some embarrassment for the erring husband. The violence abates for sometime until one day- the shrill cry of the woman -and the same cycle begins again.

Indra Vihar also has pretensions to religious fervor. The temple priest commands respect. In the festive season families compete with each other to organize bhajans that can be heard on loudspeakers. Intra familial rivalries are temporarily put aside and the dholak takes precedence. Sound functions to establish a community of listeners all governed by the nucleus of the temple. Religious ceremonies blend into political affiliations, when the local magnates organize a charity function with loud music. For the elderly woman, early evenings are spent in the temple, singing songs of the licentious frolicking of Krishna- A contradiction that nobody seems to notice or mind. Outside the temple, groups of young men listen to music loudly on their cell phones, furtively eyeing young women students, like modern day avatars of Krishna. Bollywood kitsch competes with Enrique singing mournfully somewhere close by.

On Saturdays a wandering ascetic winds way his through the

neighborhood, asking for alms to propitiate the vengeful god Shani. Added to this is the plaintive sound of the beggar woman, who pretends to be blind but can be seen counting her earnings in the neighborhood park later in the day. Vegetable vendors have each cultivated a distinct sound to alert potential buyers of their arrival. Hard bargains are driven over the prices of each item between them and the women of the colony. Both lambaste the government and the escalating prices.

Morning is the time for women. Relatively free from the demands of children and husbands, they chat loudly, cajole babies to eat and gossip. As evening approaches they are heard less. The sounds of the returning male folk takes precedence. Ribald jokes along with a generous splattering of swear words can be heard. Words are said with abandon, in front of women or total strangers.

On the other side of noise are those who are the ‘outsiders’.

Qualises drive in nosily honking to alert young college students call centre employees, of their arrival. A boisterous party, with drunken students, invites censure from the neighborhood. People gather outside, tempers flare up and often someone has the sense to call the police. Racist undercurrents come out in the open. Loud pronouncements are made on “chinky” students and their rampant immorality. Assumptions about their wealth however make them the most profitable tenants.

This neighborhood has drawn a sharp line between sanctioned and unsanctioned noise. The decision of who makes noise and who doesn’t is sometimes challenged however most of the time it is let be. In the meanwhile people get on with the daily processes of living, talking behind paper thin walls, while others listen in, voluntarily or involuntarily.

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The Benefit of Doubt

T H E B E N E F I T O F D O U B T

(written in 1993 – way before the cyber-era)

by Dr. Reshma

I could hardly wait to get home. How one begins to take one's marriage for granted, even the caring and belonging, would have never struck me, had it not been for these last three months of separation, spent in Jabalpur. The old magic having been revived, I was palpitating like a newly-wedded groom headed for the nuptial bliss! I was too lost in my own little world to notice the cab screeching to a halt, or the driver waiting impatiently for his fare.

The latter, I disposed off quickly, and without even bothering to collect the change, literally leaped to the front door, intending to knock Chitra out with my sudden appearance! I was dying to see the expression on her face at that moment, and had purposely not intimated the time of my arrival to her.

But my meticulously planned-out romantic encounter turned out to be a damp squib after all, as the door was answered by our maid! Worse still, she was not even aware of her memsaab's whereabouts at that early hour. Completely deflated, I re-entered the cold house all by myself, and stretching out on my bed, dialled Swati, Anu & Priya in quick succession. But my attempts to trace Chitra came to a naught, and the eagerness to be with her got laced with a hint of irritation. Where

could she be, I thought, a trifle disappointed. Though I could, from all conventional standards, be considered a loving and caring partner, I was unfortunately far too possessive about my wife, and disliked sharing her with anyone else.

Not that Chitra had ever given me a cause for complaint through all our years of marriage. It was just me I guess. For some strange, inexplicable reason, I had always harbored a feeling of insecurity vis-a-vis her, and been forever ready to jump to irrational conclusions. And worse, despite being aware of it, had been unable to do anything about it.

Barring this trait of mine, we had a reasonably good marriage going. And were certainly qualified to win any made-for-each-other contest; the absence of children notwithstanding. A clean chit from the doctors to both of us had diminished our anxieties to some extent, and we had decided to wait patiently for our little guest – whenever it chose to arrive…

The tiredness of the journey was compounded by my convoluted thoughts, and I was almost dozing when something soft and feathery tickled me. I woke up to find Chitra lying next to me, her lips on my forehead, and drew her close, with an urgency bordering on near-violence.

“Where have you been my love? Lord, how I’ve missed you these past few months!” I groaned. “And even if this doesn’t sound very original, let me say it one more time – I can’t live without you, and my little nymph, you better believe that!”

But just as I began lending credence to those lofty statements, I also noticed that it was a different Chitra that lay encircled in my arms. This was not the person I had left behind. The change was too subtle for me to define, but something was certainly missing somewhere. Perhaps that faraway look in her eyes… perhaps an uncharacteristic absent-mindedness in her demeanor… she was certainly not all there.

“Hey! Who dared to claim my wife’s presence at 9.00 A.M. in the morning, depriving me of…” I decided to lose no further moments in making up for the ones already lost, and quickly engaged myself in sealing her responses! Not very successfully though, for she did manage to wriggle one out.

“Sorry for turning your pleasant surprise into a rude shock Akshay, but Swati and I were out shopping – just some knick-knacks you know…”

Her explanations continued, and I suddenly realized why she wasn’t looking at me in the eye. For hadn’t Swati informed me in the morning that she was off to her daughter’s school? I couldn’t help wondering what Chitra was up to… what was she hiding behind that lie?

I quickly banished the thought and warned myself – no, I wasn’t going to let that green monster near her again. It had tormented us enough in the past; enough, in fact, to actually hurt Chitra on several occasions. But not any more. In any case, this was too insignificant a matter to merit any further attention on my part.

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And yet, as the days passed, I was forced to change my opinion; and became almost convinced that I wasn’t jumping to any wrong conclusions. Not this time.

I may have been the jealous possessive type. But then, how many benefits of doubt was a wife supposed to get? Thrice, she hadn’t been able to explain her by-now-frequent disappearing acts. Yes, I too had started checking up on her more often – but her own alibis were invariably falling flat.

And she knew it.

What had happened to cause those dark circles under her eyes?

My radiant Chitra seemed, but a pale shadow of her previous self – so withdrawn. I had been carefully controlled about my own queries so far, but it was almost a month since my return! And worst of all were her constant excuses to hold me at bay, even at nights. Something was surely troubling her. But what? Or who?

Was it another man?

I could contain myself no longer, and decided to put an end to the suspense – by following her on days that she was supposed to be "running some errands". And ended up feeling even further confused.

For her destination was always the same – Dr. Rathi's Nursing Home.

Hmm… so this was it! A doctor? So overcome was I with jealousy, that the possibility of her being sick did not even cross my mind. Perhaps, because whenever I'd express a concern regarding her health, she had brushed it away ever so casually, attributing everything to "just a headache".

Giving her one more benefit of doubt, I showed up at Dr. Rathi's one morning, and introduced myself as Chitra's husband. The direct approach always worked best for me.

But I wasn't at all prepared for the bombshell that followed. I sat numbstruck, as it tore me apart, and listened to a whole lot of technical jargon, without registering much. Dr. Rathi patiently explained everything and I kept nodding correctly, hoping that I was coming up with all the right questions.

The information wasn't adding up to much. The doctor seemed ignorant about the exact duration of my absence. And that probably accounted for several of the missing links. The rest resulted from my helplessly ruffled state.

Hoping that Chitra had her own reasons for withholding certain facts from the medical practitioner, I too did not enlighten him, and decided to maintain status quo.

“Well Mr. Mhatre,” the doctor finally smiled warmly as he winded up and shook my hand, “Best of luck! I’m sure it’ll all work out fine in the end. Don’t just believe in miracles, depend on them. Good day!”

Dazed, I stepped out of the clinic, and abandoned the idea of going to work, somehow dragging myself home. Where I tried lending a semblance of order to the various pieces of jigsaw just received. Fortunately, Chitra was actually away to a kitty – brunch this time, and I had the much needed solitude to sort myself out, having been much too stunned at the clinic to be able to think rationally.

The facts sunk in slowly… and gravely… so Chitra had conceived in my absence… but instead of growing normally, the pregnancy had developed into a “mole” – a potentially cancerous tumor… the initial symptoms being similar, the diagnosis was possible only after sophisticated investigations… but once the abortion was performed, what followed was even more traumatic… repeated urine tests, x-rays, biopsies… to make sure that it had not turned malignant.

And of-course, abstinence. A pregnancy under such conditions was disastrous for the follow-up.

At long last, things began falling into place; and it was almost afternoon when I finally set out for my office. My forehead deeply creased, I failed to notice the post-man, and nearly crashed into him, before absent-mindedly collecting the mail.

“Met Dr. Rathi today.” I announced that night as Chitra entered the bedroom, coming straight to the point as usual.

“Perhaps I’m entitled to an explanation. N O W?”

I was only pretending, but color drained out from her face completely; and if I hadn’t supported her, she would surely have collapsed. Everything that had remained pent-up inside her for so long, came flowing out now, as I held her in my arms, and stroked her hair gently.

It took a long while for her sobbing to cease completely. When her eyes finally rose to meet mine, they were darkly shadowed. I decided to put her at ease immediately.

“My darling, my love”, I murmured softly against her, almost crushing her to me this time. “How could you go through it all alone?”

She stared disbelievingly as I continued. “You little fool! Why didn’t you let me know in Jabalpur? Why? I would have left everything to be with you. You thought a baby would be more precious to me than YOU?”

Her tear-ravaged face regained some of its color, but her eyes were still clouded.

“You… know… everything…? Dr. Rathi… didn’t… I mean… didn’t… he… tell you… anything else?”

“Of-course he did…” I paused dramatically for effect, and continued with a grim look on my face,” he was afraid it might not to be a mole next time. The condition is not very common you know!”

For a moment she looked completely nonplussed. Then her face cleared, and for the first time since my return, I saw her relax fully.

I continued further. “You nut! Don’t you realize what this means? That *we* are *both* capable of producing those adorable little brats!”

I stole a sideways glance at her, and noticed the last vestiges of doubt finally melt away from her eyes. The guarded look was gone; and in its place, had appeared a serenity, that made the recently enacted scene completely worth my while. I gave her an understanding smile.

And then we held each other's hands and laughed. As we had never laughed before.Till tears ran down our cheeks. I knew I was hysterical. She seemed exhausted.

Later, I made sure she was sound asleep, before gently covering her with a blanket, and setting out for a walk.

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It was close to midnight, and the streets were deserted. All was quiet at that late winter hour, save for the watchman's occasional whistle. A thick fog seemed suspended in the air, enclosing, and isolating the rare life-forms that had dared to venture out.

Hands buried deep inside my pockets, I turned up the collar of my parka to shield myself against the bitter cold, and began an aimless meandering, ruminating over the subject that had been plaguing my mind, for what seemed ages. I could not believe that it had all begun just this morning!

As a stray dog howled somewhere, my fingers involuntarily reached out for the letter lying safely cocooned within the recesses of my pocket.

"My dear Chitra," it began, "I have not been able to forgive myself till now…"

I had read it so many times since receiving it that afternoon, that the words were nearly ringing in my ears.

"…Though we were both to blame for what happened, I

should have stayed back to see you through the painful procedure, instead of running away like a coward…”

The words continued to shatter the quiet stillness of my mind.

“…When is Akshay returning? I know I should not risk sending this, but I am being selfish again…”

The visibility was almost nil, but I didn’t need any light, to read what was almost etched in my memory.

“…and so”, it ended, “if I don’t hear from you this time, I promise to never ever bother you again. And believe me, it is a gentleman’s promise *this* time…”

What did the stress on “*this*” mean? Had this other guy made an earlier promise but not fulfilled it? Could only one partner ever be responsible for a situation like that? Had Chitra been unfaithful in a conscious, cold-blooded manner?

I could not bear to raise any more unanswered questions; nor decide whether there was any need to get them answered anymore?

Wasn’t it too late for that? For everything? I suddenly felt a strong urge to smoke.

Rapid strides took me to a nearby kiosk still open, where I lit a cigarette; and arriving at a spontaneous decision, suddenly consigned the tormenting words on that paper to the flames of the matches.

No, I shook my head, muttering to myself… Chitra wasn’t going to suffer anymore… for as long as she lived…

However long that was. I decided to save the last benefit of doubt. For myself.