

Development Oriented Theatre: Challenges and Prospects

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Development oriented theatre, as we call it today, does not have any long tradition than almost last twenty five years. However; it doesn't mean that Gujarati theatre did not touch upon the human and social development related themes/issues earlier.

In the age of globalization, liberalization and privatization, the 'development sector' has become very significant as it provides a 'human face' to market ('open') economy. In other words, this emerging open economy has been adversely affecting the lives of the downtrodden, particularly in the third world country like ours, and the whole world in general. The social structure is promptly sacrificing the basic needs of society like employment, education and health; even basic life serving natural resources like forest, land and water are left in the cruel hands of the inhuman market economy for exploitation. In such circumstances, 'development sector' is the only means to serve as a bridge between the downtrodden and the economy, and it strives to fulfil the basic needs of the poor. For the last three decades, the 'development sector' has come into existence in our country; and in order to attain its objectives it has been developing various arts, cultural forms and mass media as its instruments. Theatre is one of such effective and powerful mediums.

Although from its very inception, Modern Gujarati Theatre targeted the orthodox social traditions and the paradoxes of the modern social life, it never got rid of the mercantile cultural values in totality. It never aimed at the target of 'radical social change' but only at the 'soft social reforms'. Thus, it could resume only the role of 'sanskar' activity; and never for once the inspiration for social-cultural movement or struggle. On the contrary, it always maintained a safe distance from the social-cultural-political movements. Besides, it always indulged in entertaining the so-called educated, aristocratic and elite class as its target audience and never attempted to reach the larger masses of poor, exploited and oppressed classes. They remained untouchables forever.

During 60s & 70s, many young directors and artists emerged on Gujarati Theatre with experimental and innovative techniques pertaining to the form and the style of performance but except a few, all of them were thoroughly devoted to *art for the sake of art*. Thus, the dream of parallel Gujarati Theatre was aborted untimely till the 90s.

In the beginning of the 90s the concept of "Theatre for Social change" slowly and gradually evolved. Nevertheless, one cannot forget the contribution of revolutionary theatre activist like Jashvant Thaker and other artists of IPTA movement during the independence struggle until the 50s. How can democratic theatre keep mum witnessing the tremendous changes caused by anti-people forces and trends like the emergence of globalization, anti-reservation movement of 1981 and 1985? Communal riots from 1985 to 1992, the beginning of the process of making Gujarat the laboratory of communal fascism by the Hindutva fundamentalist forces, the retreat of the socialist forces etc. In such turbulent circumstances, politically conscious cultural groups like Lok Kala Manch (Ahmedabad), Parivartan (Baroda) and 'Samvedan Sanskrutik Manch' (Ahmedabad) emerged and attempted to formulate a 'democratic Gujarati theatre'. They focussed on the theme and issues of the exploited class of poor, oppressed, tribals and women for their theatre and street-theatre. Their approach was creative and struggle oriented simultaneously. They raised the voice of suppressed and oppressed class in the theatre. Experimental theatre group like 'Garage Studio Theatre' and the eminent individual theatre personality like Aditi Desai also helped significantly in these attempts. But at the

end of the decade all these attempts were almost nullified, on the one hand by mercantile capitalist culture (mahajani sanskriti) of Gujarat; and on the other hand, by the challenging questions raised against democratic ideology worldwide by the reactionary forces.

In the same decade began the 'development oriented Gujarati theatre' concretely. Although, the development sector of the modern age began in the previous decade, the heralding of the new phase of capitalist economy (namely, globalisation of capital) in the 80s, the 'development sector' had to assume the role of 'human face' of the new form of capitalism that is 'market economy'. It was the 'development sector' which tried to find solutions for the dire problems faced by oppressed, tribals, women and other downtrodden within the limitations of the present established market economy and political setup. To achieve this objective, as mentioned in the beginning of the article, the established socio-eco-political setup started to give shape to 'development oriented theatre' according to its interests. There was no such powerful and effective alternative as a tool at hand, the first language of humans; namely, the theatre to convey the message of development and necessary awareness unto the last; the masses of the downtrodden section of society.

The interrelationship between theatre and the development sector

One of the main objective of the *development sector* is human development, and the target groups (masses) are deprived communities. In other words; development theatre has to sort out issues related to the development of the deprived class (communities) and find out the solutions of the same within the limitation of the established market economy setup and the present political system. Theatre as a means has to be used to achieve the process of development, specially to create awareness and organizational mobilisation force among the deprived masses. Therefore it needs a trained cultural and theatre activist, not a trained actor. Because its 'actor' is the deprived masses, in a way, the 'actor' of development theatre is in a true sense a 'non-actor' (definition given by the great Brazilian theatre activist Augusto Boal.) This reality of development sector of demanding 'the theatre of non-actors' has thrown a huge challenge before the cultural and theatre activists connected with development theatre.

The second challenge for the cultural theatre activists was the issue of Aesthetics of the theatre of non-actors. In other words, Aesthetics of the theatre of the Deprived. In the context of Gujarati development oriented theatre, this challenge has been successfully accepted by the theatre activists, from the democratic theatre activists to development theatre activists.

Democratic theatre activists rebelled against the traditional Aesthetics and started developing a new alternative aesthetics in Europe when they started using theatre to help revolutionary working class movements almost one and half century before. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, theatre activists like Mayorhold & Bertold Brecht developed and gave new dimensions to the new aesthetics. During 70s Augusto Boal not only produced and developed the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' in close connection with the mass-movements in Brazil; he also redefined the relationship and dialogue process between the audience and the actors. He gave an altogether new dimension to the aesthetics of the theatre Boal rejected the old concept of spectator-actor. In his theatre, audience and actor are 'one'; he rejected the duality and innovated the concept of 'spect-actor'. This legacy of democratic theatre helps to lighten the hurdles created by the traditional, established Gujarati theatre in the wake of the progress of the development oriented Gujarati theatre.

Even today in Gujarat and elsewhere, wherever development oriented theatre came into existence the component of basic action training is grim. Ironically, neither the development sector nor the theatre training institutions have ever taken it seriously. Usually the cultural activists who take the responsibility to prepare development oriented plays train the participants belonging to the deprived class, or the members of the development organizations. Naturally it affects the effectiveness of the

play or according to the development sector's view the quality of the outcome suffers. As we have discussed, development oriented play is the medium of 'non-actors.' Furthermore, 'development' is in the center, instead of catharsis (Rasnishpatti). Nevertheless; acting, dance and music are the basic vital elements of the 'play language'. Play is not at all possible without acting. In such a situation the performers should be given intensive training.

Actually, this theatre not only needs acting training, but it should also incorporate serious social curriculum, since it has emerged as a powerful & effective means of people's participation in development process. If social workers (graduates and post-graduates) have to be enabled to view the development oriented theatre in a proper perspective, they would naturally be able to use it more efficiently and in a meaningful manner. And in turn, development programs in the future would be intensified and accelerated in more worthy manners.

The same suggestion is also applicable to drama training institutions. Now the development sector has become a profession. On the other hand, the cheap, slick, superfluous entertainment means easily available in the market have raised a serious question for the survival of the theatre in general. Thirdly, where are the degree and diploma holding trained drama students? What is their contribution to theatre? The scenario would change considerably if they are – extensively and intensively – exposed to the development oriented and radical theatre. This exposure would be helpful in more than one way, not only for theatre, but for the society and the pupil. It may open new horizons for society, for the career of the drama students and in turn would produce unexpected fruits. This suggestion gathers further momentum in the context of the rapidly growing development sector in Gujarat, which is attaining new heights in national & international perspective, and there are two degree colleges in Gujarat who provide drama education.

One may safely comment by observing the inter-relationship of theatre and development sector, that both of them are complementary to each other, though there is a wide gap in understanding their mutual needs. The Herculean task is still to be done in the field in a developing country like ours. Still, development sector uses theatre to the least, as an effective means of Development. Sometime it is used only as a means of entertainment or propaganda. On the other hand, theatre artists view 'development sector' only as a profession. In fact, theatre is a vital and useful medium of dialogue between the artists and the audience. It is a 'language' – a powerful means of communication. The development sector endows the highest place to "people's participation" in its process of development, without it development is meaningless and non-justifiable.

From time immemorial, theatre has been functioning as a vehicle of human culture, for centuries it has showing the mirror to human society. Whereas, development sector emphasizes on economic development of the deprived-section only and views their socio-cultural development from a very sectarian perspective. Thus, whenever a large-scale communal riot breaks out or dalit oppression occurs on a wide range, years of hard work of the development sector is swept away in a few days. The genocide of 2002 in Gujarat is the best example. Of course, the development sector is now slowly and seriously contemplating on the socio-cultural identity of the deprived section like Dalit, Minority, Tribals and women. But the basic point is that in this direction there are still miles to go before theatre is capable to play a significant role in this field.

Here it should be noted that development oriented theatre has to a certain extent strived to give a cultural dimension to the development sector. Augusto Boal theory has been applied in the field slowly. Aditi Desai, Darpan Academy and 'Samvedan Cultural Program' have been performing dramas based on 'Forum theatre' with development oriented political-cultural issues and trying to involve the audience directly in the resolution process of the issues. Today agitational theatre, particularly street theatre, has been losing its edge due to lack of proper understanding of its characteristics and overuse of it by the development sector and radical organizations. Now, unfortunately, even the deprived section also apprehends street theatre as a means of propagandist

entertainment rather than a powerful means of awareness, movement and radical change. Now, it is high time for the development sector to consider and take up the challenge of recreation of the new form of theatre and adopt it as it requires serious consideration.

So far I have devoted enough space to the successful experiments and experiences of 'development oriented theatre,' now let me briefly dwell upon a remarkable and different kind of experiment. The Gujarat genocide 2002 posed serious long term social and cultural challenges before Gujarat society. A long process of reflection and analysing among a few NGOs and cultural activists resulted in the 'Samvedan Cultural Programme,' a centre of 'non-actors' chosen from the victims living in the sensitive and affected areas and hailing from the poorest toilers of the society (Dalits, Muslims and OBC) from the age group 18 to 25 years. The main objective of the program was to train this group to prepare plays and songs against globalisation, communalism and cultural Fascism; perform them among deprived and exploited class and areas, to spread awareness and strengthen the movement against these menaces. So far, 20 such young boy and girls have been trained and now they are training other youth from the target group. During these two years this group has visited 8 states besides Gujarat. They have undergone various experiments and presented many performances of more than 10 plays like 'Gujarat 2004' (Forum Theatre), 'Antarrashtriya Buvo' (Street theatre), 'Ghar' (Bertold Brecht style), 'Suno Nadi Kya Kehti Hai' (Proscenium theatre), '20 March' (Improvisation), 'Ek Rakabi Futi' (Poetic drama), etc. A repertory has been launched for these 'non-actor' trainees since one year. In this entirely new experiment, the youth of the deprived and exploited section have been getting training of not only various aspects of dramaturgy but socio-political and cultural dimension too.

Although this experiment is still in its primary phase and facing various hurdles critically; it has been struggling to face the challenges of 'development oriented modern Indian theatre' and trying to find out solutions positively.

It has been facing two significant challenges in terms of theatre:

- (1) to develop 'the theatre of the oppressed', initiated by Augusto Boal in terms of theory and practice; in context of the socio, political and economic realities of the deprived & exploited section of Indian society.
- (2) to develop the aesthetics of 'the theatre of the oppressed'.

These are huge challenges; not only for the Samvedan Cultural Programme or 'the theatre of the oppressed' but for Indian Theatre also, in a larger perspective.

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