

## **Resistance and Street Theatre: Democratizing the Space and Spatializing the Democracy**

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India gained political independence in 1947 and became a democratic state and society in 1950. Freedom struggle, scattered in the earlier phases and sectorally organized in latter phases, was a movement of resistance in many forms against the British rule. The two movements in Indian history demonstrated two apparently different transitions. As India was moving from a colony to an independent state, the society too was made to move towards democracy. In order to protect the freedom, won after a long period of resistance, the society too needed to understand the meaning of freedom and other values associated with it. It wasn't an easy task. With the realization of new situation the society was divided largely in new classes— one that was resisting the previous scheme and status of inferiority and domination in favour of a new regime of equality, freedom, and justice supported by law. The second section was resisting the move and mood de-privileging them of their special status, power, and unaccountability. The third section was divided between the loyalty to the previous scheme and desire for a new system. However they were skeptical about the both. The simultaneous presence of such resistances however does not sum up the whole situation in India. At micro level there were many resistance movements, demanding new rights, share in social and political goods and giving shape to the new society. They were movements against westernization of Indian society, movements towards homogenization of India as one undivided entity, sanskritisation of lower castes and classes, movements against concentration of political powers, etc. the separate identity movements were active for a long time. Various social reform movements during the nineteenth and twentieth century were necessarily the resistance movements against some or the other issues— against regressive social customs and traditions, for pro-western model of rational society, etc. Even the religious movements were directed against the western religious practices and protection and strengthening of the native religious and cultural ethos against the onslaught.

In spite of the crisscross of resistance against each other and against the western government and the cultural and political influences, these resistance movements clearly spelled out certain features which later on significantly became reference points to examine the changes in the nature of resistance movements in the later part of the twentieth and earlier part of twenty-first century.

As the resistance movements of later nineteenth and early twentieth century were rooted in a different stage of society, their leaders applied philosophies and methods which were carefully designed in view of very orthodox nature of society and limited support from the foreign rule. These movements were largely communitarian, not so professionally organized (in today's terms). They were based around certain ideals. They were more open. The participants were largely rural and urban masses who never organized themselves in such a manner. The task based bargaining was mostly absent in those movements. In comparison to such movements the recent resistance movements show sharp developments in the means of organization, support bases, importance of funding, speedy communication, highly trained groups, and deliverability. In order to understand the difference between the natures of organization and functioning of the resistance groups we need to understand the change in the state and the society over the years. The growing discord between the state and non state actors and the civil society due to changes in policies, priorities, and practices of the both explains the complex atmosphere in which all of them operate. There is an enormous increase in the governance issues and anomalies at society, state, and globe level. There is a rapid increase in the amount of injustices and anomalies in the functioning of the governing agencies, state and non-state actors who jeopardize the rights of the civil society across the globe. With the modern shift in academic and political understanding worldwide that social service "sector" has opened new opportunities for career and profession the whole dimension of approaching the fights for civil rights has changed dramatically. Due to globalization and liberalism the state and non-state actors jeopardizing and encroaching the interests of civil society has become frequent. It naturally opened many fronts for the civil rights groups. It however increased several dilemmas and challenges for civil rights groups. Amrita

Basu in her essay “Grass Roots Movements and the State Reflections on Radical Change in India” explores-

[...] origins and dilemmas of grass roots political movements in India. It suggests that the structural context for the emergence of such movements has been capitalist development, which has entailed brutal dislocation. India's durable democratic tradition has created the political space in which social movements have flourished. (647)

State and its agencies too adopted covert and overt means to contain the resistance in its functioning. It too joined the fray by donning the role of protecting its citizens thereby assuming the role of a big brother civil rights protector. By conceding a small token amount of acts, laws, and measures to its citizens it attempted to give the impression to its subject that it too stands for the rights of its citizens and it is most effective as it can provide direct benefits to them. This aggravated the situation for the civil rights groups as their role was appropriated by the state. It put the state in competition against the already competing resistance groups. Once this simple fight for justice became political it began to be evaluated against its performance and deliverability. It explains the trinity to be followed soon— resistance, professionalism, and success. With the intrusion of values such as competition, success, sustainability, influence, and power the resistance groups too became any other entity vying for its place in the competitive society. With its urgency and sustainability of survival became the sole driver of the protest in many cases. In that case it affected the selection of matters and concerns for protest; means, sites, and agents of protest; duration of protest, etc. Not only that but the “theories of collective action have undergone a number of paradigm shifts, from “mass behavior” to “resource mobilization,” “political process,” and “new social movements” indicates new shifts (Edelman 285). This was a great shift from a non-normative, non-professional, and non-manipulative ambit of social justice movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to the possibly normative, secretive, manipulative offshoot of social justice movements of later twentieth and early twenty-first century. The core value of resistance to injustice and the inalienable right to resist got adulterated to some extent in the growing competition. However one needs to take into account the change

in “basic parameters,” as Dalip Singh mentions in his essay, to study these movements. He mentions these parameters as:

- (i) the motivational factors germinating into protest movements
- (ii) objectives of the movement
- (iii) ideology of the movement
- (iv) leadership style
- (v) modus operandi or techniques of protest
- (vi) support base and material help and other linkages. (457)

The change and transformation in these parameters would help us understand the change in the nature and functioning of the resistance movements.

### Art and/as Resistance

“Poetry is not luxury” for African American women because this act of speaking, of naming one’s own reality, has been an act of self-assertion as important as protests, lawsuits, and marches for redefining how African American women live in American society - Audre Lorde, an African American writer. (qtd in Leonard 169)

All creative art, such as literature or performative art as theatre, is an alternative way of engaging the world; a way that defamiliarises the known, the prosaic, and very obvious. However, it does not mean that art and/or literature is purely a medium to resist what its practitioners do not approve in the world. But it necessarily imagines or makes us imagine the possibility of the multiple alternatives and desirably optional ways to look at the world. It may not be wise to see literature in purely resistive terms but it is possible to see it as a desire to achieve something illusive or imaginative but higher, nobler, and ideal. However, nobody can ignore or deny the continuous debates about the so called neutrality of literature. Temporarily I would concentrate on how practice of literature has proved useful in creating models of criticism of the ills of the society; demonstrating the possibility of recovery of the lost; sustaining the core values of humanity by separating the blurring influences which mar the clear understanding of different realities of our time.

I would talk about the street theatre practice to educate the weak and largely unorganized people about their rights, to organize them in order to help them articulate their resistance against the injustices caused by the highly organized, resourceful, and professional organizations like factory managements or government institutions. The history of its success, its NGOization, and its easy-to-mobilize advantage maintains street theatre a favourite mode of resistance movements against other non-literary techno-professional outfits with their segregated outreach. Here I am planning to consider a street play *Thirst* (2005) written by Telugu Feminist playwright Vinodini. I would analyze the way the playwright explains the issue, the approach to the issue, the argumentative and resistive modes it wants to develop among the aggrieved, and the feasible performativity involved in it to forward the argument that street theatre can engage the stakeholders in a substantially meaningful dialogue to reach practical and acceptable solutions.

Vinodini's play *Thirst*:

Vinodini's play dramatizes the struggle of rural dalits against the socio-political subjugation in caste-ridden rural society in India; advocates restoration of human dignity; resists the dehumanising living conditions of disadvantaged groups; and resists an unjust unequal share in natural resources. It selects an everyday event of a village in South India, which represents any Indian village, to show how the institutions work in favour of the powerful, how the under-privileged fail to understand the rule of law and fall prey to customary law. Although a village in independent India, which should be ruled by a democratically elected *panchayat*, it is always fraught with the parallel community-based informal power structures with customary basis of governance and allegiance. Inadequate and halfhearted attempts from the above failed these institutions in strengthening their foundations in law rather than caste, class, hierarchy. The rural population is still accountable largely to customary institutions which essentially favour the hierarchically powerful. The three pillared system of executive, legislative, and judiciary, balanced on the basis of separation of these institutions and system of checks of balances is completely alien to the traditional system of *panchayats* which works on the basis of concentration of power. While the *panchayat* governing models were always praised because of their advantages and utility in terms of decentralization, their evils were never considered an

object of serious criticism. With 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment acts (passed in 1992) technical, functional, and organizational aspects of local governing bodies were detailed elaborately. However hardly it could be claimed that these councils functioned independent of the traditional manipulative and discriminatory motive. For years the superior classes governed the rural societies with the help of hierarchy-ridden powerful structures of governance. In the absence of access to knowledge and wealth the lower caste people were always restricted at the periphery of the society. It obviously alienated them from the structures of power. It led to the gross negligence of their inherent rights for seeking justice and fair share in power structures. This denial of access was strengthened further by creating and perpetuating the cultural and ideological arguments in favour of maintenance of class and structure. *Thirst* explains the simple grammar of how the conventional power structures fail to meet the aspirations of new emerging classes, their resistance to archaic models of governance, and failure of rusting elites to change. The whole process of dominance, resistance, and gaining the rights by resorting to the rational-humanistic democratic methods is quite convincing.

Superficially it seems that the play is about the rural dalits' struggle to get access to water resources, like wells and tanks, controlled by the upper-caste people in that village. However at deeper level it is a lower-caste struggle for equality. The play begins with an incident in the village when Souramma, a dalit woman, touches the rope at the well to fetch water. According to the tradition in the village the well is meant for the upper-caste people. In the subsequent quarrel between her and the upper-caste women she is severely beaten, she also scolds them in return. Upper-caste people take this incident as a challenge to their authority and foresee that this incident may set precedent in eroding their unquestionable dominance. In order to subdue the lower-castes Pedda Reddy imposes heavy fine on her and threatens her to be paraded naked, if she fails to pay the fine, which is obviously beyond her limit.

The act of touching the rope of the well by Souramma, the subsequent quarrel, and provocation by Pedda Reddy provide an opportunity to the dalits in the village to re-look and re-graph their situation and condition vis-à-vis the upper-caste people. Dasu, Souramma's son, says:

We can't go up to the well. We can't put the rope into the well that we have ourselves dug. We can't go to the temple. We can't tie the head-cloth. We can't wear shoes. *Thoo*, f\*\*\* your mother, do you call this a human life? (Vinodini 502)

The playwright uses this incident as a rationalistic inward understanding rather than making it an emotively provocative spark. The audience is provoked to brood over the question of their own status. They are made to co-examine the treatment they receive which denigrates their dignity as human beings. In Dasu's words there is a definite shift from their tacit acceptance of subordination to critiquing their existing stagnant responses which contributed to the status quo. The critiquing of his ancestors culminates in his decision when he decides:-

But the rope should be put not on the eastern pulley but on our own pulley, on the fifth pulley. We shall fix the log once again and draw the water. Come what may, whoever comes in the way, we shall do that. Let's see who can stop us. (503)

The play makes the audience to think the situation in totality and not symptomatically. It makes them realize that they too are human beings equal to others; secondly, their share in the natural resources is a just demand which was denied to them for years (despite that fact that it is they who contribute the labour); third, the grounds of injustice are unjust, which need to be corrected by fighting against injustice.

Pedda Reddy, who manipulates the village, rules over them with the conventional symbolic authority he enjoys. He is an authoritarian and a crude despot whose power is backed by the illogical convention and tradition of the rural ethos. Terms of reference for the conflict are very clear – the upper-caste, rich, and dominant Pedda Reddy, backed by very organized conventional power and open to resort to any means, including secretive violence, to carry out his wish against the lower-caste people, poor, overburdened by the conventional domination, resourceless, unorganized and without any means to fight the inequality. In a situation like this, which pervaded in almost every Indian village before and after independence, the challenges before the playwright are multiple and complex. The playwright here is not dealing purely an imaginative situation for its audience. The audience's past is reflected and the future is at stake in

the play. The street play also aims to educate the people about the prevalence of such situations in India. The playwright needs to show the urgency, intensity, and cruelty of the domination as well to facilitate the rational and logical understanding of the reasons of such dominance in order to form the equally rational, logical, sustainable, legal, and political responses without letting the emotive and illogical instincts to hijack the battle. The playwright cannot risk the undemocratic to be replaced by the antidemocratic even though it restores the dalits their status. The playwright has to ensure the relevance of democratic fight which is a far better assurance of continuation of the democratic values of equality and justice. If it is the story of just A versus B, or A being replaced by B, it won't reflect the proper and ideal development of democracy. The opposition or resistance or replacement needs to be justified by, in the words of Paulo Freire, "the process of collective reflection and thinking." The significance attached to the process of resistance, opposition, and transition is an equally important development over the rash models of overthrowing the incumbent structures by violent and irrational means. There has to be a development in the thinking as well. Jacob Srampickal comments on Freire's model of development:

For him (Freire) development is an integrated process involving psychological and material development which is not imposed, but comes about through the involvement of the people in the process of collective reflection and action. The initiatives of people are given primary importance. Development can take place only in an atmosphere of mutual reciprocity within a context of communion and fellowship. (Srampickal 9)

In order to make the change and development substantial, sustained, and comprehensive, all the aggrieved parties are to be engaged properly. What the dominated communities should seek is not just the resistance but a meaningful development of the prevalent situation. The development cannot be sustained unless it penetrates the superficial symptomatism and clichéd binarism. Srampickal sums up Freire's concept of authentic development as:

[...] a process whereby through an intense process of learning, characterized by the twin elements of action and reflection, the oppressed as a class confront and overcome the



culture of domination and create meaningful alternatives for their own future.(Srampickal 6)

Chinnaiah had earlier challenged the dominance in the village, but was silenced by the upper-caste people. He was a lone fighter as the community was clueless to react in such a situation. However brave he was, being alone he could not bring the change in the situation.

The play also systematically deconstructs the agencies and ideologies of dominance and explains the reasons of continuation of dominance for centuries. Pedda Reddy's domination has continued since his forefathers were conventional, backed by well rooted traditions. The traditions, with vague and unknown origins, are interpreted and applied in a biased and selective manner. They are coercively prescriptive, unquestionable, and unrepresentative. Their not-open-to-questioning makes them rigid to an extent where society has to subject itself to them, thereby keeping the society static or perhaps stagnant and regressive.

In contrast to such a practice of governance of the society when the Indian constitution, based on written rules, consented by the peoples representatives, and open for verification by the judiciary and amendable in the wake of new and changing realities, was adopted, it unsettled the prevalent systemic advantages. There was a resistance from the earlier haves not to segregate the advantages of the old system whereas there was a welcome move by the earlier have-nots for the gains. But in order to make the new scheme successful proper educative models needed to be evolved to shape the proper resistive modes. The emotional, personalized, situational, and attitudinal resistive directions would not only mar the outcomes but necessarily extend the conflicting dimensions. It also needs to demonstrate the effectivity of democratic models of resistance as well. It needs to underscore the voluntarily adopted regulative measures by the resisting groups. It needs to define the means to resist. As long as they keep their means of resistance within the democratic limits, their fight for justice is on right track to strengthen the democratic atmosphere. Because it is not only the fight for a particular right, or against a particular instance of injustice, it is also about the continuation and strengthening of democratic

tradition. It will ensure to keep the undemocratic and regressive forces at bay, which are very strong and present to seize an opportunity to revert the democratic progression of the society.

Another important factor of this movement is to democratize the institutions in order to make them legal-functional and accountable. Proper use of these institutions, occasional reformative steps to keep them updated and reflective of the changing times, and belief in strengthening the institutions is the hallmark of democratic process. Most of the masses were familiar to the personalized arbitrary systems of justices prior to independence. The playwright, by using the village assembly scenes, educates her audience not only about the presence of such systems but also exposes how they were manipulated and how these manipulations can be resisted with legally and rationally sound basis. Among the various modes of resistances this is most attractive as it is peaceful, predictable, and certain. The playwright also aims to strengthen this belief among the masses. The dalits in the play are shown becoming more resolute about fixing the fifth pulley on the well to fetch the water. This is the climax of the play and the plight of the dalits.

After initial hesitation and reluctance, the elder dalits like Pedda Mala, Dibbadu, Tata, and Pushpamma agree to the forceful and determined youngsters like Dasu, Prasad, and Raju. The decision is reached that they will oppose Pedda Reddy's attempts to cull the dalit resistance. In the village assembly Pedda Mala rightly conveys the change in the situation to the Reddys, "Yes, Reddy. Times have changed and the world has changed. Like everybody else, our boys in Malapalli are also getting educated" (505). In the wake of changes taking place at an all India level with the constitutionalization of rights, consequent opening of doors of education to all, and social leveling; changes also take place in this village. This positive development also leads to the questioning of traditional bases of society, authoritarian structures based on traditional hierarchies, and codes of justice and its punitive implementation. Dasu also challenges the basis and the authoritarian nature of traditional assembly and the very basis of the authority of Pedda Reddy:

Who has made this custom? Who has decided what the custom should be? Who has decided the amount of money to be paid as fine? Who has given you the right to do this? Actually... (506)

The self-designed custom, that the untouchables should not touch the water as the well would be dry, is also questioned. Dasu exposes the diabolic nature of such customs.

A democratic state functions with the consent of the subject, which is sought directly or indirectly. The power is invested in institutions by law and they function according to the law. Laws lay down certain codes to be followed by these institutions while functioning. It ensures the reign of a certainty, reliability, and stability. The institutions in democratic society, such as legislature, executive, and judiciary; are involved in rule-making, rule-application, and rule-adjudication respectively. In a democratic and plural society these functions are vested in separate institutions to avoid concentrations of an unlimited power in one hand, which might prove detrimental for the growth of other weaker sections of the society, and they work according to set principles and not based on the whims of the ruler.

In case of the village assembly in the play, there is an arbitrary concentration of these three important functions in one hand and the assembly works according to the whims. The customs which are supposed to be the basis of adjudication, are themselves undemocratic origins. The customs help the rulers to execute the code discriminately in different cases. Pedda Reddy adjudges the breach of the codes, which are unilaterally authenticated; and imposes irrational and disproportionate fines outside the assembly; and the assembly assembles simply to endorse his judgment. The oppressed has no opportunity or means to raise the voice against and to rectify injustice. Dasu questions the hitherto unquestioned authority of Pedda Reddy:

You cling to these so-called customs so that you can manipulate people; make them do what you want, play as you want, and make the village play. You decide the wrong and the right, you punish, you impose the fines... you have become the kings of this village. (506)

Punnamma, another dalit villager, too ridicules the illogical and discriminatory bases of these customs. She contests the argument that with their touch the well shall become dry, by saying that it is the dalits who have satisfied the throat of '*Gangamma*' with their sweat by digging. Not only that, at many occasions the dalit boys dive in the well to take drowned pitchers and unmarried girls from the upper-caste families out of it. When an upper-caste daughter-in-law's corpse was floating in the well, they brought it out and cleaned the water of the well.

The language used by the upper-caste people while talking to the dalits is nasty. Chinna Reddy says to Pedda Reddy:

What *nana*, why are you pleading with these bastards. They have made a mistake and we have fined them, that's all. (*Turns to the Malas*) You fellows, Mala bastards, will you pay or shall we make you pay? (506)

Dasu forcefully argues that it is the upper-caste women who have abused and beaten his mother first and not vice-versa. Secondly, they have resolved to go to the well definitely and fix the log for the pulley and put the rope on it. Third and most important thing, for which they have come to the assembly, is that the upper-caste people should admit their mistake and apologize for beating his mother without any grave offence.

The playwright uses the portrayal of the assembly scene to analyze the manner of pro-status-quo arbitration in customary institutions. This needs to be refuted with equally sound argument which exposes the anti- and undemocratic manner of functioning. Simply blaming the institutions will not help the cause; they are needed to be reformed and made reflective of the changing character of the society and its aspirations. The arbitrations by dalits highlights the unjust treatment they received in past and present; their resolve to assert their right to get water; and their demand of compensation in the form of an apology by the opposite camp in order to restore their dignity.

The playwright has used a sub-plot in the play, which serves as a metaphorical justification to the main argument, universality of rights, put forward in the play. Pedda Reddy's

daughter-in-law has an infant baby who is fed by Gangamma, the daughter-in-law of Souramma, because the daughter-in-law is unable to feed her baby for some reasons. While the assembly is in progress the baby cries incessantly. Pedda Reddy's wife sends message for Gangamma. But she does not move an inch. All the dalits assert that unless the assembly is finalized she would not feed the baby. The baby cries continuously and faints. Even Pedda Reddy now requests Gangamma to feed the baby. The only demand put forward by her is that the women who have beaten her mother-in-law must apologize for their act. Through this incident, the playwright weighs an infant's thirst for few drops of milk against the thirst of whole dalit community, for years and ages. If it is unbearable to see an infant's pain for a moment, how unbearable the pain of the women, men, and the children of dalits would have been? The pain of thirst of the infant makes Reddy and his family meek; while undergoing the same pain of thirst for ages made the dalits stronger in their resolution. The playwright gives proper direction to this strength rather than allowing it to assume some nasty direction.

The Constitution of India recognizes and guarantees the rights of every citizen as an individual. The Preamble of the Constitution also "assures the dignity of the individual." It also recognizes equality among citizens. Article 14 of the Constitution provides-"The state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India." Article 15 of the Constitution provides:

(1) The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, race, caste sex, place of birth or any of them.

(2) No citizen shall on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to

(a) Access to shop, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or

(b) The use of wells, tanks, bathing *ghats*, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of general public."(Constitution of India 6-7)

*Thirst* explains these rights and the ways they can be achieved in a simple dramatized form to the people. The audience is made to realize what the problems are and where the remedy lies. This revelation can be summed up in Jacob Srampickal's words:

This is how they come to know that the real cause of poverty and underdevelopment are not their ignorance and weakness but the structural relationships which keep them powerless and exploited. They realize that the real problems are not lack of proper drinking water, illiteracy, superstition, large families and malnutrition, but exploitation, victimization, corruption and injustice. (Srampickal 41)

This exercise explains what and how to be resisted and prevents the resistance movement from being vague and unclear. It also helps the active leadership and the audiences align on clear understanding. Paulo Freire makes it clear further:

The struggle begins with men's recognition that they have been destroyed. Propaganda, management, manipulation—all arms of domination—cannot be the instruments of their re-humanization. The only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed. In a humanizing pedagogy the method ceases to be an instrument by which the teachers (in this instance, the revolutionary leadership) can manipulate the students (in this instance, the oppressed), because it expresses the consciousness of the students themselves. (Freire 68-69)

#### Street Theatre and Protest:

A reading of “formal characteristics and influences of street theatre” will show how resistance is articulated in means which also exhibits the exercise of the democratic rights to strengthen the very process of democratic change (Srampickal 127). These plays originate with collective authorship in the sense that although written by single authors their subjects and references are obviously communitarian and visible, though scattered. The much required

flexibility regarding performance and logisticity keep it within the reach of the very ordinary masses for which it is devised. The audience participation is voluntary and huge as they perform on the sites near masses; use their language, idiom, incidents, and issues from their life. The use of *sutradhar* or *vidushak*, songs and slogans, dances, satire and humor, etc contribute to the entertaining aesthetic quotient highly required to pacify the somber realities of life.

The history of street theatres performed in India such as, *Baba Bolda Hai* (1985), an attack on the then central Government's opportunistic policies and fundamentalist Akalis; Saksena's satirical play *Bakri* (1974), exposing the exploitation and religious bigotry; *Chapa Para Manush* (1980), criticizing the governmental red-tapism; Arena's (Calcutta) *Ha Ha Anahar* (1981), criticizing the governments' apathy and segregation of urban elites from the rural realities; Chetana's, a mine workers' troupe from Madhya Pradesh, *Miyan Ki Jooti Miya Ke Sar* (1979), criticizing religious bigotry, etc (Srampickal 118-123), shows how street theatre was an effective means of protest. There is a strong selfless political commitment in the artists involved in street theatre. Most of the artists perform in open spaces free of charge. Even their lives are at risk (incident of Safdar Hashmi is an example of that). What is interesting about the street theatres is, as Srampickal mentions, that,

They attempt to provide an alternative explanation and a different point of view from government controlled media. For example, in the wake of Bhopal gas tragedy, while the official media were content with providing statistics on the extent of damage, it was the street theatre groups who focused the attention of the people on the wider aspects of exploitation by multinationals and the continuing horrors and tragedy... thus while the media look at social problems as technical matters requiring technical solutions, street theatre has tried to delve deeper to examine their root causes. (211)

The list is long, varied, and demonstrative of the fact that it has been a tool used by artists to aesthetically resist and protest against the social evils and seek changes in human nature and human institutions by democratic means of reform and "collective thinking and action".

#### The Impact of Street Theatre:

A street play is aimed at achieving certain goals. It helps the poor, rural, and illiterate people to organize, share, and articulate as the play *Thirst* does. It attempts to explain the masses the reasons of their status and agencies responsible for their domination. Except during the cultural occasions, where hardly there are any systematic rational engagements, dalits would not get time to organize to see them explained. Their organizing and witnessing the performance is also a political statement giving a message of change to their oppressor. The democratic ideas such as peaceful assembling, organizing, sharing, participating, and expressing are exercised without being conscious of it. Not only the performers but the audience and spectators perform a democratic function. Srampickal, while explaining the street theatre, sums up its influence on the three groups: performers, the audience, and the agencies against which the play is performed (142). For performers, he says, it is a balancing act between what they believe, commit, and practice. For some it is “therapeutic,” as he quotes a student, a participant in street theatre, that “we will never allow us to react another communal riot with indifference or cynicism... it was as if we lived the experience of riot...” (143). For some, “street theatre is an attempt at developing social attitude.” For an activist it is “a reassertion of the values he/she stands for.” For audience the play is a revelation, revisiting or recalling of their past, reorganizing their responses, or re-strengthening their resolve to protest or fight the injustice in a democratic way. Srampickal mentions immediate and delayed effect on the audience. The immediate responses are emotional reactions identifying with or opposing the play. Due to the difficulties in the daily life and the lack of entertainment the lower classes in *bastis* expect the street play as an entertainment and complain the lack of entertainment in it. Compared to the old young people are more attracted towards the street performances. Often they compare the plays with films which are more colourful, versatile, and entertaining. Women are often missing from such performances in rural areas. However the places where the audience is familiar with such performances the impact is quite notable. Srampickal says:

They are aware that they have come to watch a play where a play where a topical issue of a serious nature will be analysed. “Their plays give us a new perspective on current people talk about it for days”, said one. In many places the performances become an



event—people talk about it for days. Men debate the pros and cons in the play at tea-sessions, in their evening jaunts, children re-enact their favourite scenes, recite the dialogues and hum the tunes. This can add up to an ongoing education. (145)

Regarding the impact on the agencies targeted by the street play Srampickal mentions that as the plays basically aim at raising the awareness of the aggrieved and exposing the injustice affecting them they are often ignored by the agencies indirectly criticized by the plays. However when the street plays become potential challenge and gain momentum there are instances of suppressing such plays by governments and non-governmental agencies (147-148). Srampickal mentions a few incidents:

*Lathi* (baton) charges and arrests are routinely used for dispersing the players and the audience. In 1984 a street theatre group, Hirwal from Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh performing in a suburban street close to Patan was arrested and kept in prison for over three months at the insistence of the landlords. The performers of the Amritsar School of Drama including Gurucharan Singh were arrested in 1984 in Bombay when they came to the city to participate in a street theatre festival. (147)

In her book *A Critical Stage*, Pakistani theatre activist Fawzia Afzal-Khan mentions an actor's experience of performing *Dhee Rani*, a play about women's education by a theatre group Ajoka, in a village near Lahore. Hardly there was any one to allow them space to perform. A woman offered them space and the play started. However the owner of the house came and drove everyone out of his house. The troupe left the place "ignominiously, amidst derisive comments and invective." (Afzal-Khan 62) She assesses the impact of the community-oriented and issue-based theatre in following words:

If the gender politics of *Dhee Rani* can be said to be fairly straightforward in the advocacy of the right to education for women of all classes and sectors of society, it is the politics of reception that allows us to see that it will obviously have a different effect on

different audiences; for some it will be a threat, for others, an entertaining spectacle, and sometimes a bit of both. (62)

What she says about the theatre is also relevant about the impact of and on the street theatre in a developing society like India.

Despite a variety of responses to and experiences of the street theatre, the fact remains that it has contributed, to a large extent, in extending the exercise of democratic rights to far off spaces and among groups and people unaware of such exercises. With continued belief in this tradition, I hope, it would prove a useful tool in spatializing the democracy.

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