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**by**

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ANIMATING THEATRE MOVEMENT - COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
AND MASS EDUCATION AMONG FISHERFOLK AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN  
TAMIL NADU

FELIX N. SUGIRTHARAJ.

INTRODUCTION.

The Association for the Rural Poor is a non-profit voluntary agency which has been primarily engaged in the development of the rural poor, especially the traditional fisherfolk and farm labour who happen to be the majority in the unorganised sector. The Association has been using "Popular Theatre" as a powerful tool to make the rural poor conscious of their human and civil rights and enable them to play a significant role in revitalising their communities for better decision making and participation in community building. The ARP covered more than thirty-five coastal villages between Mahabilipuram and Pondicherry and during this process of humanization for sustained development. It had organised many cultural caravans in the form of dramas using folk media to demystify superstitious beliefs and taboos and pave a way for cultural reawakening among the men and women in the fishing villages.

THE FISHERFOLK AND THEATRE

The fisherfolk in Chengalpattu and South Arcot Districts of Tamilnadu are deeply interested in music, dance and drama. But they have been alienated from these cultural activities for a long time. Nobody can give us a clear reason for the alienation. Young men, if they are trained would act and sing beautifully in dramas, without an inhibitions. Women had never taken part in any collective activities such as folk songs and dances even during festivals. Community singing or mourning during deaths are not a common occurrence.

Festivals to village deities are very common and money is being spent lavishly. Each family has to contribute towards the

celebration and this might amount to Rs 500/- per family. While the deity is taken around the village to bring out fortune and prosperity to the whole village, drummers and Bhajan singers are being hired from other caste communities. The festival might last long for two days only. The festivals come to an end with a "Drama" enacted by professionals of Theerukoothu fame. These professional folk dancers and dramatists enact mostly puranic or mythological plays highlighting the blissful activities of God and Goddesses in favour of the poor. No local person will be allowed to get on the stage during the drama which lasts for seven to eight hours in the night. Awards and prizes are being offered to professional musicians and artists by the village elders during the drama. Nobody can interact or question the validity of the drama in terms of life education.

The value of each drama towards cultural re-awakening has to be seriously questioned. It looks as though Indian spirituality and mysticism is often imposed upon the silenced culture of the fisherfolk and make them to be more passive submissive and fatalistic.

#### RURAL DRAMA - ITS IMPLICATIONS

Historically speaking, tradition and culture have usually been associated with responses to preserve values, life style and customs, especially when societies have been threatened with the shock-effects of external influences. The societies have used their reserves of culture as a cushion to absorb various disruptions caused by war pestilence, famine conquests and migrations.

Having played the role of a preserver of traditional values and ways of life, culture has generally been registered as a conservative force, upholding the status quo more than helping to usher in a change way of life.

Like other forms of culture, expression, drama, theatre can be used to preserve or change traditional values. It can also be used to resist undesirable external influences as well as to help societies emancipate themselves from unfair and unjust social structure. As a vital medium of communication drama can conscientiae people to resist, or actually work for change.

Drama that is woven into the fabric of everyday life has been and continues to be, one of the most potent means of communication in rural setting. Unlike cinemas and Television, the message transmitted through performances of folk theatre are total and integrated into the emotional, seasonal and episodic elements in village life.

Time and again it has come to pass that the imagination of rural people can only be temporarily stirred through modern communications. There is something about projectors, video magic lanterns and Television that alienated them from the needs of rural communication and which can scarcely compete with live folk plays, puppets, dance, dramas, community Kathas [story-telling] mime and the martial folk arts.

### POPULAR THEATRE IN PRACTICE

What is Popular Theatre and what are its main objectives? The terms of popular theatre is used to describe a great variety of theatre based forms including mime, folk, forms, puppet theatre and political protest theatre all of which are specifically employed to advance and validate a people biased counter culture. Popular Theatre is used to counter the cultural and political hegemony of the ruling order, its myths and its versions of social reality.

## ROLE OF POPULAR THEATRE IN INDIA

Until very recently, the cultural history of India was seen solely in terms of the classical culture of Brahmins - the Great Tradition as it is called in social and anthropological studies. But more recent studies of the cultural history of India have examined cultural forms <sup>ab</sup> the bottom up. And this field of subaltern studies has unearthed considerable evidence of the dynamic nature of popular cultural offensives against dominant cultural and political traditions.

### POPULAR THEATRE IN INDIA TODAY

Although Popular Theatre in India today owes a lot to the traditional of political protest theatre, it has in many ways gone beyond the constraints of this type of theatre. Different forms of popular theatre have evolved. The very ethos of its development has changed and the practice of popular theatre today is not normally an isolated one-off performance but is linked to the demands of an on-going people's struggle for economic, political cultural and social liberation. It has become genuinely popular in the Brechtian sense of the word and participatory in the Freireian sense.

The main impetus to the growth of popular theatre in India was the emergence of Social Action groups [SAGs] and rural movements in the early 1970s. Their appearance was directly related to a crisis of development. Development programmes in general had not dealt with the root causes of poverty, inequality and oppression and these new groups tried to evolve structures of development that reflected the needs of the people and could be controlled by them.

It was also during this time that Freire's writings gained currency in the East and the people based approach to development became the theoretical basis for the development activities of a

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large number of NGO groups. His notion of 'Cultural Action for Liberation' stressed the importance of evolving cultural-based development strategies for liberation. Cultural action for liberation was given a further impetus by Augusto Boal's revolutionary praxis of Popular Theatre.

There were innumerable occasions when the real effectiveness of popular theatre was quite apparent. When the performance was linked to and mirrored the concerns expressed in the popular literacy classes of the ongoing struggle, it clearly contributed to strengthening the commitment of the people to the objectives of the larger struggle. To take a typical example - during a popular theatre performance among the fisherfolk in South Arcot District, Tamilnadu. The threat posed by the big trawlers, owed by rich people, to the small fisherfolk was mirrored on the stage. There were frequent interruption and members from the audience corrected mis-interpretation of misrepresentation of their social reality. Many local boys were involved in the production and, at the end of the performance, the people decided to intensify their struggle against mechanised trawling in coastal areas. Successful popular theatre performances calls for an organised build-up before the actual performance. Committed cadres prepare audiences beforehand. They organise cultural analysis sessions and provide perspectives on the larger struggle. In many instances they lack of a proper build-up, results in the relative failure of performances to elicit a positive response. The lack of commitment to the struggle is an important reason for the failure of many SAG campaigns. But allied to this is a fact that popular theatre in India is itself facing a crisis of forms, ethos and legitimacy.

#### THE ARP'S EXPERIENCE IN POPULAR THEATRE

Theatre has always existed as the village level in India. The traditional forms of theatre offered villagers a brief escape into the world of history and mythology, but values of fatalism and

passivity were imbibed along with the entertainment, and the existing caste and class struggle thus legitimised.

The anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggle which preceded independence saw the beginnings of theatre used as a tool for conscientisation and mobilisation of the people's theatre was in fact, the first communication medium to be censored by the British in 1876. By the turn of the century nationalists had begun to recognise the value of indigenous theatre as opposed to Western theatre forms and in the 1930s with the urban protest theatre was effectively controlled. Mukunda Das [Bengal] and Shahir Wahiwardekar [Maharashtra] transformed the traditional forms of jattras and tamsha into agitational media dealing with social and political issues, thus keeping anti-colonial spirit alive in the rural areas.

'Sangham', a kind of village elders councils differed from village to village. <sup>Though</sup> ~~Each~~ judiciary and law enforcing also encouraged folk music, drama and cultural traditions. Dramas wherever necessary enacted issues such as challenging famine or drought, conserving drinking water, saving grains for common use, socialization of farming etc., After so many years of British rule and "State penetration" after Independence, yet the rural communities still maintain such communication systems to sustain their systems.

#### ARP'S POPULAR THEATRE APPROACH

Three basic approaches to people's theatre have been identified by the Association for the Rural Poor, Madras. [ARP] - taking theatre to the people, producing theatre with the people and developing theatre within the people's movements. The plays in the first category, performed by the middle class theatre artists for the rural and urban poor, tend to present per-formed analysis and solutions, attempting to influence the people to class certain

position rather than encouraging development of their own wind ideas and thoughts.

The second category - producing theatre with the people - deepens the awareness and understanding of the people involved building confidence and rehearsing actions that may be taken against oppression. But is generally conducted in the form of improvisation, and in the form of short workshops with follow-up and support necessary move beyond performances on the stage.

This support is build into the third category namely theatre within people's movements - which situates the theatre experiences within on ongoing rural development programme. It is the third approach to theatre which the ARP has developed and refined in such a way that it precipitated a Labour Union among Fisherfolk to come together, discuss issues and go ahead resetting them.

#### ROLE PLAYS AND STREET THEATRE

Popular theatre is firmly situated within ARP's ongoing process of education and organisation, performing a wide range of functions - from building confidence, exposing injustice and providing a focus for strategising ongoing action to reinforce moral, celebrating victory and spreading the spirit of new cultural freedom to other villages. The study sessions of the adult education and literacy classes follow discussing socio-economic and political issues, however, as literacy perspective is not ARP's main objectives, the issues are freely discussed without the necessity to confirm political action. Discussion at the level increases awareness and insights and action may follow after many months.

Issues are explored through the improvisation of skirts and role plays by the animators and group members and the subsequent discussions of personal experience and the social context of the

problem is being shared by actors and audience after each play or performance.

Role plays provide valuable preparation for the members during leadership training for Action Committee members when they plan the tactics to be used in struggles against bureaucrats and landlords. Techniques of confrontation are defined and redefined and a greater understanding of potential resources existing within the community is being explored and tapped. The skits performed by animators and villagers are unscripted. The outlines are discussed and rehearsals held in advance but during the performance the actors improvise their lines. Discussions with the audience may be built into the structure to the drama, pecculating the need for a group discussion at the end of the evening. After the performance the animators walk about the village listening the peoples's reaction and assessing their level of support for the struggle planned in the drama. If the support is there, the action committee meets to plan and to mobilise the people for action.

While forced to live segregated and silenced by the dominate culture a sense of culture inferiority is constantly frustrating them. The drama and songs performed in ARP's cultural programmes are by and large not only for the Harijans, but for the rural poor, such as fisherfolk and Tribals helping them to express their problems and aspirations, developing a positive identity and a class consciousness and join together as a class of exploited labour to bargain and negotiate with other officials - asserting their rights.

Cultural action programmes are held at least once every three months and the performances reflect the level of awareness and organisational skills attained by the villagers. In the initial stage both the oppressed and the oppressors are caricatured and some of the village problems are often exposed. The second stage demonstrates how people can take action together like petitioning

to a government official to take action against a pending issue etc., Oppressive practices are identified and the exploitative methods are exposed in the third stage and the strategies for a really struggle are discussed, planned and done for the sustainability of a movement.

The vivid thread of cultural action programmes ties together the entire community organisation process. The marginalised rural labourers of India and especially the Harijans [untouchable communities] have a distinctive culture out of which they can forge an identity.

In the case of fisherfolk, it is also true. They belong to the Backward castes of Tamilnadu which is deprived of many privileges compared to the upper castes. Yet the fisherfolk have an ancient tradition to cling on to. It is that tradition which is deep seated in their customs, taboos and superstition. It is that tradition that makes them face the sea daily whether it is calm or furious. It is that tradition which forces them to live separately from others, yet live together as "*Fisherfolk*". If we go deeper many more authentic Poems, songs, folk dances etc., can be unearthed. In ancient Tamil literature they are still called as "**Parvatharajakulam**" - the descendants of the Kings of the Mountains.

We shall synthesize between traditional forms and alternative forms and focus on a world view of sea, its resources, its variety, its ecology and above all its sacredity so as to give hope to the fisherfolk ~~of~~ a new cultural transformation based on the rich oral spiritual tradition.