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Alternative Theatre For Women's Development

by

Khalid Ahmad
ALTERNATIVE THEATRE FOR WOMEN’S DEVELOPMENT

(A paper based on the experiences of Tehrik-e-Niswan Theatre Group.....by KHALID AHMAD)
The purpose of this paper is to present an account of the activities of our theatre group, TEHRIK-E-NISWAN (The Women's Movement), over the last ten years. While doing so I will also explain the theoretical basis of our specific approach towards the task of women's upliftment in Pakistan, and give a brief analysis of our experiences during this period delineating our areas of success as well as of difficulties. But, given the unique character of the state and society in Pakistan, it is necessary to first prepare the background for such a discussion by describing the specific social, cultural and political environment within which we work. This becomes necessary because while sharing the usual problems of poverty, illiteracy, absence of democracy etc. with other third world societies, Pakistan has certain unique features of its own, the understanding of which is necessary for an appreciation of the women's theatre movement in Pakistan.

The main factors that need to be pointed out in this connection are the rise of fundamentalism since the late seventies and its consequences for women, the hostility of the state towards the performing arts, and the conservatism of the society in general, with the consequent lack of acceptance of cultural forms such as theatre, film, music etc. In the light of these the term "alternative media" takes on a special significance in our case.

After explaining the background we shall proceed to present briefly the history and aims and objectives of our organisation followed by a description of our work in the theatre. This latter will include both, a description of our plays as well as an account of our efforts to start a grass root theatre movement through workshops etc.

THE HOSTILE ATTITUDE OF THE STATE TOWARDS CULTURE

Eversince its inception in 1947 the state of Pakistan has consistently been anti-culture. There has never been any encouragement or sponsorship of cultural activities such as dance, music, theatre or films by the government. The state has even discouraged the private sector such as business houses etc. from lending support to these activities. As a result of these policies and in the absence of any patronage we are witnessing the death of our classical music, dance and all the various folk traditions. There are no schools for music, drama or film, no institutions for the preservation of folk heritage. All such practices are discouraged and frowned upon by being branded un-Islamic. Therefore, when we set out to do theatre in our country we not only find ourselves hard pressed for funds, auditoria, technical facilities such as lights, sets, make-up etc., but also up against a number of obstacles placed in our path by the government in order to make our task extremely difficult if not
impossible. Thus, one has to go through a long, tortuous and humiliating process of obtaining NOCs, police clearance, excise stamps and censorship of the most ludicrous variety.

All this at one level is not surprising and is perfectly understandable, since a dictatorship, which is what we have been for the most part of our history, cannot be expected to look upon thought provoking art with favour since it leads to questioning of the status-quo. Any activity which can make people think, arouse their critical faculties and lead to their emotional re-awakening is understandably, suspect in the eyes of the state. These conditions we share with most third world countries which have suffered under dictatorial regimes. What is special in our case and makes our society doubly suffocating is that here, political suppression is combined with cultural suppression as well. In most banana republics people would be prosecuted for speaking against the government, but no one is stopping anyone from a little bit of singing and dancing. Here, that too is considered by many influential quarters, a moral offence.

Coupled with this hostility of the state is the attitude of the society itself, a society which is extremely conservative with deep rooted prejudices towards the arts. These prejudices are reinforced by religious bigots who declare the performing arts un-Islamic.

This suppression of all cultural expression has led to extreme social suffocation. Men take recourse to drugs and violence which has been on the increase. Women, however, have been its worse sufferers. They have no outlet. They cannot go out freely. There is no entertainment for them. They spend most of their lives locked up in suffocating houses. There are very few families in Karachi who would allow their daughters to take part in a play. Female dancing is banned on television while male dancing is allowed. Women are not allowed to take part in sports. There are absolutely no avenues for women to express themselves. We once did a play at Karachi University. This was on the 8th. of March, the International Women’s Day. It was organised by some girls studying there. Just when we were about to go on the makeshift stage we started getting messages from some people in the audience saying that if boys and girls appeared together on the stage they would start shooting. The play somehow did take place and the entreaties of a largely female audience prevailed upon these elements into restraining themselves. But that proved to be the first and the last play in the history of Karachi University!

THE RISE OF FUNDAMENTALISM DURING ZIA AND THE BIRTH OF WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

Ever since Zia ul Haq’s military regime came to power in 1977, women have been one of the target groups singled out for attack.
A series of laws were passed which were highly discriminatory against women. The first of these was the new evidence law which made it necessary to produce two male witnesses before it is possible to give the maximum punishment for murder and criminal assault. This means that if a man is murdered in the presence of his wife and daughter, or if a woman is killed when no man is present, the criminal cannot be awarded the maximum punishment.

In all other matters two male witnesses will be required, failing which one male and two females will be considered sufficient. One woman’s witness will be considered sufficient only in matters like delivery, menstruation and virginity. This makes the evidence of two women equivalent to that of one man, and the evidence of one woman equivalent to that of half a man. It is tantamount to saying that women are only half human beings.

The second law pertains to the issue of blood money, an Islamic practice whereby a murder case can be mutually settled in a court by paying the relatives of the victim a certain agreed sum. According to the new law where the victim of murder or assault is a woman, the ‘diyat’ or blood money to be paid will be only half that fixed for a man. This implies that a woman’s life is only half as valuable as that of a man. On the other hand a woman who commits such a crime against a man, will have to pay the penalty in full.

Under the already existing ‘hudood’ ordinance, four male Muslim adult eye witnesses to the crime of rape are required before a rapist can be given the maximum punishment. It is clear that a man is not likely to rape a woman in the presence of four hostile adult males. This law makes it easy for the criminal to get away, and exposes women to violence.

This degradation of women to the status of half a being, or even a non being, was merely the culmination of a series of attacks on women. Prior to this the government issued other proclamations like banning the participation of women athletes in international and mixed sports events, attempted to repeal the 1961 family laws ordinance which gave a modicum of security to women with regard to marital and property rights, announced its intention to eliminate coeducation and to institute separate universities for women with separate subjects and clearly a much reduced budget and consequent lowered standard of education.

The government sounded out its policies through the ultra conservative religious leaders. Thus the Zia years saw the emergence in the mosques and the media, television in particular, of mullas proselytising against women, and proclaiming the wonders of the Iranian model with regard to its position on women.

It was in response to this situation that a number of women’s organisations came into being. Drawing on a membership that cut
across classes, they challenged these policies of the regime through forums, mass meetings, press campaigns, petitions and demonstrations. September 1981 saw the birth of the Women’s Action Forum, a mass based popular front of many different women’s groups, organisations and concerned individuals. The specific issue that saw the birth of WAF was a zina case, wherein a fifteen year old girl was sentenced to flogging in consequence of her having married a man of a lower class background, contrary to her parents’ wishes. This sentence triggered off a response among women, combining as it did issues of class, social morality and individual choice. Following as this case did upon the heels of news about women professors being molested and removed from their positions, women being tortured for their political beliefs and affiliations, restrictions on the professional activities of women, imposition of dress code requirements for public employees, action was felt to be imperative. It was also recognised that help could not be expected from other quarters, either from the Movement for Restoration of Democracy or the Left, since these groups were fighting for their own survival, and had not previously taken a very active part in any national effort to push for women’s rights. Women recognised that this was a fight that they must themselves lead——that the need was to educate each other and fight for their rights, not only in response to the current barbarism inflicted upon them by this regime, but also to overcome inequalities that previously existed.

TEHRIK-E-NISWAN, HISTORY, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

It was in the background of these events that TEHRIK-E-NISWAN was formed in 1980. It had its first conference in Karachi on March 08, the International Women’s Day. This conference was attended by women from all sections of society especially working class women from various trade unions.

Tehrik-e-Niswan on the one hand set up an adult literacy centre for women as well as a centre for self employment where women were provided with sewing machines and knitting machines and given courses in these skills so that they could become financially independent, and on the other it arranged awareness raising programmes such as seminars, conferences, poetry readings and educational programmes.

In December 1981 a play was held for an all women audience in one of the depressed neighbourhoods of Karachi. The response to this play directed our attention towards seriously adopting theatre as a medium for our work. Over the years this became our main emphasis and Tehrik-e-Niswan became mainly a theatre group under whose banner plays that highlighted and underscored the plight of women began to be staged. In the last ten years we have had more than 90 performances of 20 different productions. Tehrik-e-
Niswan, in a sense, became the cultural wing of the women’s movement in Pakistan.

Tehrik-e-Niswan’s emphasis on theatre was because of a number of factors. We felt that the first step in the direction of attainment of women’s rights must be the comprehension and understanding of their problems and bringing about, amongst all sections of the society an awareness of these rights. In this we found theatre the most effective medium for spreading our message far and wide. In a society which is largely illiterate and where access to formal education is extremely restricted, lectures, seminars and papers have limited usefulness. Theatre, on the other hand has a much wider appeal for the general public. Our ten years of work in the theatre has strengthened our belief in this approach.

Tehrik-e-Niswan realised that the women’s movement can only move forward and succeed if it is seen as part of the overall fight against conservatism and obscurantist attitudes. In fact, because women are the worst affected by this conservatism they should be in the forefront of this fight. Since this was a cultural fight it could best be fought through cultural tools, of which theatre is the most powerful one.

The development of women’s theatre could give the socially repressed women of our society a platform for expressing their feelings, hopes and aspirations, fears and apprehensions, joys and pain—the kind of expression that is denied to them in a highly repressed atmosphere. It would bring them together through a common interaction of a very high order. Under artistic license a lot of things can be said which, otherwise, in a conservative society are difficult to express.

There was the need for an alternative to the state controlled media especially radio and television which constantly promote ideas detrimental to women’s progress and freedom. For example, one of the favourite themes of Pakistan Television is to show how selfish working women are and how they neglect their family and children.

We felt that the absence of any kind of cultural outlet was largely responsible for the spread of drugs and violence and the social degradation of our youth. Hence, the need to provide opportunities for creative expression. We also felt that theatre could bring some healthy and awareness-oriented entertainment into the lives of women in particular and the whole society in general.

Theatre forces the audience to look at their own lives from a distance and question anything and everything around them. It brings the performers and the audience in direct contact with each other. In a successful theatrical experience a fusion takes place between the audience and the performers and the audience
has the power to influence the process by its direct presence and instant approval or disapproval of what is going on. Also, inspite of all the censorship laws theatre has a relative freedom as compared to other media such as film, television etc. This is because it has an amazing adaptability and the capacity to continue with extremely meagre resources. Once it takes root in the people it can be organised on a self help basis at a community level, thus providing the people with an alternative platform for self expression and questioning, independently of the state controlled media.

The fight for women’s rights had to be conducted not only at the legal and political level, which, in any case, other organisations were already doing, but also at the level of moral attitudes, emotional responses and values. No change can be meaningful and everlasting unless it takes place at an emotional level as well. And this is best carried out through artistic means.

REPORT OF ACTIVITIES

With these factors in mind Tehrik-e-Niswan set out to do consciousness-raising plays with an emphasis on women’s problems. Here it is necessary to point out that we do not look upon our work in the cultural areas as an alternative to the development work being carried out by other organisations, but wish to complement their work and do the groundwork for them by creating the right mental attitudes.

Our work in the theatre can be divided into two broad categories:

i) Proscenium theatre in middle class areas

ii) Mobile theatre in low-income areas and neighbourhoods

As explained earlier the problems of women and their status cuts across classes and different sections of society. Therefore, the need of the hour is to work at different levels keeping the varied requirements in mind. In a society like ours, even middle class women are forced to stay at home; there are taboos against women working and their education is discouraged. They are denied any kind of independance. Given the conservatism of attitude towards women in these so called educated sections of society, unless problems are addressed at this level as well there can be very little hope of achieving any success within the backward and illiterate sections. Our plays in middle class areas attempt to question these attitudes and expose their hollowness. In doing so we take care not to be crudely propagandistic and try to maintain a considerably high degree of artistic merit. It is only through this professionalism that we are now managing to draw large crowds. We stage these plays in hired halls, courtyards or lawns.
and charge a small fee of Rs.33/- which goes towards meeting the expenses of sets, lights, hall etc. All the actors, directors, writers have so far been working free.

We stage original plays written by us as well as local adaptations of relevant world classics. For instance, in 1988, at the height of General Zia's rule, we staged "Chadar Aur Chardiwari", an Urdu adaptation of Garcia Lorca's, "House of Bernada Alba", which is about women being kept in seclusion and locked up behind the four walls of the house.

In 1985 we staged "Anji" which was about the problems of working women and the issue of marriage.

In 1989 we staged "Tafteesh" which was an adaptation of J.B.Priestley's, "An Inspector Calls", where an unmarried woman is shown to be the victim of sex and class exploitation.

As explained earlier the women's cause can only be advanced as a part of a wider struggle against orthodoxy and narrowmindedness. Therefore from time to time we have also staged plays which while remaining close to our own themes, have addressed wider issues. For instance in 1991 we staged "Jinnay Lahore Naeen Vekhya", which is a play about religious minorities, whose rights are also being seriously threatened due to the rise of fundamentalism. This play advocated the liberal and tolerant version of religion and the right of religious minorities to exist as equal citizens.

In the same vein in 1992 we staged a play depicting the violence that has gripped Karachi since the last 6-7 years.

Over the years our audience have grown considerably and now we have large crowds coming to see our plays. We have gained a high reputation both for the social relevance as well as the artistic merit of our work. Our plays are much written about generating discussion and debate.

The second kind of work we do is in the low-income areas, mainly in and around Karachi, and occasionally in rural areas. Here the audience is largely drawn either from the industrial workers or people doing small jobs in various service sectors. This is a largely illiterate audience. The performances are done free of cost. The plays are of shorter duration and mainly draw their material from the problems faced by people in these areas. The productions are simple and are designed in such a manner as to not require elaborate sets or lighting or costume. Using a bare minimum of props these plays can be performed anywhere at a short notice. We work as a mobile unit which goes and performs in various places at the invitation of NGOs and other organisations working there. We try to work closely with these NGOs and often develop the material of the play in collaboration with them. The plays are usually followed by discussions with members of the audience.
As an example, one of the organisations we work with runs a mobile dispensary in rural areas. Another organisation works amongst women factory workers providing them legal and medical aid.

In order to introduce theatre as a tool for community work and promoting its use for development purposes, we have, of late, also held some workshops which were largely attended by community workers, both from the rural as well as urban areas. Here the basic tools of theatre such as movement, speech, improvisation, communication etc. are introduced. The main purpose of these workshops is to show the community workers how they could themselves develop plays drawn from their own lives and of the communities they are working with.

The main emphasis in these workshops is on the kind of theatre which is free from the need for an auditorium, stage lights, costumes etc. and where plays can be done with the barest minimum of resources. Even the need for a formal scriptwriter is eliminated because the plays are evolved collectively through a series of improvisations in which every actor or actress contributes freely.

We lay great stress on the entertainment aspect of these plays since wherever we go we constantly find ourselves in competition with TV and videos. Attracting the audience towards purposeful cultural activity therefore remains a challenge which can only be met successfully by making the plays highly interesting and entertaining.

The other point that we emphasise again and again is that the plays should not be propagandistic carrying messages in black and white. The effort should be to allow different views to come out and to let a clash of ideas take place, since drama is born out of conflict and not out of agreement. The plays instead of being didactic should be such that questions are raised in the minds of the audience and they should be induced to think about their own respective situations.

SHORTCOMINGS AND LIMITATIONS

Though we have had successes in both the areas and the results have been very encouraging, we feel that this kind of work needs to be carried out at a much larger scale, with many groups like ours working in various areas all over the country. In expanding our work the greatest problem we face is of resources. As pointed out earlier, all the actors, writers, directors working with us so far have done this work voluntarily and free of charge. Obviously they have to do other jobs for their upkeep and only return to this activity in their spare time. This imposes serious
limitations on the frequency, quality and the expanse of our activities. To really take our work to a higher level we need to have a team of actors, writers, directors working at a more or less full time basis and being paid for it.

Unfortunately, consciousness-raising work through culture is not yet seen, either by the government or private funding agencies, as something that needs to be somewhere on the priority list. The Pakistan government's position on this matter we have already explained, but even the other donor agencies seem to consider cultural work too controversial in the case of Pakistan and shy away from supporting it. Culture is considered a luxury and not a need. Development work is seen only as work in the areas of food, health, family planning, education etc. Even education is understood as merely imparting literacy and not seen in a larger context. While in no way denying the immediacy and the importance of work in these areas, and in no way suggesting that cultural activities can be a substitute for this work, we feel that a lot more attention needs to be given to cultural work than is being given now. For only through meaningful cultural work can a people be truly transformed, educated, made aware and self reliant; and only then can they be in a state of readiness to receive the benefits of other development work.