

# THE THEATRE OF PROTEST IN KERALA

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The element of protest has been very active in Kerala Theatre during the last forty years, particularly in the seventies and eighties. The upsurge was felt in every walk of life and theatre eloquently expressed this new wave of rejuvenation. It was part of the renaissance movement triggered off by the revolutionary and social activists like Shri. Narayana Guru, Dr. Palpu, V.T. Bhattathirippad, K. Kelappan, E.M. Sankaran Namboodirippad and many others. All these pioneers in their own ways struck new channels of creative expression challenging the stagnant values of the past. It was in a way, a movement of liberation, freeing the spirit of man imprisoned by social norms, customs and practices. The struggle for liberation manifested itself in terms of politics, religion and economics in all walks of life. It shattered the centres of power and theatre became a powerful instrument for social mobilization and protest.

The theatre of protest in Kerala provides an in-depth study of how the oppressed has been struggling hard through decades to liberate the strength locked up in him. It is a study of the structural conflicts latent in our society. The man who was deprived of his right and dignity as an individual in society sought to make himself heard and listened to. In the traditional theatre of Kerala, his role was that of only a witness. The Sanskrit, Parsi and the Western influences, whether separately or collectively, defined for the theatre enthusiast three areas of participation: playwriting, acting and appreciation. The spectator had a passive role. It was a theatre of forgetfulness in every sense of the term. The spectator was overburdened by certain fixed prejudices and preconceptions. Social power dominated his individuality which wanted a free expression from all sorts of exploitation. Unthinking obeisance to class and caste hierarchy suppressed his intellect and prevented freedom of expression.

The social, cultural and political movements of Kerala from 1920 onwards aimed at developing new means of expression, autonomy and creative participation of the individual in public affairs. Historically speaking, the organized attempt for this kind of expression in theatre can be found in the social revolt expressed in the play, 'Adukkalayilninnu

Arangathekku' (From the Kitchen on to the Stage) by V.T. Bhattathirippad. This is a play or protest against male domination, brahmanical superiority and prejudices, early marriage of young girls to elderly Namboodiris, discrimination of sexes etc. The playwright addressed himself to these issues in a theatrical idiom which made change inevitable. The major plays that followed suit are 'Rithumathi' (Premji), 'Marakkudakkullile Mahanarakam (MRB) etc. Women's liberation, modern education, the need for social involvement, the plight of windows etc have been the themes that inspired these plays. Looking back, one may be surprised to find how scientifically and theatrically these issues were analyzed exhorting the audience to rise in revolt against social and cultural oppressions that appeared in the garb of traditional values. The intentions were to inspire the participants of the theatre movement with a sense of autonomy. The tragedy of modern society is caused by lack of self knowledge and the energy and power to attain it. In these plays the diction and other means of theatrical expression were as progressive as the themes, enlightening the individuals regarding their complex situation in the society. Oppression was a common theme in these works and the purpose and motive was to protest against the causes and circumstances of such slavery.

This kind of protest found a fuller expression in the plays of Thoppil Bhasi especially in his monumental work 'Ningalenne Communistaki' (You made me a Communist). Here the issues raised are wider, ranging from economic and social inequality, casteism and feudal prejudices to the establishment of an Egalitarian society. The play was repeatedly produced throughout the country and it is believed to have been instrumental in ushering in the first communist ministry in Kerala (in the world also) in 1957 through a democratic process of free and fair election. Similarly, the protest registered in 'Kanyaka' by Prof. N. Krishna Pillai is equally strong in a cultural and psychological sense. Plays of this caliber are plenty in the language but the influences they have exerted are to be studied separately.

The theatre of protest gathered momentum as years passed when the cultural activists insisted on the people's awareness and their seeing and thinking for themselves. Theatre organizations, with clearly defined political and cultural motives, sprouted in different parts of the state with a firm belief in man's infinite capacity for improvement. What is offered by the authorities is not enough and it must be destroyed or rejected when found intolerable. This process of destruction or rejection can be carried out only after a close scrutiny and deep analysis of the social evils transmitted to the present generation through dictatorial, colonial, feudal and communal agencies over the last several centuries. The revolt

represented in theatre was in fact an extension of the revenge and anger felt at the social levels. It was an expression of dissatisfaction and discontentment over the conditions of life in society. The popular theatre was not very much concerned with those problems. It concentrated on cheap entertainment, a combination of music, dance, melodramatic acting and sentimental ideas. There was no provision for serious thinking and analysis of social problems. But the theatre of protest aimed at revolutionary political solution for the latent problems in the society. So every theatre worker had to be politically awake and he had to play a vital role in educating the masses.

The condition required for this theatre of protest was not merely a political awakening. An understanding of the relations between society and theatre was very essential. According to the social activists Indian society is a closed structure, stagnant and retrogressive. It had to be turned upside down to make it effective and receptive to new ideas and challenges. Similarly, the theatre was also over burdened with conventional concepts and ideas. Fresh thinking and understanding was required in the very structure and mode of communication in theatre. Theatre and society had to be mutually supporting and supplementing. One cannot be discussed without a reference to the other. One is actually for and because of the other, not at its expense. Both can have the fullest expression only in terms of this mutual response and co-operation. Thus theatre is both political and artistic. It should become the best means of cultural communion and communication.

What is expressed above appears to be idealistic. But it was this idealism which spurred at least a small minority of theatre workers on to the production of some serious plays. One such play was 'Nadugaddika' written, directed and produced by K.J. Baby. The playwright has been totally committed to the ideals of social development and audience participation. The play deals with the transfer of power from the British to the Indians and among the Indians how it is transferred from a new group to another for selfish achievement. This was presented through out Kerala during 1979-80 and has had repeat performances also. The play projected a hitherto untried technique of the tribals witnessing the transfer of political power. The locale of action is Wynad, the center of Adivasi culture and their problems. The director seemed to have followed a kind of Brechtian street play pattern. The audience, unlike the elite spectators, became seriously involved with the development of the plot. They were made to doubt, question and answer some of the problems. It was definitely a new way of expressing anger and protest in modern theatre. The innocent life of the tribals with their song and dance attracted the attention of the

onlookers. The play brought the simmering resentment out into the open. The protest was so strongly expressed that the play was looked upon with suspicion by the authorities and the players were arrested and no wonder, it became extremely popular because of its deep rooted commitment.

Many similar plays were produced during and after the Emergency. The Emergency declared by Ms. Indira Gandhi unveiled a dark period in the social and cultural life of the country. Freedom of expression and creativity was curtailed and the power syndrome occupied the centre of political administration. The result was an array of frightening incidents secretly reported from different parts of the country with a warning that any one rising in revolt against the authority will be smashed. India proved itself to be heroic and great, developing a sense of rebellion against this undemocratic and dictatorial regime. In Kerala this questioning was to some extent implicit but there were troupes and groups of artists and thinkers who rallied together on this fundamental issue of freedom and survival when ever it was possible. My own play 'Thulsivanam' was written and produced during the period of emergency. When it was staged in Trivandrum as part of the Zonal drama competition of the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy, the Police were all around the Bank Employees Union Hall and I had the bitter experience of being interrogated by an intelligence officer regarding the details of my play. Protest was more powerfully expressed by revolutionary activists like Civic Chandran, K.Venu, Sri. Vasu, K.Sachidanandan and others. A play 'Padayani' was presented by the Wayanad cultural society in the wake of the emergency on the initiative of Idakkadu Muraleedharan, who highlighted the cause of the marginalized and the down-trodden. Madhu Master of Calicut played an important role in propagating the serious ideals and ideas of the theatre of protest. He took initiative in organizing the play 'Padayani' in different parts of the state. It is one of the early plays in Malayalam which took upon itself the duty of mobilizing the people's power and educating the silent masses on their positive role in social reconstruction. Incidentally, 'Padayani', won the first prize in the state level competition conducted in connection with the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the Kerala Sahithya Parishath, which made it more popular and established it as an example of people's theatre. An important feature of this production was that it demanded a cultural meeting for discussion and protest immediately after the play was produced. It was a successful attempt. Madhu Master's contribution to the theatre of protest in Kerala is all the more valuable when his production of Gorky's 'Mother' is considered. The stage version of the 'Mother' was prepared by him with Maxim Gorky's novel and

Bretolt Brecht's adaptation in mind. Hence it has the qualities of a literary piece as well as effective theatre. The troupe 'Renachethana' presented this play through out the state. In fact, it was one of the pioneering ventures in this category even prior to the 'Nadu Gaddika'.

Most of the activities of the theatre of protest in the state took place in the street. They are generally called Street Plays. It is a strange as well as important theatre experience when one is confronted at a street corner by a committed team of activists presenting a play. This trend has been very active in Kerala. Socially and politically relevant problems like Bus charge hike, privatization of education, communalism, Bhopal gas tragedy, Police atrocities, defection of people's representatives, proliferation of atomic tests, child marriage, dowry system, assault on women, illiteracy, globalization, GHAT agreement, patent rules, environmental pollution etc. were made the subjects of such street plays. The Kerala State Sahithya Parishat, 'Kalajathas' organized by students unions, women's group etc. came forward with strong political statements in an exciting street theatre idiom. Percussion instruments, eloquent rendering, exaggerated gesture, colourful costumes, acrobatics, popular tales, myths and stories were all used to achieve the very specific purpose of attacking the identified social enemies of the people. The folk art forms of the tribals and the villagers were also borrowed when found essential for some musical or dance episodes. The street plays were mostly satirical and humorous thereby attracting the attention of the people in different walks of life. They were accepted as a strong weapon of fighting for a public cause. No wonder that about thirty thousand street plays were performed at different places of India on April 12, 1989 in memory of Safdar Hashmi who was killed by the reactionary forces in the country on January 1, 1989. It is also to be noted that the progressive movements all over the world at one time or another resorted to the call of the street theatre and its aesthetics. 'Agit Prop Theatre', 'Guerilla Theatre', 'Third Theatre', and 'Documentary Theatre' are some of the troupes and movements in different countries which presented street performances effectively. Julian Beck and Judith of Living Theatre (U.S.A.) taught the world how seriously the performance aesthetics can be developed in street plays also. I had the rare privilege of watching their street play in Rome (Italy) in 1980, which protested against capitalism, religious and state intervention in the personal affairs of the people. Irwin Piscator, Brecht and Dario Fo explored the possibilities of this medium to the maximum extent. The Nobel Laureate Dario Fo drew on the Italian popular tradition of the 'commedia del'arte in many of his plays meant for open-air improvisational performances for informal audiences. I remember with a sense of nostalgia how he hilariously

demonstrated his techniques of street performances in a work shop in Rome in which I too was a participant.

Coming back to the Kerala scenario, one must make a special mention of women's theatre experiments in the state. It is of course a recent development. Prof. Sara Joseph, a prominent short story writer has devoted her attention to the women's theatre also S. Sreelatha and Sudhi, graduates of the School of Drama, Trichur, organized a women's troupe 'Abhinetri' in Trivandrum and conducted work shops and play production with gender perspectives. They look at life with a sense of anger, agony and consequently with protest against the interpretations of values through centuries from a 'male point of view'. According to the 'Arthasatra' women are to be fined for attending public performances! Let alone participation in performances. Even today it is not very easy to get actresses for performances because of the irrational male-dominating systems.

The Feminist Theatres also project the injustice meted out to women and their great potential for involvement and participation in the restructuring of society. It is in a way part of the women's liberation movement. There is a women's wing of the Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishat (KSSP) which scientifically takes up these issues. 'Samatha', 'Manushi' etc. are other organisations working on these lines. Street plays like "Parasupuram Chantha" and "Sita" presented by the women's wing of the KSSP powerfully dramatized with an uncompromising note of protest the curse of the dowry system nursed and nurtured by a decadent society. It was produced in 1983. In 1989 the same group presented street plays of great vigour and protest embodied in "Njan Sthree", "En Jathi" etc. Other important plays of protest in this category are "Rose Mary Parayanirunathu", "Deva Silakal" etc. "Deva Silakal" produced by S.Sreelatha in which she acted Yasodhara's role, analyzed Prince Sidhartha's selfish motives in denouncing the Kingdom, his wife and son for the sake of enlightenment. All these plays question the authority, the centres of the power and attempt to ask for apology for the denial of fundamental rights to women. C.S. Chandrika, Sajitha and a committed group of women are quite active in voicing the anger and protest so long suppressed in Indian women. It is also to be placed on record that the enthusiasm of the women's theatre groups encouraged the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy to organise an all India Women's Theatre festival at Trichur in 1998.

There are many committed and angry theatre workers and organizations in Kerala. Only a few have been mentioned here. Names like P.M. Antony, P.M. Thaj, Surasu and others can never be set aside in a discussion of theatre of protest in the state because these were brilliant

young men who were protest personified. P.M. Antony for instance, was a centre of attack by all the “henchmen” of the state politics and the Christian community for his controversial play “The Sixth Wound of Christ”. The whole of the Catholic community in Kerala protested against the play which portrayed a humanized Christ as against the mistified figure adored by the papacy. One of his earlier works, “Spartacus” was equally striking. It highlighted the Greek slavery and connected it with the present. P.M. Thai, in his plays suggestively and symbolically shattered the authoritarian centres while the late Surasu lived an open life of a rebel like his characters who struggled to free themselves from the shackles of conventions and norms. They all wanted a free society and theatre was used as an instrument for the purpose. Another play produced recently in Kerala with powerful undertones of breaking the Icons of power centres is “Ulakutaya Perumal” written by Prof. Omchery N.N. Pillai. The impotent ruler aspiring to have his successor is the central image of the play. The writer without mincing words quite satirically aims his arrows straight at the controlling men at the helm of affairs who are incapable of delivering goods. Omcheri employs a style of shocking irony, dark comedy and farce in most of his plays. Similarly, an adaptation of Ionesco’s Rhinoceros called “Nettikkompan” was produced by Janayana and was applauded by the jubilant audience who could identify with the helpless masses in the play. It was directed by Prem Prasad, a graduate of School of Drama, Trichur.

In short, the theatre of protest as a forum for social enthusiasts has been vibrant in the state for quite a long time. Mostly it is engineered by young artists with leftist inclination. It aims at enlightening the common man and at questioning the so called “upper class and the elite” on contemporary issues directly concerned with peace, food, freedom and social justice, irrespective of caste, creed and sex. Brecht and other innovators have been at the inspiring points. Even Augusto Boal, The Brazillian Theatre Visionary who works for a “Theatre of the Oppressed” is often heard quoted by the well meaning rebellious theatre artists. His protest is registered against the “glossy” proscenium performances and against the misuse of the body, voice, and mind.

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