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Janam's *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* (This also is Violence): A Review

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It was the 27th of August, 2017, a lazy Sunday morning in Kolkata. Traffic is light, minus the rush of weekdays and office commuters. Some fifty odd spectators comprising college and University students and theatre enthusiasts gather at Padatik Little Theatre, a part of Padatik Cultural Centre at 6/7 A.J.C Bose road, an unassuming simple studio theatre tucked off in a by-lane multipurpose building where the Padatik Dance school is also located. Kids and teenagers are coming in for their 'Sunday dance classes'. I have come here for the Jana Natya Manch (Janam in short)¹ production of *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai*, a street play.

Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai was first done by Janam in June 2005, voicing protest against gender violence. It is part of a rich repertory of woman-centred plays of Janam like *Aurat*, *Police Charitram*, *Who Bol Uthi*, *Artanaad* and *Kaafila Ab Chal Para Hai*.

This was a great opportunity for me to catch up with Janam's performance, live in Kolkata. The studio theatre at Padatik Cultural Centre is a medium hall with black cloth backdrop before which the performance takes place, facing a small gallery of seats for the spectators. The gallery was full within minutes and many had to remain standing. Spotlights were on, the backdrop firm and ready, with a banner in bold straight Hindi words declaring



the name of the group- Jana Natya Manch. The bare floor was all set for the play to begin.

The attention of the expectant spectators is at once arrested by the rhythmic march-in of three actors with regular drum beats as background score. The play begins with a rhymed re-telling of the mythic/epic tales of women characters like Sita, Ahalya, Renuka, Draupadi and Surpanakha, all victims of male violence in a patriarchal society. But it hits at the spectators, with sharp clean shots, rather than being a sad recitation full of pathos. This is Janam's street theatre, which Safdar Hashmi² had defined as "a militant political theatre of protest..."³ hard-hitting, targeted, crisp and pithy. It is a theatre of protest and theatre here is a political weapon necessary to fight for justice.

Now, coming to the paraphernalia and props, besides the stark black backdrop and spotlights and a bare floor, you only have the actors, dressed uniformly in black *kurtas*. Props, whatever used in the play, have been minimal, functional and significant. For instance during the opening lines of a retelling of mythic tales of injustice and violence against the women characters by the patriarchal society, all that is needed is symbolic stylized postures and a clever use of a white sheet of cloth, that at one moment becomes Draupadi's saree symbolizing the scene of her molestation (*vastraharan*), the next moment symbolizing Ahalya metamorphosed into a stone statue, again with a stylized gesture and the cloth rolled up and held tight symbolizing the sharp blade of Parasurama's axe with which he decapitated his mother Renuka.

The mythic tales bring us straight into the contemporary world, where you realize that the tales of violence have continued since mythic times to the present. What we take for



granted in our everyday or ignore or do not notice is protested here and the protest is registered through a brief cameo where three variants of ‘common man’ (Ashok Tiwari, Satyam) are satirically exposed and shown guilty of the ‘male gaze’. A spectator, unaware, may smile or laugh when the male actors, the common men sing and dance – “*Hum toh ghurenge...*” (We will stare...) but the choric figures of two women instantly makes one realize that the laughter is pointed against him too. And the one line rhetorical question – “Staring at women is not violence, is it?” makes you realize that the act of staring/stalking or the ‘male gaze’ is violence.

The play proceeds through vignettes or collages which are different scenes depicting different situations but unified into one theme – violence against women that comes in different types, and one message – the necessity of protest. The second scene shows, or should I say showcases ‘woman’ as a commodity to be desired and possessed, where the groom sets the demands and choices and wants a tailor-made bride. The post-marital scenario is also brilliantly underlined, with all the cliché attitudes of patriarchy toward the bride. The husband, son, father-in-law by imposing the patriarchal restrictions- commit violence against the married woman, whether in the role of wife, mother, or daughter-in-law. Each male character attacks the woman pungently with words and slaps her (stylized gestures). Ironically, and the irony is not lost on the spectators, each slap is a slap back on the face of patriarchy.

The third scene of a young girl and a roadside ‘Romeo’ pestering her highlights the menace of eve-teasing. The male character, brilliantly played by Sudhanva Deshpande, wears flashy jeans and T shirt, a head scarf, sunglasses, smokes a lot, shaves with ‘Gillette’,



wears 'Axe- effect' perfume and rides a motor-bike, thus depicting all the popular, heavily-advertised concept of a 'definitely male'. And here also the male character takes the woman for granted, without respecting her will to differ, her right to protest and say "No means No"⁴. He molests the young girl (a powerful performance by Komita Dhanda). Again, violence has been committed. But if this is cruel no less merciless is the cliché and callous response of the patriarchal society. The police want to brush off the case as it was not in their jurisdiction. The media wants to sensationalize the incident and insensitively and unabashedly wants to dramatize the incident for the viewers (*natya-rupantar*, a very in-thing in electronic media nowadays). The usual finger-pointing starts, with the victim being accused rather the perpetrator of the crime. Someone says the girl must have been in fault, someone says she must not have ventured out late at night alone, a religious guru or God-man finds fault in not being pious enough. The real culprit remains untouched outside the ambit of this finger-pointing, and the patriarchal society has no words to spare for him.

The plain white sheet of cloth remains a crucial prop throughout the play. The girl, victim of physical violence (she is whipped with long red laces symbolizing hunters by the road-'Romeo' and two more male actors), molestation and rape, lies on the crime scene with the white sheet becoming a shroud. The ending shows two female actors (Malayasree Hashmi and Priyanka) and the victim girl stand-up and raise their voice of protest. The white sheet has now been rolled and left on the floor straightened like a line, and the women step across it and come forward towards the spectators, facing them (as if they have crossed a threshold) and demand that we raise our voices in protest against (by now the spectators are fully aware) the various facets of patriarchy that dominates, dictates, subjugates, oppresses, victimizes,



vandalizes and ravages the dignity of a woman and are tantamount to ‘violence’.

Endnotes

¹ Jana Natya Manch, a theatre group was established in 1973 in Delhi by initial members from Student’s Federation of India (S.F.I)

² Founder member of Janam, theatre activist and ideologue, actor, writer, lyricist, artist who inspired Janam to venture into street theatre, victim of a fatal assault by political goons during a street show of *Halla Bol!* on January 1, 1989 at Jhandapur, Sahibabad near Delhi, due to which he succumbed to death on January 2, 1989.

³ “The Tradition of Street Theatre” in *The Right to Perform*, Sahmat, Delhi, 1989, p. 9.

⁴ The dialogue delivered at the concluding court scene of the film *Pink* (2016) by Amitabh Bachchan.