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Cultural Intervention through Theatre: Case Study of a Play on Female Infanticide/Foeticide

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The process of evolving 'Pacha Mannu', a play on female infanticide produced by a women's theatre group in Tamil Nadu and its showings especially among audiences from communities who practise female infanticide/foeticide has led to a redefinition of a methodology of consciousness raising, opening up varied ways of understanding and subverting cultural expressions.

If, on the contrary, the theatre's object is... to set in motion the immobile, the eternal sphere of the illusory consciousness's mythical world, then the play is really the development, the production of a new consciousness in the spectator-incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompleteness itself, this distance achieved, this inexhaustible work of criticism in action; the play is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life.

-- Louis Althusser (1986:151)

IT is indeed a tall claim, almost an impossible task - to set in motion the immobile-to create spectators who would continue to perform. In order to even attempt it, we need to shed our own fond beliefs of knowing things better, our urge to impart information, the craving to grant advice and all such superiorities of consciousness and commitment. To win over confidence, to create a congenial atmosphere of sharing, to help vent our frustrations and disbelief's and to evolve solutions that are acceptable were the hopes of 'Pacha Mannu' (Green Earth).

The lessons of this exercise have led us to redefine a methodology of consciousness raising and shown us varied ways of understanding and subverting cultural expressions. I wish to focus on tone, idiom, mode and scope of this exercise for convenience of analysis. I hope that this description-cum-discussion will emphasise the need for an inclusive tone, localised idiom,

participatory mode and a flexible, open-ended spectrum of expression, which are valid for any endeavour on awareness, mobilisation and articulation.

A brief introduction to Voicing Silence, a women's theatre group, is necessary to place 'Pacha Mannu' in context. The group has been functioning from 1993 onwards with the aim of being a link between women's consciousness and women's articulation. It has also worked on the premise that gender in a hegemonic system cannot overrule the variables of caste, class, religion, occupation and generational differences in defining itself. Voicing Silence conceives of theatre as a mode of self-expression and as provocateur of self-conceptions and constructed images.

It will be also worth while at this juncture to describe the production process of our plays, which challenges conventional definitions of playwright, director, actors and audience. There are however minor differences among the plays. 'Pacha Mannu' started with a preliminary workshop in august 1994 with Rati Bartholomew as the resource person. Already existing research on female infanticide and novels written about this issue formed the starting point. This workshop also addressed attitudinal differences within the group. Debates about what should be our tone in this play began then. After almost a year, a production workshop was held. By then, we had collected songs sung during ceremonies connected with life cycle rituals of women in the communities in which instances of infanticide were rampant. After a series of reviews, comments and suggestion from friends and fellow workers on this issue the play was ready, to be performed.

This mode of evolving the play departs from conventional definitions of compartmentalised roles assigned to the writer, actor, director, etc. Though I am aware of the heated debates around collectivity, one has to admit that plays evolved in this process are the result of all the participants in this venture. I restrain from idealising collectivity as though it was all smooth sailing. Far from it, the exercise encountered internal and external pressures and has been wrought within contradictions. What it does however is to lay open differences instead of hiding them under the blanket. We have reached a stage when all of us feel we speak our language and not something pushed down our throats.

'Pacha Mannu' dealing as it did with the sensitive issue of female infanticide/foeticide to be performed within the communities in which the prevalence of this issue has been recorded, had to face the difficulty of adopting a tone which would enable participation of the audience. Framed in the street

theatre format it had to be wary of sermonising. Nor was it an advertisement for any programme, governmental or otherwise, I have personally had my own trajectory of addressing this issue in three of my earlier plays/performances. 'Yar kutravali?' (who is guilty) dealt with this issue as a social analysis, trying to trace the culprit. 'Karpathin Kural' (Voice of the New born) sought a solution to this issue in the assertion of hope in the newborn, while 'Thoppuzh Kodi' (umbilical cord) made the female foetus offer support to the distressed mother. All these plays were performed by AIDWA, Chennai. 'Pacha Mannu' however was performed by voicing silence, an autonomous cultural group functioning as a project of MSSRF.

'Patha Mannu' consciously tried to avoid the 'us' and 'them' divide by staying within recognisable cultural modes of expression. Nowhere is the viewer 'shocked' but sees everyday realities depicted with a subtle critique of the same juxtaposed. None of the roles tower above the ordinary but retain average fears, doubts, desires and hopes. 'Pacha mannu' 'refuses to comment directly, but only through ironic juxtapositions of scenes... The play has no real villains either; where villainy needs to be represented (in the dowry harassment scene, for example) the actors are masked, raising this villainy into a non-gender-specific abstraction, a structural problem of patriarchal societies" [Natarajan 1997, 20]. The spectators are expected to come to terms with their own consciousness regarding the issues raised through these scenes ranging from justification, as in the case of a youth in Salem who proudly proclaimed that he would demand dowry since he was unemployed or escaping the accusation, as the men who blamed women for committing female infanticide; or frustration as the woman who brought up her girl single-handedly but has her daughter sent back for more dowry; or distrust as the woman who blamed us for having triggered off a discussion and leaving without offering any further options. Not getting into a didactic tone does not necessarily mean just openness to accommodate everything that is uttered. Most often, the openness was countered by other viewers, challenged by the actors and vice versa by entering into arguments. While the actual show was about 35 minutes long the discussions would go on for 30 to 60 minutes. One of the actors said, "most often it seemed as if we had a framework chalked out while entering into a discussion. We could not answer all their questions. Maybe, we need to go beyond theatre onto social movements as well." The tone of the play therefore demanded responses, spontaneous and impromptu, from audiences and actors.

The play is firmly rooted within the Tamil socio-linguistic-cultural context. Since the play aims to touch the female viewers in particular and re-present the existence of women, it explores female specific ceremonies and rituals. The whole play is structured around the life cycle rituals of women within this

milieu, from birth to giving birth. These are represented through songs, commentary, aphorisms reflecting value systems and cultural codes in operation. The concern was not simply to reflect women's experiences, but to explore the explicit ways in which gender roles are reinforced and embedded in cultural institutions. These ceremonies and rituals are vital aspects of community living. In the case of women-related ceremonies, they provide a space for women to congregate, celebrate and share female experiences. These are, however, outlets sanctioned within a patriarchal system over which growing commercialisation of consumerist society is also superscribed. This duality in understanding these ceremonies led to both a celebration of these traditional spaces and a critique of the values ingrained in them.

Each community has specific ways of recognising the biological changes in women. Their reproductive ideologies are expressed through these ceremonies. This is an area where the most crucial attribute in the cultural perception of differences between the sexuality of women and men are inscribed. The other differences are orchestrated around this. In fact, these ceremonies have implications for the mechanisms and processes of socialisation. Proper social behaviours, ideal familial roles and purity as value are all dinned into girls through these. Leela Dube has dealt with the implications of these rituals and their relationship to caste structures at length [[Srinivas 1996, 6-20](#)].

Ways in which 'Pacha Mannu' negotiated with these expressions need to be illustrated. K A Gunasekaran, a theatre academic and practitioner, helped us in this process. We collected the songs and ritual practices of ceremonies conducted during puberty, marriage and first pregnancy. The bangle ceremony held during the seventh or ninth month of first pregnancy, 'valai kappu', is an all - female ceremony of celebrating fertility and blessing the woman. It tries to keep the pregnant woman happy and gives her the proud place of being responsible for the family lineage to continue. Herself-esteem is boosted and absolute attention is bestowed on her. Within this female celebration is inscribed the patriarchal preference for a male child voiced through women themselves. We retained the song as such expressing the values of superiority of a male child and all the blessings which would be showered on the mother of a male child.

The puberty ritual on the other hand is both auspicious and impure - that the girl is now a sexual being is celebrated. The very same is however seen as threatening and therefore needs control. In most south Indian contexts, this is an elaborate and expensive ceremony. The girl is given special attention but is also taught to restrict movements and social mixing. This again is an all-female space. There is celebration, feasting, decorations, etc. The songs sung during this ritual

speak of purifying a female body and casting off the evil. This mixed feeling of happiness and fear, pride and shame experienced during puberty seems to run all through our lives. We chose a traditional song describing each part of a woman's body from head to toe praying for purification. We retained the tune as it is. The lyric however was changed to express the values of socialisation implicated in that ritual. Restriction of free mobility and fear of safeguarding the virginity of the girl became the crux of the song. The visual aspect of clothes put around the girl becoming a trap into which she is caught adds to the poignancy of the song. All these however have a celebratory atmosphere. Most often, when the tune starts, there are soft murmurs, shy looks, and lowered eyes from the women's side. This ceremony is not for public eye after all. When the song slowly sinks in and ends with the girl caught in the net, there is a disturbing silence.

The use of lullaby and 'oppari' (funeral songs) which are female forms of expressions establish female bonding. These forms are the reservoir of women's experiences and varied expressions. The visual image of the woman being carried in a stretcher singing an oppari song thinking of her mother who did not kill her either in the womb or as an infant brings out the painful moment of having to make the decision to kill the female foetus almost as mercy killing is drawn from 'koothu' performance of his wife moaning over the death of her son Duryodhana. At this point instead of leaving the cathartic momentum building up the feelings of isolation, the narrative is broken and the onus of deciding, the fate of the unborn foetus is left with the audience. If the play had culminated with the oppari it would have relieved the spectators of knowing what is being said and done. The audience is taken by surprise while given the responsibility of deciding the fate of the mother and her foetus. The unresolved ending heightened the audience's sense of irritation and unease, and "conversations sometimes erupted simply as an instinctive attempt to bridge the lacunae, to overcome the dissatisfaction of an inconclusive narrative" [Natarajan *ibid*].

Natarajan goes on to describe how a fluid structure characterises the whole play not only because of 'dissolve' ending but also as there is no identifiable protagonist or heroine. The narrative is fragmented by intrusive comments from within the group, the style of acting shifting from Brechtian representation to impressionistic images, realistic portrayals and stylised expressions and movements. The play was not a story of a woman but of women in general each aspect of a woman's life being enacted by a different woman in the group. Each ritual is re-enacted through songs and gestures that accompany it without any overt comment but against the backdrop of female infanticide, the meaning of these rituals takes on a deeply ironic significance. The forces working against women are presented in abstract terms, their sexual natures not underlined. The border between audience interaction and the play proper has been deliberately

collapsed at some points because in this theatre mode, actors are merely facilitators or agents provocateurs. The actors however have their own stock of alternatives ready at hand these are enacted whenever indicated by the discussions. There is a popular grandmother figure that condemns dowry and applauds bride price, glorifies the daughter as a caring and nurturing figure and vehemently criticises consumerist culture. Another woman, a young wife tries at first to rationally and to emotionally argue against having her foetus aborted. When her plea fails, she decides to walk out on her recalcitrant husband and takes care of her child herself. Discussions move on to dowry, status of women and value systems both at abstract level and concrete personal histories.

'Pacha Mannu' can be said to be one of the successful attempts to incorporate Friirian ideology and Boalian techniques. 'Pacha Mannu' demanded conviction and commitment on the part of the actors to communicate its expressed concern. The flexibility of the structure of the play demanded that the actor should improvise, interact and participate. In most shows the male members of the troupe were cornered by interrogation of the audience. In a formal proscenium play or in many street plays this is not required of the actors. Jayalakshmi, one of our actors, has this to say: "For a body of 17 actors to work smoothly was no easy task. For instance, the background of the women in the play differed vastly from that of the men. Most of the women were born and bred in Chennai while the men came from various districts of Tamil Nadu. The women spoke predominantly in English while the men had problems communicating in English." The urban-rural divide and language barriers were just the more obvious of differences. Attitudes, ideological associations, socialisation and theatre experience could be added to the list. The effort to get them into a group was not to wipe out the differences but to know, acknowledge and problematise the differences. The sight of men and women working closely together on what is conventionally seen as 'women's issues' is in itself a powerful incentive for change, both externally towards the audience and internally towards the actors themselves. Although the fear of men once again hijacking the feminist agenda for patriarchal interests cannot be totally ruled out, I still believe that the involvement of men in these types of efforts is essential. Of course, female leadership makes all the difference. (It is a heated debate within the field of theatre whether we should have all-women teams or mixed ones). We can no longer afford to ignore the importance of male responsibility and participation in these societal problems if we are to envision a humanist society free from gender discrimination. Current rigid and patriarchal stereotypes of masculinity and femininity need to be re-interpreted, so that no male can consider himself a decent human being without building up mutual respect for the opposite sex. For all the men involved in this venture, the play has no doubt called them to question the validity of their exclusive male privilege in one way or the other or at least made

them realise that they are not beyond criticism. It would be naive and dangerous to expect any revolutionary change with just one play. Nevertheless, I consider it a self-searching experience for all the participants. In this sense the cause and effect of this play has been a two-way process.

The scope of this effort in the socio-political arena needs close analysis. 'Pacha Mannu' can be classified as a street/agit-prop/political theatre while it simultaneously defies all these descriptions. It is street theatre without making any immediate demand. It is agit-prop calling for change but not action. Addressing consciousness and awareness does not seem protest at the face value. However, without them protest cannot be meaningful. A recent issue of STQ (Seagull Foundation for the Arts, Calcutta, December 1997, number 16) dealing with street theatre in India has many theatre activists discuss the state of the art today. Moloyashree says, "The gender issue has really been dealt with in a big way ... On the other hand, in plays against communalism that kind of debate has not come up... No one is going to say we are communal. On the gender issue they will take up cudgels in their on way." Pralayan while talking about issues that are favourites with the development people refers to how the NGOs get funds for projects related to girl child, child labour, AIDS. He however adds, "but some well-meaning work has also been done, like in the area of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu" (ibid: 83). The underlying assumption of these comments seems to be that gender is not all that political. Without underestimating the commitment and efforts of these left parties-based theatre people, I would like to differ from that stance.

Most political organisations consider cultural activities as crowd pullers or conference entertainment. Most often, they are treated as bandwagons. These are performances for the already converts activists who could be called upon to participate in protests. Even if the audience is different, the ideology and affinity leave nothing to be guessed. The agenda is clear even before the shows are performed and very little scope is given for discussion and differing opinions. The same is true of most NGOs taking up cultural activity as part of their projects.

'Pacha Mannu' has taught us that it can reach the not-yet converted audience who could be coaxed or provoked into discussions. It can appeal to their emotion and reason and bring them to a platform. Since ideological beliefs are not thrust down their throats nor paraded as back up powers, the audience resorts to teasing, interrogation, mistrusting and arguing with the group. This vulnerability offers scope for open debate in the fields. When the 'Pacha Mannu' troupe members were introduced after the show as university

students/scholars/professionals, it brought each actor as individuals, educated people, as role models with seriousness in what they say.

This is not to undermine organisational movements having cultural squads but, to expand the scope of these bodies go beyond what a political pamphlet can do. They can mobilise, give enough scope for people to share their views, doubts and make decisions. It is worthwhile to discuss the need for these kinds of open-ended spaces as part of mobilisation, awareness raising, campaigns and organisational network. It is also an insight to be borne in mind by various participatory training programmes of voluntary agencies.

'Pacha Mannu' is a case in point to deepen our discussions, alter our modes of functioning into a more democratic one, provide a space for bringing out not altogether favourable views and conflicts out in the open and to complicate the issues and solutions without rushing into easy, fixed notions.

References

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