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Theatres of Afghanistan: An interview of Md. Azim Hussainzadah

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Theatre has had its origin and roots in religious rituals, ethnic and national habits and traditions. The content and structure of theatre and the way it was presented, developed and widened, meant to deal with all kinds of human affairs. It was same with the theatre in Afghanistan, which had its origin and practice within regional and religious rituals before Islam spread in Afghanistan.

The Theatre Department of Kabul University came to Santiniketan with their students' production of *Kabuliwala*, by Rabindranath Tagore. The play was performed in the language called 'Dari' which is the national language of Afghanistan. It was a great memoir in the performance history of Santiniketan where the Bengali speaking actors from Santiniketan and Pashto speaking actors from Afghanistan have performed together in the play. It reminds us of the time of British Colonial period when the Kabuliwalas from Afghanistan used to come to India especially in Bengal (Kolkata) for commercial purpose and a buyer-seller relationship built up between the natives and the Afgans, which sometimes surpassed beyond that. In this present production, the director tried to do the same thing to rediscover that relationship what Rabindranath had portrayed.



QUES 1. Please tell us about the theatrical environment at present in Afghanistan.

A.H. You know, the situation of Afghanistan is not good. Theatre practices are not good exactly, but after the Taliban left our country, the theatre department was started in the university (Kabul University).

When Taliban got into the power in 1995, theatre in Afghanistan was forced to go into “a deep sleep” for a long time. Only the Faculty of Fine Arts had some theatre activities, like teaching and performing, using sometimes very tricky measures to be able to survive those years artistically.

At present, through our department, theatre is exploring to the entire country, especially in villages, after the Taliban gone away from the country.

QUES 2. Is there any particular theatre or performance tradition in Afghanistan?

A.H. Not specifically. But if we look at the history of Afghanistan’s theatre, we see that the *Madahan* (narrators and preachers) are the pioneers in our theatre. These narrators usually appeared in crowded bazaars and gathering places to narrate epic, religious and mythological tales. They emphasised their narrations with gestures, mimic, movements, and altering voices and accents. They used common and poetic language. The *Madahan* themselves narrated and played all different roles of a tale. The content of the tales were dedicated to Islamic characters, which later were partially replaced by the mythological themes.



Sadhos are the second group of pioneers of Afghanistan's theatre. Usually they narrated tales and stories of courageous behaviour and the religious characters of Islam.

QUES 3. What about the other professional or non-professional Theatre groups or companies in Afghanistan apart from your department?

A.H. Yeah. If we see a little back, in 1949, the City Theatre was established which was managed and directed by Abdul Rashid Jalia. Their productions were composed of common and simple language. Notable productions of this foundation were Black Wear, Two Loves, Soldier Love, Old Shoe, Cheater Woman, etc.

Meanwhile, Muhammad Ali Raunaq (Theatre practitioner in Afghanistan during the of 50's & 60's) came back from France, graduated in theatre and established the First Dramatic Arts Course and brought the principles of modern theatre in Afghanistan.

He continued his activities till 1960 and very specifically we can say that in between the years of 1945 to 1960, when theatre was highly appreciated and consumed among all of the Afghan society. The plays ranged from tales about Afghan history and cultural epics to Shakespeare and the plays of Anton Chekov.

Right now, after the Taliban regime, we have some theatre groups in Afghanistan. All the members of those groups belong to our students of the theatre department. Some of them are active and some of them are inactive. Especially I can tell you about a



particular group called “Political Theatre” (The National Theatre) which belongs to the government from 1943. They are working very less. Except them, there is ‘Aftab Theatre’ which is supported by the Institut Française. And a lady, named Arian Manoshkin, theatre director from France is also providing her support to this group. Right now this group is staying in France and working there.

And there are some other theatre groups as well, like ‘Parwaiz Group’, ‘Azdar Group’, ‘Tajazi Theatre’, ‘Farookh Theater’. These groups exist in Afghanistan in name only, but mostly they are inactive because they don’t have money, no support and the members of these groups are too old in age. Consequently, they are a bit inactive than others.

Meanwhile theatre activities re-started in the provinces by themselves and independent and individual theatre groups came into existence such as ‘Theatre of Mazar-e-Sharif’, ‘Farookh Theatre’, ‘Saddiq Theatre’, ‘Takamul Theatre’, ‘Asmayee Theatre’ and several others.

QUES 4. Does your department (Theatre) take any initiative to support them??

A.H. Yes. Our department is supporting them every time. When the directors or professors are coming from other countries to our department, that time we are inviting them to send their actors, directors to take training or attending seminars, workshops and others.



QUES 5. What about the women? What is their position in theatre field?

A.H. Not actually so good. In 1958, Mrs. Zainab Saraj established the ‘Women Theatre’ with Sayed Muqadas Negah, being the artistic director of that theatre. The plays were performed just for women audiences and it was for the first time in Afghanistan that women took part in theatre as actresses, and actresses like Mrs. Habiba Askar, Mrs. Zulaikha Negah, and Najiba Dina were the first ones. In the beginning the audience also consisted only of women, but after a few years they successfully opened the theatre for a mixed audience.

But as the Taliban came into power, all such initiatives collapsed. But, at present, some groups of Afghanistan have started theatre along with the female artists. And very interestingly in provinces like Farah, Kunidz, Harat, Kandahar, girls are working in Theatre. They made their theatre groups in their provinces. They did shows in our festivals too. Now they are also working as free lance actresses.

QUES 6. What type of Theatre festivals you are organizing in Afghanistan?

A.H. In Afghanistan there was no festival until 2003. After a long struggle Department of Theatre had started a theatre festival with collaboration some of our friend countries, called as “National Theatre Festival of Afghanistan” which was organized in Kabul with the help of Goethe Institute in 2004. Department of Theatre had performed the



main role to organize the festival. In this festival there were 22 shows from 8 provinces of Afghanistan.

Like these way, some organizations like Goethe Institut, Institut Française, British Council, Cultural Centre of America, had given us monetary and physical support to do the festivals from 2004 to 2010. Department of Theatre of Kabul University had organized these festivals.

In the 2nd festival, all expenses were borne by Goethe institut and Institut Française. It was held in Kabul in 2005, we named the festival as “Summer Theater”, and this year we had a lot of artists from different countries in Kabul and they organized workshops for the young generation.

In the 3rd festival, the “British Council” and US Embassy also announced their cooperation to organize it. It was in 2006, the participants and groups came from various provinces, which was much bigger than last 2 years. The women theater groups were also showing their plays in this festival.

The 4th festival, in 2007, held at Kabul University. Again the expenses were carried by 4 countries. In this festival we had a increased the number of the productions from different provinces. We had plays from 17 provinces of Afghanistan. In this festival the afghan refugees in Pakistan, Iran and Germany wanted to take part but due to lack of time they could not.

After 2010, financers left us. They told that they didn’t have enough money to pay for us. After they left, the festival also stopped. Again we have started another festival



called “Student Theatre Festival” in Kabul University. Still the festival is going on the month of November. Still this is confined to national sphere. But we are thinking that we will equip it with international productions.

But, we are highly grateful to the government and the people of Germany, who helped Afghanistan in various sectors including art, culture and theatre more than any other century. And in this new era also Germany is playing an outstanding role in the Afghanistan Reconstruction Project.

QUES 7. Is the government supporting you to do this ‘Student Theatre Festival’?

A.H. No, the government is not giving any support. Only the Norway Government, especially Burgen Theatre of Norway is giving money to do the festival. And also they have given money for this trip (to Santiniketan as well as some other parts of India) also. And the Goethe Institut also had given us support for the last festival which we did 3 to 4 months back.

I mentioned before that in Afghanistan, we have one “Political Theatre” which belongs to our government. When we, theatre department have started the festival on 2004, there was no activity of the ‘Political Theatre’. The name was there but they were inactive actually. Immediately after the festival they had started their work again in 2005 in the name of “National Theatre of Afghanistan”. Still the same name is there and people working there from 2005 until today are the students of our department.



QUES 8. Do you have any 'National Theatre House' in Afghanistan?

A.H. There is not yet any theatre house specifically. But in around 1973 'Afghan Nendari' theatre was established in Kabul equipped with a big structure and endowed with many participants. It started producing fruitful performances after Afghanistan went through the first political changes. After the communist regime took over in 1978, many theatre artists immigrated to overseas. In 1993, when civil war started among factions of the Mujaheddin, the building of Kabul Theatre (Afghan Nendari) was destroyed and artists got scattered everywhere.

When Taliban's regime was overwhelmed and the interim government established, theatre revived like other aspects of life in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Information and Culture paid attention to the theatre and the first performances took place in the ruins of Kabul Theatre in front of hundreds of people, sitting on broken and burnt chairs of the theatre. Most of the artists returned to Afghanistan and for example the Kabul Theatre and the Mobile Mini Circus for Children have started performing in the provinces after long time.

Fortunately, now we are observing that after those bad times Kabul University started to reconstruct our theater house. Department of Theater of Kabul University is trying to reconstruct the entire theater environment of our land and fulfilling its responsibility to train an academic cadre .

And we have one theatre house in our department with proper equipments. And another theatre house belongs to the Institut Française in Kabul. The other groups in



Kabul and from other provinces, are also welcome to stage their production in our department.

QUES 9. For that, are you charging any money from them?

A.H. No, Not at all.

QUES 10. Are there any theatre courses in school level??

A.H. No. Not in School level. Only in the University level. And I want to mention here that, our entire educational system is totally free. Student does not need to pay any money for their tuition fees. The government bears everything from school level to the university level.

Thank you so much.