

Drama achieves what sermons can't

Safeer Ullah Khan

Manzoor Hussain, 33, had been smoking for over 15 years. He had a meagre income and his three children had dropped out of school because he would not pay their tuition fees on time. His wife was seriously upset with this state of affairs, but it was no use talking to Hussain. He would often ignore her and sometimes resort to violence. As his father and other elderly people in the community came to know about the situation, they too tried to talk sense to him, but to no avail.

However, the situation changed dramatically. One day, Hussain came home and called all his three children and wife. They were all afraid that something must have gone seriously wrong. They were holding their breath, anticipating abuse or even violence, as Hussain looked into each one's eyes very calmly and said, "I would not smoke from today, and all of you would go to school from next month." None of them could utter a single word, but kept looking at him in sheer disbelief. "How come," exclaimed his wife, after a long awkward pause.

To cut the story short, he had seen a performance by a street theatre group. The short play was on the issue of domestic violence and its impact on the family, especially children. Hussain was so thoroughly affected by the play that he roamed the streets thinking about his wife and children. Finally he took out the cigarette pack from his pocket and threw it into the nearby dustbin. He realized he was spending Rs 2000 (USD 20) on his cigarettes every month—an amount enough to pay for the education of his three children at the community school. Drama had achieved what all the sermons by elderly people in the community could not.

Theatre has fascinated people around the world since time immemorial. On the one hand, the elite classes had their own theatre that told the stories of kings, queens, princes and princesses; on the other hand, there was a tradition of street theatre that focused on the common man's life and problems. The elite theatre made heavy use of costumes and other props, with usually a very large cast; street theatre meanwhile, was comparatively inexpensive entertainment.

The subcontinent of India and Pakistan has its own tradition of people's theatre known as Notanki, Natak, or Raahs. The most important aspect of this traditional theatre is its simplicity. Unlike theatre in the proscenium, street theatre entails minimum use of lights, cosmetics/makeup, costumes and other paraphernalia. A character is established with a small but significant prop, such as a stick to portray a policeman, a stool/chair to represent a king's throne and so forth. The actor achieves success with his acting skills: his voice control, body language and facial expressions.

This kind of theatre was quite popular among the masses, and people thronged to see such performances, which were held at *melas* or fairs regularly, in every nook and corner of the subcontinent. There were groups which would regularly perform various plays based on traditional stories and historic events. I do not know about India, but here in Pakistan, such groups have ceased to perform. I personally met quite a few people who used to perform for such groups, but have long changed their profession for various reasons.

Its strong appeal makes theatre one of the most cherished tools for development workers, especially those involved in advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns. As the sub-continental version is more affordable and culturally acceptable, it becomes more important for awareness

raising campaigns. There is no need to hire professional actors and actresses, as members of a community can themselves prepare short plays with minimum training.

Alex Mavrocordatos says, “The first step to development is a change of attitude, both individual and collective — and in that order — from declared helplessness to empowerment. This is culture in action, and theatre is a cultural tool.”

Theatre is a cultural tool that helps change people’s attitudes. When they prepare a play on a certain issue facing their community, they analyze its different aspects, search for its causes and learn about its possible consequences. These insights lead to a change in the attitude of the people who are directly involved in the production of the play.

As these activists become aware of the complications of the issue, they can become the best advocates on the issue for the rest of the community, and their play can be the best way to convince other members of the community to take the issue seriously.

Furthermore, these people have a continuous presence in the community as opposed to advocacy campaigners who visit a community for a short time, and cannot have long term interaction with the community.

Another special aspect of this kind of theatre is that the play is produced by the members of the community, so it portrays their problems in their own unique context, which makes it more relevant to the viewers. When directing a team of volunteers from Muzaffarabad (a district of Azad Jammu and Kashmir in Pakistan) on the issues of personal hygiene and cleanliness, I came to know of the unhygienic practices indulged in by community members. I was told that while people did purchase soap, they would keep it under lock and key and take it out only for guests – something I would never have known if I was working with professional actors from Rawalpindi/Islamabad where I live. We developed scenes based on such ‘inside’ information, and the play became so powerful that after the first performance, around half a dozen kids ran to their homes, washed their hands and returned to the performance venue to show their washed hands to the theatre team.

What happens is that people start identifying themselves with the characters of the play, which makes them feel the agony, pain and suffering as well as joys of the characters. As a result, what the play’s characters learn is also learnt by the audience as well. It results in a change in the way the people perceive that particular issue, which leads towards a change in behavior afterwards. Drama achieves what endless sermons cannot. Theatre remains an under-utilized tool in the world. We need to make proper use of this powerful tool to bring about a positive change in our societies.

[Footnote for first page] Safer Ullah Khan is a practitioner of street theatre working in Pakistan. Currently, he is working as Coordinator, Bedari Theatre Program and is a member of Theatre Wallay, a newly established group trying to revive theatre and cultural activities to de-radicalize Pakistan’s youth.