

Jung ki pukar: Avahan's cultural revolution

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How a middle class theatre group got a raw edge and energy when it incorporated folk forms and the voices of the toiling masses



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Shahirs (poets) are produced by movements, says Sambhaji Bhagat. “With the death of Annabhau Sathe, the *lokshahiri* tradition also died,” he notes. But only for a brief while—for Bhagat and his companion Vilas Ghogre emerged on the scene barely 10 years later.

As members of Avahan Natya Manch (henceforth: Avahan), they infused the group’s productions with an understanding of people’s problems from the grassroots; they provided an instinctive connect with the toiling masses in Maharashtra. “Their entry changed the class and caste character of Avahan,” says Sanober Keshwar, who worked with them in the 1980s.

Raw eggs and energy

The 1960s and ’70s were a time of great ferment internationally; revolutionary movements in various parts of the world were threatening to upturn the status quo. In India, the Naxalbari movement and its brutal quelling, followed by the Emergency (June 26, 1975-March 21, 1977) and its concomitant repression, brought the ferment closer home.

As a student of Bombay’s Elphinstone College in 1978, Sanober got attracted to and involved with a students’ organisation called Vidyarthi Pragati Sangathan (VPS). As a natural extension of her involvement in theatre in college and her interest in politics, she participated in the staging of a play by VPS for the Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR); the play was on false encounters, which were common during and after the Emergency.

“After this play, some friends suggested that we have a political theatre group of our own,” says Sanober. “I had watched Badal Sircar perform in Chhabildas Hall, and was greatly inspired by his book on third theatre by then,” she recalls.

It was decided that the new group would be called Avahan, meaning ‘call to challenge’. Members of what started out as Avahan Theatre Workshop, “mostly sons and daughters of CEOs”, drew ideas on political theatre from the famous Toulaine Drama Review; they picked up theatre skills through long workshops. Their first street play production titled *Shikhsa Ka Circus*, a critique of the education system, came out in 1979, followed by an anti-ruling class play calling for the boycott of the 1980 Lok Sabha elections.

“We would stage six or more shows in various parts of the city every day...we’d just occupy a random corner on a footpath and start off,” says Sanober, adding, “Very often, we would lose our voice from shouting out all those dialogues...Somebody told us that if we popped raw eggs into our mouths, our voices would come back for a while. I wonder how many raw eggs we ate then, given that the remedy seemed to work!”

Once, while performing in Worli, members of the group were badly beaten by CPM cadre. “They came in jeeps, armed with lathis and broken soda bottles...They ripped our saris and pulled us (women) by our hair,” says Sanober.

In the ensuing months, when Safdar Hashmi came to Bombay, he met some members of Avahan at the Bombay University garden, and apologised on behalf of the CPM. “But we were too smug and too young to talk to him properly then,” says Sanober, a fact that she rues to this day.

The group would come up with new plays through workshops, an outline of scenes would be chalked out first, followed by improvisation and writing of separate scenes in tandem.

Towards the end of 1980, the group came in touch with Sambhaji Bhagat during a performance in his college. Sambhaji joined the group shortly after, putting an end to Avahan’s practice of requesting other groups to teach them popular protest songs that could be incorporated into their plays.

The entry of Sambhaji, and later Vilas Ghogre, lent Avahan a raw edge; both were from a lower-caste background and had grown up in extreme poverty. They were also ‘organic singers’, at home with folk forms. Sambhaji especially was critical of what he saw when he joined Avahan.

“The street theatre they were doing seemed too acrobatic...there was too much speed. I told them that the *jhuggi-jhopdi* people can’t understand this speed. It can only shock people, make them still,” says Sambhaji. “I told them we’d need to mix folk forms with street theatre to make it a people’s form.”

What ensued was a debate within the group about what folk theatre and people’s theatre were, and whether they were the same. Old-timers in Avahan, mostly from the upper and middle class/caste, were of the opinion that the street theatre they were doing was also a people’s form. They were asked who the ‘people’ they were referring to were.

“I told them that in what they called people’s form or folk form, there was a huge impact of German theatre, and stressed that we needed to find an alternative that was closer home,” says Sambhaji.

The entry of Vilas Ghogre transformed the group further. Vilas was a resident of the Dumping Road area in Mulund. Coming from an extremely poor and lower-caste background, he lived in a shack made of plastic sheets, and earned his livelihood campaigning for the BJP and assisting qawwals as a writer in qawwali jugalbandi programmes. Members of what was by then Avahan Natya Manch collected Rs 8,500 and bought him a pucca room in a slum; they also got him a job as a peon in a girls’ school to help him get by.

Vilas and Sambhaji's entry gave Avahan a new direction. "They used their knowledge of folk forms and the culture of the toiling masses to give a new character to our productions," says Sanober.

The focus slowly turned to elements like the Nandi Bail (bull) that people would readily recognise, but which were turned around to critique the socio-political system.

For instance the Nandi Bail as fortune teller was incorporated in a play after suitably tweaking it. In regular practice, the *bailwala* or handler brings the bull to the village; villagers pose questions to the bullock, which are communicated to it by the *bailwala* in a singsong manner: 'Will it rain well this year?' or 'Will my wife come back to me?' The bullock would nod 'yes' or 'no' depending on how its handler would nudge it. In other words, the bullock behaved the way its handler wanted it to. In Avahan's play, the bullock was made representative of Indian democracy, and the handler a combination of imperialist and feudal forces, which controlled it secretly.

Avahan's 1983 production titled *Matdanachi Jatra (Election Mela)* also used folk forms to critique the system. "In villages, whenever a kid is sick, people take him/her to various gods and goddesses," says Sambhaji. So when a child born at midnight of August 15, 1947 falls very sick, it is taken to various gods and goddesses...but the gods and goddesses are the heads of various political parties. When the mother asks each god how the child's health will improve, each points her to a poll booth and tells her that once she casts her vote against their respective party's symbol, the child's health will improve. Eventually, she goes to a doctor—representative of the trade unionist Datta Samant who led the Mumbai mill workers' strike in the last phase, hoping that he would not ask her to cast a vote in return for her child's health. But instead, giving the child '*arthwad ki goli*' (pill of economics), he too directs the mother to the poll booth. The mother then turns to the audience and asks if the *janata* has any answers on how to save her 35-year-old child named 'Freedom'.

This sleight of hand served to critique not just blind faith in gods and goddesses, but also in politics and the mockery called elections. It also premised freedom as something that was over and above the right to vote and choose a ruler.

"What the mother did in the end was ask people for an alternative to parliamentary democracy," says Sambhaji, adding that rural audiences in various districts of Maharashtra loved the play.

Masses and connections

Sambhaji and Vilas were prolific writers and singers, and Avahan now had a new momentum. Also, its connections with a faction of CPI(ML) meant that it was deeply ensconced within a movement. The question of this connection, though, is dicey—while the party claims to have spawned and led Avahan Natya Manch, members of the group say it was born and functioned outside of the party, though connections did exist between the two.

Nevertheless, the connection ensured that Avahan was part of a larger movement, which it also shaped and articulated. It travelled to districts of Maharashtra for campaigns, and the members wrote songs and plays during these visits, incorporating experiences gathered along the way.

"We used to walk all day long, and eat and sleep in people's houses," says Sambhaji. "As part of our campaign, we would stay in some villages and work in fields or brick kilns. This would give us an opportunity to analyse land relations in the village and draw up plans of action," says Sanober.

"Upper-caste/class members underwent a qualitative change during these visits," says Sambhaji. This learning was over and above the lessons gleaned in *shibirs* or camps preceding every campaign in areas like Amravati, Nagpur, Sangli, Satara and Nasik. In the camps, and in regular meetings during the campaign, there would be discussions on how to analyse each village; elements like the landholding pattern, agricultural yields, tools that people used and numbers and owners of cattle would enable activists to decipher the class and caste character of the village. The gender character was gleaned from women's position in agricultural production, the prevalence of love and inter-caste marriage and the status of widows. At the same time, the cultural character of the area was available through songs that people sang in the villages, the number and types of *mandalis*, the forms of god

worshipped in the area, the caste of singers—within and outside the folds of varied traditions, the number of people who watched television, the type of television programmes that were popular, and the MNC products that people used.

“These things were extremely important as government statistics were not trustworthy. Moreover, we needed to explain things to people in their language—only a deep and full understanding of the situation would enable us to create songs that were critical of the system but emerged out of people’s expressions,” says Sambhaji.

These campaigns were taxing—ranging from a few days to weeks—and only those who had stayed in Avahan long enough went along. The touring party, comprising cultural and political activists, would be divided and spread across the campaign area; cultural performances would happen only in the evenings. It was during these campaigns that the connection between Avahan and the party became obvious.

By the mid-1980s, the party had metamorphosed into the People’s War Group in Andhra Pradesh. In 1984, Gadar came to Bombay for the first time, and Avahan put up a collaborative performance with him in the city. In the late-1980s, when Gadar went underground, he spent two months in the slums of Bombay—during this phase, Vilas sat with Gadar and translated most of his songs into Hindi, and Avahan brought out a booklet of these translated songs titled *Jung ki Pukaar*.

“When Gadar came overground, some of us from Avahan went to Andhra Pradesh. The crowds were maddening—there were over 2 lakh people on the roads to welcome him,” says Sanobar. This was perhaps the high point of Avahan’s life—its campaigns were yielding fruit, and it was establishing links with groups and activists across state borders in a major way.

Counting losses

In 1989, Vilas started drifting away from Avahan. His daughters had grown up, and he needed money to take care of his family. Since work in Avahan was without monetary benefits, he began singing in sundry programmes, like police campaigns against alcoholism.

Anand Shinde, a famous ‘folk’ singer from Maharashtra, stole one of Vilas’ songs titled *Sun Meri Fatima Didi*. He changed it to *Sun Meri Sakina Didi* and included it in his album without giving credit to Vilas or seeking his permission. Livid, Vilas wanted Avahan to take up the matter with the recording company that had offered him Rs 5,000 as compensation. Members of Avahan debated filing a lawsuit, but nothing really moved on the ground.

In a desperate measure, Vilas sat on a hunger strike demanding action—an act that was criticised at the time and also served to distance him further from Avahan. He began singing in the election campaigns of various political parties; a labour contractor made him the secretary of his union. Vilas, however, was unhappy with all of this and tried to return to Avahan quite a few times, although he had ego issues with some members in the group.

Around 1992-93, some members of Avahan broke away to form Lok Avahan. “Mostly dalits, they wanted to focus on fighting caste on a day-to-day basis. But they could not stay together as a group. The split hurt Avahan badly,” says Avinash Kadam, a cultural activist who was part of a group called Samagra.

In 1995, there was another split between the party’s student organisation and the leadership, and this impacted Avahan further. In addition, in Andhra Pradesh, People’s War Group faced severe state repression, and Avahan too started feeling the heat.

In July 1997, Vilas hanged himself in his small shanty. Before committing suicide, he tied a purple cloth around his head, which has often been interpreted as his disavowal of radical leftist politics for its failure to tackle the caste question. Read together with the formation of Lok Avahan, it could also signify Avahan’s failure to address the caste question adequately, and its tendency to privilege class over caste.

And so, gradually, the longest surviving and most radical group in the cultural resistance landscape in Maharashtra lost its ground.

“Many of the people in Avahan were intellectuals from upper-caste/class backgrounds. There were people from elite schools like the Doon School and London School of Economics—but they wanted to change society and were sincere about it. However, when things started going awry some of them went back to their middle class lives and continued to work for the cause from there. Some died and some were put behind bars,” says Sambhaji.

“The post-Bari Masjid demolition environment of fear and the iron fist of the fascist state combined with a host of other factors eventually brought about their end,” says Kadam.

Yet, Avahan has remained influential way beyond its lifespan. Some of today’s radical cultural activists like Sudhir Dhawale and Sambhaji Bhagat emerged from Avahan to carry on the struggle. While Sudhir was instrumental in starting Republican Panther Jati Antachi Chalwal, Sambhaji soldiers on with Vidrohi Shahiri Jalsa. Sanober, on the other hand, is busy trying to help a group called Muktiyaan get on its feet. Surendra Gadling, the lawyer who deals with cases of victims of state repression in Gadchiroli including those of cultural activists, and who fought many of the cases mentioned in Part 2 of the series, was a member of Avahan as well. Though these individuals branched out to work in different organisations and areas, the connection between them remains strong. Collaborating, working together to battle the odds, they keep Avahan alive.

(Aritra Bhattacharya is a researcher presently based in Maharashtra. This is the fourth in his series on the repression of cultural activism in Maharashtra, researched as part of the Infochange Media Fellowships 2012.)

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