

## **Taking Theatre to the People - the Street Theatre Movement**

Over the last three decades, there has been a growing new movement in political art, the street theatre movement. All the way from Philippines to Brazil, South Korea to India, a new breed of artists have been involved in experiments that have been resulting in a new form of theatre. This has been referred to as People's theatre, Popular theatre for social change, and theatre of Liberation. Each of these terms draw on various associations to older or different activities, but here we will use the term that is most common in India - Street Theatre.

As the name implies, street theatre is performed in informal locales like the street corner, the village square, and in front of factories. Through this very choice of location, the traditional distinction between the performers and the audience is blurred to some extent. Street theatre is different not only in the arena of performance but also the subject matters dealt with in the plays. These, primarily, are political in nature and an aid to activism and mobilization. Nevertheless, commitment to artistic integrity is still of the highest concern.

Street theatre in India draws on several traditions. For its location, it follows the traditional street plays which are still popular in large parts of the country. For its content it draws on the radical theatre movement from earlier in the century as exemplified by the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association). And, for its methodology, it draws on the theatre of liberation movement that started in South America with the work of people like Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. Two key events that were instrumental in bringing together artists from different countries who were involved in developing the concept of theatre for social change were the Third World Theatre Conferences organized by UNESCO in Manila, Philippines (1971) and in Shiraz, Iran (1973).

The practice of theatre in India is very ancient. Even as early as the Sangam period (estimated by some to be between 200 BC - 100 AD), Tamil was divided into Iyal (literature), Isai (music) and Natakam (theatre). Similarly the plays of Kalidasa in Sanskrit are well known. Modern theatre in India can be traced back to the colonial period when the British administrators started bringing in actors from England to perform English plays in India. Starting around the middle of the nineteenth century, indigenous theatre companies started producing their own plays in cities like Calcutta and Bombay. Subsequently, these became vehicles for propagating the theme of national independence as well as various social reforms.

During the early 1940's, a number of artists, many of whom were associated with the Communist Party, started the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). IPTA was strongly influenced by the use of theatre in Russia during the first few decades of this century as a tool of agitation and propaganda (agit-prop). Several prominent theatre personalities and writers like Bhisam Sahni, M.S. Sathyu and Kaifi Azmi have been active in the IPTA.. One of the early actions by this group was a campaign, in 1943, to collect money for victims of the famine in Bihar. For this, they created a mobile performing arts festival and toured around the country, thus taking theatre to the people. IPTA continued

as a major force in Indian theatre until 1964 when it weakened with the split in the Indian communist movement. The current street theatre movement has borrowed several ideas from IPTA - for example, using traditional theatre forms but injecting them with political content, or the traveling theatre festival.

There were two periods that were crucial to the growth of the street theatre movement : the period around the Naxalite rebellion in the late 1960's and the period around the imposition of the emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1975. During the rebellion, several artists started performing in support of the Naxalites and the large-scale peasant uprisings in large parts of the county that ensued. During the emergency, once again, many progressive and radical artists took refuge in the villages of India to escape from the severe censorship that reigned in the cities. The movement was particularly strong in Southern India.

By the 1980's the movement had changed quite a bit. The range of subjects addressed by this movement had become much wider. For example, at the recent People's Theatre Festival in Madras (Chennai) earlier this year, themes ranged from drought and starvation, to the exploitation of farmers and child abuse. Apart from the choice of topics, street theatre had matured into a full-fledged alternative cultural form with its own aesthetic criteria. The ability of this art form to create very sophisticated images with the simple means at its command came out of various experiments.

A striking example of this type of experimentation can be found in 'Taangiya Chaap', performed by Natya Chetana, a street theatre group from Orissa. They tour all over the state by bicycle performing plays based on stories collected from common people. In the play, two men carrying a politician on a hammock turn it into a helicopter descent by the simple means of rotating a staff overhead to the accompaniment of whirring drums.

Besides professional theatre performers, the potential of street theatre as an agit-prop tool has also been exploited by various activists at an amateur level. In Kerala, the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), has been using street theatre in their jathas (cultural and educational tours) to help in spreading science among the masses. Similarly, Sampoorana Kranti Vidyalaya, a Gandhian institute has been using street theatre techniques while on cycle yatras around villages in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Kerala in order to increase awareness of the harmful effects of nuclear energy and

weapons production. In some cases, even local organizations have requested professional groups to perform plays. A recent example is from Rajasthan, where Alarippu, a theatre group from New Delhi, gave several performances in support of the ongoing movement, organized by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghathan, for the people's right to information.

Mainstream proscenium theatre artists have largely ignored or criticized this movement. As a prominent artist said, "Street theatre is incapable of leaving either a lasting impact or of profoundly disturbing its audience because, unlike proscenium theatre it cannot deal with the fundamental questions of life like death and love". The idea seems to be that somehow the very presence of a stage leads to a more profound analysis, an idea that is

contrary to history. Classical Greek drama used to be performed surrounded by thousands of people on three sides of the acting area and much of traditional Indian theatre is still performed in open village or town squares.

Safdar Hashmi, one of the main forces behind the growth of street theatre in India, (see accompanying article) argues that this is an argument laid out by artists who are shackled to the past and therefore cannot accept the historical inevitability of mutation and transformation in the arts. "The way proscenium theatre has developed, it has become a place where one concentrates on the finer and subtler aspects of life, a place for meditation, reflection and introspection...the bourgeois artist exploits all this for rising above the collective, above the community to appreciate 'art' at the individual level. He has made it into a platform from where to engage the undivided attention of a number of 'individuals'. This concept of interaction between isolated individuals and a work of art is in itself a bourgeois need and an offspring of a system founded on the philosophy of individual enterprise.....It is far from our intention, however, to even remotely suggest that the 'historically more pressing need to replace proscenium theatre' has at long last arisen and has created in its place the contemporary street theatre. Not at all. What we are saying, in fact, is that the present street theatre is one of the manifestations of protest against the bourgeois concept of theatre, against the bourgeois appropriation of proscenium theatre."

Despite the indifference of the traditional theatre performers, or the active opposition of the forces interested in maintaining the status quo, the movement has grown a great deal in the last few decades. It is now well established as a forum for progressive, political ideas, creating a vibrant alternative culture, one that genuinely belongs to the people and aids them in their struggle for social and economic justice.