

Why we are working on the issue of violence on women?

Most social action occurs as a result of the individual's inability to tackle his own problems alone. This is more so in the case of women's organisations – it is when a woman who has been victim of a violent incident appeals for help that some action begins. Most women's organizations come into being because of such cases – of domestic violence or rape, for instance – and continue to deal with such cases even after they are well established. There is an urgent need, no doubt, to provide services to such women – moral support, temporary shelter, arbitration, legal aid, support in approaching the administration and getting it to work and so on. We think these are necessary, but in order to provide even these services effectively, there has to be a comprehensive understanding of the conditions prevalent in our society as a whole. When a violent incident occurs, it is the aggressive manifestation of an underlying, sometimes chronic, oppressive situation. Dealing with such an aggressive situation, especially in the presence of an indifferent law enforcing machinery, is extremely difficult for a lone individual.

We can remember Augusto Boal here, in his book *Games for Actors And non Actors* he has discussed Twenty fundamental topics. In the first topic("Oppression or aggression? ") he has said " My conclusion is that Forum Theatre is always possible when alternative exist. In opposite case it becomes fatalist theatre."

Women in our society are born and brought up with conservative and often very patriarchal values. A woman's sheer existence is therefore full of oppression. If we look at these oppressive situations in great detail – discrimination between sons and daughters, forced early marriage, quiet submission to dominance of the in-laws, having no say in childbearing – it will ensure a deeper understanding of situations of aggression. Women's organizations usually resort to so-called progressive legislation to counter such situations – eg the law against atrocities on women, the law ensuring maintenance for a divorced woman, the law prohibiting dowry etc. It has been the experience of many women activists that such legislation does not really take into account the position of women in society today, let alone try to change their position.

Aggression is always difficult to deal with. But undoubtedly aggression is the climax or manifestation of a state of continuous oppression. If a problem is dealt with at the level of oppression, perhaps it will not reach the point of aggression. So we must start working from the beginning or from the root. We must intervene at a time when the situation is still at the stage of oppression and has not become aggressive, or reached a point of no return. Aggression does not necessarily mean physical aggression. It can be emotional aggression. It can be any sort of mental crisis. And this is what we should aim to do in Theatre of the Oppressed

VIOLENCE ON WOMEN: Oppression, and not aggression lies at the root

Can it be denied that the reason behind domestic violence and violence outside is patriarchy?

Patriarchy cannot be understood in all its dimensions theoretically. Because theoretical understanding has its limitations and cannot always take experience into account. Theory gives a clear idea about a fact but cannot analyse various dimensions of the fact. To

understand various dimensions of a fact, experience is necessary,. If I cannot understand various dimensions I cannot deal with the situation created by the fact.

Jana Sanskriti, from its inception, has studied the history of human development in an attempt to understand patriarchy. We have also been interested in knowing how patriarchy acts at various levels. And how patriarchal values penetrate into our minds in such a way that we cannot see it. This internalisation of patriarchal values takes place all the time. We have seen how women in our villages often accept oppression because they have absorbed patriarchal values in such a way that they do not see it as oppression. While practising introspective theatre among women, we have encountered reactions like – “if a woman does not do her household duties properly she can be beaten up by her husband, not too severely.” Such attitudes are not unique to Indian society, neither are they a result of poverty. Such attitudes exist where there is patriarchy. Such attitudes exist everywhere because there is an internalisation of patriarchal values. I have come across similar reactions amongst women even in countries like Austria, Germany and France, where women enjoy some economic power and poverty is not as serious as it is in our country. This is how patriarchal values are absorbed in human kind.

We have also seen that there are very few organisations, which actually deal with and understand how patriarchy acts at various levels. Pro-women legislation, though we do resort to them at times, do not really help us in our work. The institutions, which bring about pro-women legislation are themselves steeped in patriarchal values. One of the strongest characteristics of patriarchy is centralization. The state sponsored legislative authority is also centralised. It is an assembly of patriarchal values. Even sometimes we see women in parliament. But they all represent parties which are out and out patriarchal. Therefore the pro-women legislations have limitations in real life. There is a conflict with patriarchal values at every level. The institutions, which come up with such progressive legislation, do not understand the conflict between laws and the patriarchal values acting at various levels in the family and society. Either they pretend as though they are against patriarchy while knowing that the laws are not helping women or its an unconscious attempt to fight patriarchy without understanding its presence in our every day life.

Through our plays we try to convey how patriarchy acts at various levels. On many occasions we have enacted these plays before the women we work with. It was for us an essential task to create a space for the women so that they can see themselves in their own reality, very minutely. An understanding of patriarchal values in their everyday lives is most important for our women.

We have said earlier that centralisation is a characteristic of patriarchy. Centralisation, in turn, gives birth to a culture of monologue. Boal has said “ monologue is the root cause of all kinds of oppression” and this not something we understand theoretically. We all understand this through our experience in social , political life. In theatre of the Oppressed we try to practice a culture of dialogue. Dialogue offers space for all and makes everybody active. Nobody is reduced to just watching, listening and carrying out orders. In a dialogue, everybody can speak, act and suggest. In the process, even the most dominating person enjoys the cope of rationalising his emotions, his actions. One can become analytical about the society she/he lives in, thus she grows intellectually. In fact,

the principle objective of us should be to establish dialogue in society at all levels – and the process should be continued at home and out side home. The family must be democratized to fight against oppression on women.

The question now is – how can this oppression be handled?

The first step is to start a process of empowerment. This first step can be taken in the following ways:-

1. Introspection through theatre – inside every human being is a store of talent and brilliance that we often do not know about and therefore suffer from a sense of inferiority. This sense of inferiority is also the product of a culture of monologue. Monologue is a product of centralisation, which in turn is a product of patriarchy, in a centralized situation, a few act, speak and take decisions while the majority remains passive. The few, because of the power they wield, enjoy a sense of superiority, the majority, on the other hand, is pushed deeper and deeper into a feeling of inferiority. The conflict between superior and inferior marks the oppressor and the oppressed. Under these circumstances, a human being, a woman in particular, becomes a passive, mute, silent observer who always positions herself at the receiving end. She listens, she watches, she waits for instructions from the top. Thus she is oppressed. Through introspective techniques we try to bring about a meeting between the inner talent and the individual, which makes the individual articulate and confident about handling real life situations. She discovers herself, she discovers a new human being which was always there but unknown to her. Introspection through theatre brings out “the perfection and strength which is already there in every human being.”
2. Performing theatre – In daily life most women are not given much importance by the privileged sections of society, in fact their role is constantly undermined so as to create a sense of inferiority. For such an individual, the act of standing up on stage with a huge audience in front and acting in a full-fledged performance imparts immense confidence. We can remember Mary who was sketched by Boal in his autobiography. Mary, a house maid by profession said after a performance that she discovered herself as a woman, as a human being. Theatre gave her a respectable identity, though housemaid but a powerful talented human being. Theatre of the Oppressed scripts power. It brings women like Mary outside the kitchen, makes their world bigger and inspires them to try to reconstruct a human society with the men around them. Yes we can see this around the world.