

Theatre All The Way: Mulgi Jhali Ho (A Girl Is Born) and Street Theatre

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Abstract

Street theatre is defined literally as the theatre performed on the streets. Although theatre presented at open places was not an unfamiliar phenomenon in India, street theatre with pronounced political overtones, made its way only in the nineteen twenties due to British colonialism. The street theatre movement in India reverted to the folk traditions, as a vehicle for political protest.

Besides the curriculum, the extra curricular activities like theatre, sports, literature play a significant role at developing a critical value perspective among the individuals. Hence it is interesting to see the values imparted through theatre.

This paper attempts to map the value education through street theatre with special reference to the play Mulgi Zhali Ho addressing women's issues. Street theatre and folk theatre have performed their role as social theatre independently as well as in the Dalit theatre movement. It is interesting to view the impact of theatre in creating awareness and making the audience think about several issues.

Mulgi Zhali Ho (A Girl is Born,) written by Jyoti Mhapsekar of Stree Mukti Sangathana, Mumbai, Ho was performed in 1983 bringing in a major breakthrough. The play, combined elements from street theatre and Folk theatre to evolve an altogether different, elastic form. The free play stressed the secondary status of women on economics, social, political and cultural fronts. This status is not inborn but is created the society. To acquire equality the struggle will have to be fought on the individual as well as collective level, against the patriarchal values and also against the caste system, class and so on.

The play had a phenomenal success with its performances in Hindi and English besides Marathi and later on in Gujarati, Kannada and Telgu. Thus the message of the play could reach crossing the barriers of class and caste, religion and sex, city, and village.

KEYWORDS: Street theatre, women, value education, Mulgi Jhali ho, women, stree mukti sanghatana

Introduction:

Street theatre is defined literally as the theatre performed on the streets. As a form of communication, street theatre is deeply rooted in Indian tradition. Although theatre presented at open places was not an unfamiliar phenomenon in India, street theatre with distinct political overtones, made its way only in the nineteen twenties due to British colonialism. It has been used to propagate critical issues, social and political messages creating awareness amongst the masses. Street theatre breaks formal barriers and appeals to the people directly. Street theatre and folk theatre have performed their role as social theatre independently as well as in the Dalit theatre movement. It is interesting to view the impact of theatre in creating awareness and making the audience think about several

issues. There is often a debate raised about whether plays can bring about a change. In recent years street theatre has become popular and has gained an image of a theatre of moral nature coupled with entertainment. In a country with low literacy and high population, theatre especially street theatre provided a low cost and an immediate means of reaching the illiterate. In 1970s, 1980s and 1990s NGOs, social activists, theatre personalities and grass-root groups all over the country increasingly used street theatre as a means of social change. It reflects the historical shift in the notion of theatrical development. The earlier agendas of people's struggle and nation-building are now joined by a focus on human and individual rights. Hence the theatre for development now covers subjects as diverse as sexual health, female infanticide and foeticide, political, gender and Dalit (under privileged class in India) concerns. Street theatres are dedicating themselves towards expressing the realities of oppression and resistance that are a part of day-to-day life. Better known as 'nukad natak' today, is perhaps the best way to connect with the common man and the youth. After watching the performance, the spectators often raise questions and discuss the issues. This questioning also is a kind of an impact.

While one considers value education through theatre, it is being acknowledged that besides the curriculum, the extra curricular activities like theatre, sports, literature play a significant role at developing a critical value perspective among the individuals. Hence it is interesting to see the values imparted through theatre.

Street theatre has been used to encourage literacy amongst villagers, to highlight ideas about hygiene and health, caste conflicts and so on. Themes related to women play a major role in street plays. This paper attempts to comment on the nature of the street theatre and the value education through street theatre with special reference to the play *Mulgi Zhali Ho* addressing women's issues.

Street Theatre:

Street theatre offers a statement about socio-political problems and often motivates the viewers to take action on a particular issue. Seen from the history of its genre, it needs a mass political consciousness. Street theatre is defined literally as the theatre performed on the streets. Of course the street need not be the venue each time, it could be a temple yard, a square outside any building or any such place. It is an effective medium of communication doing away with the use of elaborate costumes, sets and lights because it is portable, economical and flexible. There is a minimum use of dialogue to avoid disturbance of street and traffic sounds. There is an emphasis on dramatic, stylized movements making it more effective than words.

In street theatre, the audience has no intention to watch the play and also not the time. These limitations determine the parameters of the plays which are of short duration. Songs based on popular catchy tunes are included to enhance the appeal. The play needs to be as inexpensive and mobile as possible since no stage props are used.

Street Theatre and the Proscenium Arch Theatre:

Most of the Indian and so also Marathi Plays since 1870-80 were performed imitating the proscenium arch style. The realism followed in the later plays conformed to it more rigidly. This arrangement implies a divide between the audience and the actors, thereby destroying the collective theatre experience and making it an individual experience. The primary difference between street theatre and this traditional theatre is that of the venue. The street theatre is taken to the audiences, whereas the audience comes to the theatre in the traditional theatre. Also, the actions of the proscenium theatre take place on the stage which is on a

higher level than the audience and is lighted whereas the audience sits in the dark. In the street theatre both the audience and the actors are close, both are in the light and the acting space is surrounded by the audience. A marked difference between the street theatre and the proscenium or the established theatre is in terms of the script, which is fixed in the latter whereas it is evolved in case of the former. The audience response and reactions often determine the dialogue delivery. Presence of a single director is characteristic of proscenium theatre; Street theatre is often evolved through the participation of all members. The movements of the actors of the established theatre are pre-determined. In case of street theatre these movements can often be extempore, also depending on the available space.

The attitude of the audience vastly differs in case of street theatre and that in established theatre. The audience buys tickets and sits through the play in the established theatre, while in street theatre the spectators join any time they wish and leave in the same manner. Hence many a time, efforts are made to attract the passers by at the beginning of a street play. This can be achieved by singing a song, clapping and making an announcement. It is a challenge to the actors to sustain the attention of the audience to the play in spite of other distractions. There is no stage property like the conventional plays, but some easily manageable things and instruments can be carried along with the group. Songs are often used to carry forward the theme.

Street theatre has not arisen as a rebellion against the proscenium theatre; in no way is the street theatre a substitute for the proscenium theatre as well. Proscenium theatre has its own strong points and also possibilities of change in it as demonstrated by Brecht, Grotowski and other experimental theatre personae.

Street theatre made its presence felt mainly in the nineteen twenties. After the first World War, street plays were performed in the major cities in Europe. One could trace the occurrences of the street theatre all over the world. These include: the agit-prop theatre of Russia and later on protests by French students in the seventies, the groups like Red Lander, Theatre Mobile, Inter Play performing in Britain during seventies; again, protests by student community in 1989 in China, Black Theatre and the present Guerilla Theatre in the U.S.A., the pantomime form used against the Vietnamese movement and so on.

The stalwarts like Peter Brook formulated the concept of Poor Theatre, that is, theatre without any techniques, where the prominent part is actors. Grotowski has taken off from this concept to develop it further. This kind of theatre always existed in India since time unknown.

Street Theatre in India:

Street theatre in India is recognized primarily as a means of resistance, a form of protest. The informative, educative and mobilizing quality of the content of street performances has dominated both the practice and the conception of street theatre. In India, ironically it was British Colonialism that gave Indians the experience of the proscenium stage and also their first cohesive experience of street theatre. The street theatre movement in India reverted to the folk traditions, as a vehicle for political protest.

The history of street theatre in India is broken, coinciding with periods of political upheaval. Contemporary street theatre began in the turbulent 1970s. Calcutta saw hundreds of street performances by radical groups. In terms of form, the work done by Badal Sircar has had a great influence. After giving up mainstream theatre, Sircar experimented with open-air theatre and foregrounded the discontent of the rootless urban middle class in an intensely physical style. Though Sircar does not see himself as being a part of the street theatre

movement, many street theatre groups have benefited from the workshops he has held all over the country. Sircar believed in the Human Body as most important in the art of theatre. Sircar had a faith in the common people and that they can bring about a change in society. Sircar's 'Procession' is about the search for a real home-a new society based on equality.

Habib Tanvir and Utpal Dutt used street theatre as a political catalyst in 40s, 50s which was revived in 70s.

In north India, street theatre was pioneered by Jana Natya Manch (Janam, formed 1973, and led till his murder in 1989 by Safdar Hashmi)¹ and in south India by Samudaya (formed 1975, with many units all over Karnataka). Janam has bagged about 7,000 performances of 58 street plays till October 2002, and many of these have been extensively translated/adapted, including in Pakistan and Bangladesh. *Aurat* (Woman, 1979), *Halla Bol* (Attack!, 1988), and *Aartanaad* (on child sexual abuse, 1996) are fine examples of a popular political theatre that combines a directness of address with aesthetic vigour. Theatre Union (founded in Delhi in 1983 and counting in its members Anuradha Kapur, Maya Rao, Rati Bartholomew and others) also did some excellent street theatre.

There is a striking similarity between street theatre and folk theatre. There is an expression of the collective consciousness, are instructive and may involve social criticism. However, while folk art is essentially a representative of a particular culture and social system, the street theatre cross examines the very psyche born out of this social system. Also folk arts invite very little conscious participation from the masses as is done in street theatre.

IPTA –Indian Peoples Theatre Association has performed a significant role in the history of Street theatre in India. After the Independence the IPTA movement faded. Annabhau Sathe heading the IPTA chapter in Maharashtra contributed immensely to the social cause by using the tamasha and powada form.

Street theatre has played a major role in election campaigns all over India. Samudaya's role in spreading the anti-congress wave in the Chickmangalur elections (1977) revealed the powers of street theatre. The rise of street theatre plays on particular themes has been due to the events of the recent years. Assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, Bhopal Gas Tragedy in 1984, Deorala Sati Case in 1987 of forcing a young Roop Kanwar into the funeral pyre have given rise to many plays on issues like dowry, women's education and equal status for women.

In Maharashtra, Jyotiba Phule highlighted social evils during the British rule through his *Satyashodhaki Jalse*. Anna Bhau Sathe, Amar Sheikh, Gawankar performed several plays along with the art wing of *Rashtra Seva Dal*.

The Street theatre groups in Maharashtra in the beginning include *Jaagar*, *Ladhau Lokakala Aghadi*, *Aavhan Natyamancha*, *Navanirman Sanskritik Mancha*, *Samagra Sadak Natak Chalwal* from Mumbai, *Madhyam* from Pune, *Young Debaters* from Aurangabad, *Panther Theatre* from Vidarbha. The *Andhashradhha Nirmulan Samiti* presented plays like *Vidnyan Jagar* against the superstitions, *S.F.I.* presented plays like *Manus* at Sangli, *Stri Mukti Sanghatna* 's *Mulgi Jhali Ho* had a series of performances. In the later period, the groups emerged were *Mumbai Lokadhikar Chalwal*, *Navanirmiti Mandal*, *Disha* from Mumbai and *Pratyay* and *Abhivyakti* from Kolhapur, *Prayog*, *Lokavhan* from Akola. During the Emergency of 1975 the plays performed included *Bigi Bigi Mar Valha* by *Samagra Sadak Natak Chalwal*, *Thok Tanashahila* by *Jaagar*, *Aavhan Natyamanch*'s production on the background of Telangan showed the effects and dangers of Emergency.

The mill workers' strike in Mumbai in 1982 was one more event making a deep influence on the overall workers' movement. During this period, Lokadhikar Chalwal Kalapathak presented plays at street corners, at the Gates of the mills pulling crowds. There have been instances of a crowd of over thousand people gathering to see the performances followed by discussions. The police force tired of the duty at the entrance of the mills would join the audience to watch the performances.

Women and street theatre:

Feminist groups, both of the left and the non-left variety, have turned to street theatre since the early 1980s, and have done some excellent plays. The most notable among these are Om Swaha (1979), originally done for Stree Sangharsh and then taken up by Theatre Union was a play dealing with the dowry demand, and Mulgi Zhali Ho (A Girl is Born, 1983) was a play dealing with all those problems in a woman's life, written by Jyoti Mhapsekar of Stree Mukti Sangathana, Mumbai. Sabla Sangha, an all women's street theatre group performed on Communalism in October 1990, in the streets of Delhi in spite of threats from certain groups.

The Play Mulgi Jhali Ho:

Mulgi Zhali Ho was performed in 1983 bringing in a major breakthrough. The play, written by Jyoti Mhapsekar, combined elements from street theatre, Proscenium theatre and Folk theatre to evolve an altogether different, elastic form. However since the play was taken to the masses and performed without props etc, it can be considered mainly as a street play. The actors were the volunteers of Stri Mukti Sanghatana who belonged to different professions. The play had a phenomenal success with its performances in Hindi and English besides Marathi and later on in Gujarati, Kannada and Telgu. Thus the message of the play could reach crossing the barriers of class and caste, religion and sex, city, and village. The play was performed in cities, villages and also abroad. Thus the play carried out the function of reaching out to the masses and 'instructing' them through 'entertaining'.

The free play was written against the background of the manifesto of Stri Mukti Sanghatana announced in 1978. It stressed the secondary status of women on economics, social, political and cultural fronts. This status is not inborn but is created by the society. To acquire equality the struggle will have to be fought on the individual as well as collective level, against the patriarchal values and also against the caste system, class and so on.

The volunteers of Stri Mukti Sanghatana included the young working women. While speaking about the Women's movement in the Indian context, it is important to understand the history of women's liberation movement --the meaning of women's oppression, the institutions responsible for it, the attempts to challenge it, the feminist movement in the West, its gains and limitations etc.

Maharashtra has a rich tradition of the social reformists. Mulgi Jhali Ho presents in a lucid way thoughts about women's liberation of Phule, Karve, Gandhi, Ambedkar and Pandita Ramabai, thus making the concept of Women's Liberation local and hence more acceptable.

The rhythmic simple songs, the form of the play which was a result of amalgamation of different elements and the dedication of volunteers performing the play resulted in an excellent performance which could deliver the message of gender equality in a simple way. When Mulgi Zhali Ho was staged, there was a tension between traditional middle class and the new middle class. However, the difference was minimal in the position of women in these two sections. Also the oral tradition carried forward by women has been used in a very

effective manner in the play. Especially the traditional Maharashtrian folk-songs are used here as was done by Shahir Amar Shaikh, Annabhau Sathe and so on in the earlier times.

The play, with its translations in many languages and the Stri Mukti Sanghatana made an impact in different States in India. People responded with their personal problems after the performances hence the Sanghatana decided to start Grievance Cells. The play reached International level with its performances at International conferences in Australia and Beijing.

Mulgi Zhali Ho was certainly not created as a perfect theatrical product. It was written with a mission to create awareness among women. The play vividly unfolds the canvas of a woman's life-the discrimination she has to face ever since the birth which continues during her education, her social life, while getting married and thereafter. Thereby it makes the spectators introspect the incidences from his/her personal lives. During each performance, besides delivering the thought, the play also gave inspiration to several men and women to work with the organization

The strength of the play is its ability to create a visual effect while audience is listening to its dialogues and songs. Though most actors are women they enact male roles and also keep on shifting the roles. The prose dialogues smoothly transfer into songs and dance movements.

A few members of the Stri Mukti Sanghatana raise questions about the association of the play with the organization and how long should both be connected. However the play has not yet reached the tribal and remote rural areas. Even few pockets in cities have remained neglected. Secondly, till one sees a significant transformation in the conditions of women, the play has to be used as an effective weapon by the Sanghatana. As Sharada Sathe of Stri Muki Sanghatna stated:

The real success of the play would be when it would become outdated. It is not art for art's sake; it is a weapon to achieve the target. (Sathe, P. 3)²

There are significant reactions from the audience after watching the play about women education, dowry system etc. from both – the men and the women. When performed before young audience, the reactions are more spontaneous and the effect is more lasting. Hence it can be considered as one step towards achieving the goal of equality among men and women and creating gender awareness.

Conclusion:

Many of the theatre personalities of proscenium stage rated this theatre secondary. The objections on street theatre concluded that it is a propagandist theatre, too simplified, an art form without any aesthetic values and so on. To some extent the groups which performed street theatre were responsible for it. These groups were invariably related to the political parties and looked at theatre as a weapon in the struggle by those parties. The form of the street theatre was and had to be essentially different from that of the proscenium arch theatre. However the drawbacks in the development of street theatre can be located in lack of theorizing it as an independent form.

Also, the declaration of street theatre as a weapon for the party propaganda by the Political Parties led to a didactic, propagandistic tone of street theatre forgetting the basic purpose of entertainment. This led to delimiting the themes as well as the audience. One more misunderstanding about street theatre is that it is a simplistic form which does not require creativity, aesthetic sense, skills of acting, direction etc. It is no doubt a theatre without requirements of stage property, sound etc. but to present a powerful play the artists need to

take efforts about voice projection, movements, dialogues and so on. The physical capacity of the artists is tested at its highest.

The present play in discussion, *A Girl Is Born*, however, succeeds in overcoming the didactic tone and appeals to the audience due to the elastic form and the issues addressed. It only illustrates that Street theater can be accepted as an effective medium of social awakening, social and political revolt, it is needed today like never before. Other media though progressing are mainly in technological aspects, street theatre can be the one of the few effective media to appeal to the emotions. More the sophistication of technology, more the expenses of production and more the control of the capitalists. Hence street theatre can be effective when it would remain free from all these clutches.

With the changing social conditions, one needs to reconsider the form of the street theatre, its limitations and its strength. Only then would we see an evolved form of street theatre. In democracy, one may not be able to solve the problems on the streets. But at least they can be presented on the streets setting the audience to think and in turn make them adopt the value system proposed. This should be the aim of the street theatre.

Notes and References:

1. The year 1989 was a high-point for street theatre, when, after Hashmi's murder, 30,000 performances marked his birthday, 12 April. This day is observed all over the country as National Street Theatre Day.
2. Sharada Sathe in an interview

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4. R.Ramanathan, "Street Theatre Falling By the Wayside", Indian Express, 09/04/1995.

5 .A.K.Hangal –comments , Indian express, April 1996.

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