

Plays of Social Relevance and on Feminist Issues / Manohar Khushalani

Firstly on Women's Day it is important to recall the innumerable **street plays** we did on women's issues mostly under the banner of **Theatre Union** and **Workshop Theatre**

'*Om Swaha*' was about dowry and bride burning. It contributed towards sensitizing the media and the nation on this issue.'

'*The Rape Bill*' was about custodial rape and insensitive cross examination of victims in courts. It was performed when a select committee was examining the new rape bill before it became an act in the parliament. It also informed women about their rights.

'*Pardon ka Parcham*' was prepared by us after Roop Kanwar an 18-year old Rajput woman committed *Sati* on 4th September 1987 at Deorala village of Sikar district in Rajasthan. These plays were collectively evolved by our group **Theatre Union**.

I would also like to recall my brothers and sisters in arms, an endless procession of street theatre co-warriors who came, sometimes stayed for a while and sometimes stopped briefly for a production or two and moved on. In no particular order they were: **Sudhir Mishra, Sushmita Mukherji, Bina Pal, Meenu Chaturvedi, Anamika Haksar, Nandini, Anil Mehta, Anuradha Kapoor, Ravi Shankar, Umesh Bisht, Maya Rao, Vandana Bisht, Sushil Prashar, Sujasha Dasgupta, Chandrashekhar, Urvashi Butalia, Ragini Prakash, Vibhuti Nath Jha, Dr. Harivansh Chopra, Krishan Tyagi, Kumkum Sangaria, Ein Lal, Dr. Ravi Mahajan, Satyajit Sharma, Tapush Chanda** and me, **Manohar Khushalani**. If I have forgotten anybody then please remind me.

I also directed Dario Fo's '*Can't Pay Won't Pay*' for TU, it

was a proscenium play. The play Kanthi Tripathy's '**Kurukshetra and After**' which I directed for StageBuzz was also a proscenium play based on the **Stree Parv** of **Mahabharat**. Which takes up the issue of women's plight during War. And of course how can I forget that as an actor I acted in Henrik Ibsen's '**Dolls House**' and Tendulkar's '**Khamosh Adalat Zari hai**' ! Both monumental plays in their own right.

With **Workshop Theatre** which emerged out of a workshop conducted by the Theatre Giant **Badal Sircar** at Sri Ram Center in 1979-80 we did a few plays on social issues, the most important amongst the was Badal Sircar's, **Bhooma**. It took us 6 months to develop the play, which we translated from Bengali to Hindi collectively. We were young and sentimental, and broke down before the audience and audience too became sentimental about the plight of the villagers and farmers of Sunderbans who had to till and plow a land made fallow by salinity. Other plays we did was William Hinton's **Fanshen**, Bertolt Brecht's, **Measures Taken** and a children's play; **Kaddu Ram** evolved by Workshop Theatre

Would also invite the readers to a conference being conducted by Natrang Pratisthan to discuss our memories of Theatre Union and it's plays on

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Nostalgia Street by Manohar Khushalani

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Manohar Khandekar



Manohar Khandekar has been involved with various aspects of theatre for more than 25 years. He is a theatre critic and producing actor and director. He is also the honorary President of North Indian Film Association.

Having been associated with more theatre from the last six years are members of Jaya Maru Manch an equally old. It was way back in 1977 that I lost our father Madhav. Our group, Workshop Theatre, which was formed after a workshop with Balraj Sarda was rehearsing for William Shakespear's *Aeschylus*, a play about communist revolution in a village in China. Balraj had come to meet the late Indira Gandhi. We got through our rehearsal and gave more suggestions. Our group consisted people, most of whom have migrated to elsewhere—Indira Mishra, Indira Mathur, Raju Rai, Anil Mishra, Oshy Anandika Haldar and I stuck on to theatre. But the next year that we did street dramas were full of success. Our most successful production was Balraj Sarda's *Shiksha*, for which Balraj himself came specially to Delhi to do a workshop with us. Other people kept to our street, and so did we, obediently, while performing. Although I was also performing in the government sector, this theory was still very close to a street play. When we came to meet with M.R. Ramesh, one of Workshop Theatre members asked to work in his street production of *Julius and Caesar* in *Uttaranchal* and *Madras*.

One day out of our beliefs came when Balraj took our performance of *Shiksha* at the Bhabha International Theatre held in Calcutta in 1978. There we were greeted by the support from the last 100 years of the city. While our street play dealt with the underlying social and political aspects of society we were confronted with a dilemma. The funds raised a part of such they were around the dramatically that we stayed in. The water remained for three days and we were kept up on the last hour as the rain was that the previous day they were being all around the dramatically with their situations which facing before their eyes. We were helpless to offer them relief in our own names. What kind of street drama were we doing? We were indeed on whether doing play was enough and whether it should not be supplemented with social work. The answer came much later when Maya Rao, Anandika Haldar and myself set in charge at the NIC and decided to form Theatre Union. Later we recruited other young members like Vinod Das, Raju Lal and Raju Prakash, along with some senior artists like Udaya Kishore and Balraj Sarda.

Our first play was prepared in connection with street drama's groups. It was called *Radha's Karma*. The Raju Lal was before a writer committee, whose recommendations would be considered before it became an act. We examined the bill, discussed the budget as well as the strength. We created a play which would serve the other committee about the budget while rehearsing the committee women that right as yet



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the bill. During this play we had an opportunity to interact with social workers who worked in the very communities that we performed in. Besides in say the give us more satisfaction. In fact later Theatre Union prepared a play on environmental drug companies who were dumping in the Third World, all these drugs which were banned in the developed world.

The play we prepared in association with Voluntary Health Association of India and got a lot of information from Mira Datta. This information was used to create an interactive play in a comic vein. This play was a useful supplement for medical workers. We also did not let the audience get involved at the end of the show. However, by now the debate on whether a street drama group should also do social work had reached itself. It had now moved on so that it was performers and we should stick to that. If we created a consciousness in just a few people it would spread to others by conduct.

Sometimes people had created doubts amongst or about the reach of street drama. Television was cited as a medium with a greater reach. One still remembers a talk that Balraj Sarda gave at Jawaharbal Nehru University City Auditorium which was so prophetic. At that time the people were TV's. There was only one Doordarshan channel and no given channels. Sarda would that the TV will create emotional which while performing are and a community office and bring every people under one roof, the television will divide people by extending them to their homes. He cited the example of people who visit homes of television viewers. When the host spoke in his game by using his eye as his mouth. But his mouth was closed away as he himself had his eye glued to the television. Of course, Balraj was a different conspiracy in this and left the television had been created to divide people, to break up communities and to destroy the inclusive spirit. He pointed out that I was up to the stage to congregation him.

But the real truth about the TV having a greater reach has been revealed in my mind by liberty. The answer lies in credibility. A house being looking into our eyes and delivering a message has greater credibility than an electronic media supported by social status and money power. When we did the play against India burning, just 200 shows were enough to create media and government attention on the issue. Even the case was seen everywhere in newspapers, on television and in films. Mira Datta's award winning film on India burning, and our play's members were spread with her own visuals. Theatre Union performed theatre to thousands with Jaya Maru Manch in many states. There we got to see each other's plays—appreciate and critique each other's work. This Balraj appreciated the photographs and anatomy of Theatre Union production, he felt that the message was not done. We felt that Jaya's play was hard hitting but sometimes lost strength there was a greater effect. Though I read my latest production have been changing over the years and the fact that I am looked like a Theatre Union play to me. Since we had ourselves who also acted on the government stage our productions were looked to be different. However this I am talking about the rights. Now Jaya has also performed on stage—in a film and looking under Theatre Union has gone into television.

I still remember how it was considered a taboo like a street drama worker to perform on stage. The first time I remember Balraj showing an interest about problems of government drama was when the Bombay police act was introduced in Delhi and drama workers went up to protest.

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system is, that Madhav in a business specially organized system, "this was the first step towards government's restructuring of theatre". I was particularly agitated about it when I felt that the police was ill-equipped to understand the nature of theatre. Little did I realize at that time, that in effect, given the social inefficiency of the official machinery, giving a police licence, meaning though it may be, was just another formula to be completed. This, street drama, which had the maximum potential of a political voice was outside the purview of a performance licence since those performances were not in its jurisdiction. Yet Madhav spoke more actively followed by M.R. Ramesh who had a face to back the licence.

Street drama does not mean just making up any issue, manufacturing a bunch of emotions, and venturing on the last street-corner and corner again. It may take months to write a socialist realist script. Workshop Theatre took three months to produce Balraj Sarda's *Shiksha* and six months to further realize the play! An issue may arise from a film, it may be with hearing, or a structural hindrance, or a middle class drama problem. It is chosen by a general consensus, working sessions are organized into a script is written keeping in mind the target audience. Few people know that Balraj Sarda's *Julius* has been performed in Pakistan as well. Street drama has attracted a few people because of the information provided in the whole system. Since they are often exposed, the police which carry like references to its own jurisdiction, often tries to stop the performance. Sometimes even the audience gets pulled up because of the personal use of a relationship that the audience tries to establish. When the police tried to stop a performance of *Julius* by Pradyum at Commonwealth Place's end of the park, more than a decade ago, the audience intervened on behalf of the performers and fought with the police. Similarly, during the Emergency, when the police stopped a street performance in Curzon Park, Calcutta, the audience people responded by turning up in thousands to watch the same performance the next day. The demonstrations, however, were all about one thing. Only a few who are somebody concerned stick to the movement. "If ever you do street drama, forget that you will be happy, forget that you will be famous, forget that you will be rich," says Balraj Sarda. However, Balraj Sarda's unorthodox interpretation has changed all that. People have become more conscious of a performer's right to perform. But street drama's which appeared to be an act of defiance is based on rise up again and fight the injustice of social world. In its work plays like *Janam's* unforgettable *Janam* or Theatre Union's similarly memorable *Taka Taka Jangal*.



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