

currentnews

July 25-31,2010

Politics is hypocrisy; theatre honest, bold



Bhawani Bashir Yasir

*A week ago, an impressive gathering of prominent literary personalities and famous playwrights of the state listened in rapt attention to **Bawani Bashir Yasir's** journey in the world of theatre. Fiftyeight-year-old Bawani shared details about his acting academy, the first of its kind in the state, and the difficulties he faced while keeping it running. A staunch believer of Kashmiri nationalism and a former political leader Bawani however chose theatre over politics. The first Muslim from the Valley to enter the National School of Drama (NSD), he found theatre as a better means of communicating with the outside world. Setting up and running a theatre and acting academy was something that could have invited serious troubles during the peak militancy years when cinemas and traditional folk theatre of Kashmir was clamped down. But then Bashir Yasir Bhawani was not a man to give up. **Arif Bashir** spoke at length to the man.*

Current: How would you introduce yourself?

Bawani: My Name is Bhawani Bashir Yasir. Bhawani is my family name, Bashir is the given name and Yasir is my pen name. Earlier I used to write poetry under the pen name of Yasir Kashmiri. I was born in 1954 at Doru-Shahabad in a middle class family. My father was a political activist of the Plebiscite Front and was more often arrested on every July 13 (Martyrs Day) and August 9 (1953) to face police torture due to which he succumbed in 1969 at the age of 38.

Doru Shahabad has produced great poets like Rasul Mir, Mehmood Gami, Hamidullah Shahabadi; Historians like Mir Saidullah Shahabadi, religious scholars like Sonaullah Mantoo,

who is popularly known as Wafayee Amritsari. Asia's great short story writer Sadat Hassan Mantoo also has ancestral origins from Doru-Shahabad.

During my teaching days I developed a great taste and interest for painting, poetry and art. In 1984 I joined the National School of Drama.

Why did you opt for theatre?

Having specially developed deep interest in theatre I established the Maraz Cultural & Art Centre, Shahabad-Doru in 1977 and actively devoted myself to work for a concerted rural theatre movement in South Kashmir which was, till then, otherwise limited to Srinagar. Secondly I never bothered for monetary gains. I am not a materialist. I used to spend from my own salary and other professional earnings to build my own theatre institution. If money would have been my priority I would have not come back from Delhi after qualifying from NSD with distinction. I would have stayed in Delhi like my predecessors did or joined film industry to earn money, name and fame. I always loved my Kashmir and Kashmiriyat. I believe that theatre is a learning institution and to live with honour and dignity, there are many other just means.

How did NSD help you in realizing your potential?

In NSD you have to live with theatre, think theatre all time. This helps you to grow manifold. In NSD I got national and international exposure to theatre.

Did you ever try your luck in Bollywood?

I never thought of it for obvious reasons. Theatre is my only passion. I have come a long way to survive for my Kashmiri theatre. I had offers from Bollywood but I never got allured.

Any experience of working with prominent actors, directors?

During my stay at NSD I had many great experiences working with great directors, actors and designers of national and international reputation like Prasana Kumar of Karnataka, Fritz Bennewitz of Germany, Rattan Thiyam and Ebitombi of Manipur. KN Panniker of Kerala, Prof Mohan Maharishi, BVKaranth, Ram Gopal Bajaj, Prof BM Shah, Robin Das of NSD and others. Working with such great directors, actors and designers helps you grow and explore yourself.

What about your political career?

Any pro-active theatre activist has had a deep sense of political belongingness. Without any socio-political conviction, commitment and sensibility towards sensitive issues of life any theatre person is a barren human being. I happened to be a pro-Kashmiri nationalist. But factually sometimes the contemporary geo-political hard realities make you to think the other-way round. Let me play my most demanded intellectual part in a prudent, positive and constructive way to make my people and the nation wise and vibrant as my people of Kashmir happen to be intelligent but have not proved wise. I don't bother for any power politics. I have had to play a political role but I never longed for any political career. It practices hypocrisy and I am not a hypocrite. Politics in Kashmir has become a trade; or better still the trade of Kashmiris' blood. I am no trader.

Any political incidents or anecdotes that you remember?

To be precise the last 50 years of Kashmir history is full of broken promises, pledges and betrayals. One cannot be selective.

How long were you in politics and what was your belief?

I feel I had been a pro-active political worker from my childhood. For many substantial reasons, I believed in my Kashmiri nationalism. And I remained quite active on the political and diplomatic front during the last 15 years for this cherished dream when I was out of my Kashmir since 1990 to 1999.

You chose theatre over politics.

Yes. I believe I was born for theatre. It does not restrict my creative ability rather helps me to put forth what I believe in and cherish. Theatre is my passion. Theatre has the ability to make the nation wise and vibrant. For a nationally conscientious person like me theatre is the best possible medium where I have to make no compromises. I can't make compromise with what I don't believe in or like. And theatre helps me to explore my inner-self at liberty.

Secondly, after returning back in 1999, I found my Kashmir to be lost. This shattered my dream and conscience. Each and every one around was wearing a mask. The duplicity of the people had become the order of the day. In this milieu I found myself alone, intellectually. Thirdly, I believe

that a nation without theatre is a dead nation. Theatre has been a prime institution in preserving not only the cultural ethos and heritage of a nation but plays a healthy and key role in shaping and reflecting the mental state of a nation as well. But the theatre movement of Kashmir is almost dead. I discussed this matter with many theatre activists in Kashmir who had nothing but to narrate gory tales. Being the only professionally trained person based in Kashmir, I realized that I have had to work for rejuvenating this erstwhile dead theatre movement of Kashmir. This was yet again a great challenge to re-invigorate a new spirit into it. As the saying goes – only those who dare, live.

You have been struggling in setting up your theatre academy.

After passing out from NSD in 1987 I established a repertory in my home town Doru-Shahabad by the name of Kalakaar Theatre Repertory. It first participated in the regional drama festival of Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1988 held at Simla with its production – Aka-Nandun. The same year some friends from Srinagar persuaded me to work in Srinagar for wider interests.

Since I had made my mind to institutionalize the theatre of Kashmir on a professional level which could provide basic professional training to up-coming and promising talent of Kashmir to compete on a national level, I decided to establish a theatre academy in Kashmir. In 1989 I founded the Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi (EKTA) and, under the aegis of EKTA in collaboration with Maraaz Cultural & Art Centre Shahabad-Doru, organized a four day State Theatre Conference at Tagore Hall Srinagar in Sept 1989. It was at a time when the political scenario had taken a U turn and explosions were routine. And with militancy theatre became the first victim. The golden era of Kashmiri theatre (1980-90) was pushed into the black era (1990-2002). And I had to close the Academy.

Have you received any support for your venture, especially from the state government?

So far I have not received any kind of support from the state government. As we all know our state is a dead state as far as the art & cultural movement is concerned. The bureaucracy, especially those who belong to the Valley is not only corrupt but insensitive towards the heritage and cultural ethos of Kashmir. The all important and the only state-sponsored J&K Cultural Academy has been turned into an entertaining cultural agency. Tagore Hall – the nerve centre of our cultural activities has been in shambles since the last five years, even lacking funds for renovation. The state is following the policy of trading our art and culture for the sake of tourism. Their mind-set is reflected in the fact that the present government merged the newly created Department of Culture into Tourism. What could one expect in such a situation

What has been the role of the J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages in helping you?

The J&K State Academy is itself in crisis. There are also efforts to take away its autonomous character. Still the authorities of the State Academy, within their limitations, have been cooperating with me and encouraging my initiatives as I cooperate with them with their theatre projects and activities.

What can theatre achieve in Kashmir?

It can lead them to think and ponder in a constructive way and help them search for peace and justice. People have lost their confidence. It can help them build their confidence. In the present scenario they can't communicate and freely express. It can bridge the gulf. At the same time the generation next can be guided in the right direction whose future is presently at stake. The only thing needed is to be sensitive, honest, serious and professional on our part. The legacy of all performing arts is believed to have been preserved in the back of one's mind. And every mind has its own version that makes it the richest cultural heritage. Out of all these arts, the art of theatre is the most appealing genre not just in carrying on with its physical form or style but in its popular expression. We the people of Kashmir, in general and the concerned persons, in particular have to grow and rise to the occasion. This could be achieved only by the fact that our theatre has to be honest, bold, creative, consistent and contemporary enough. It must argue, debate and question contemporary issues, concepts, conflicts, challenges and changing trends to make its nation wise and vibrant. It has to enrich its aesthetic, artistic and professional standards. Any theatre which fails to deliver contemporary challenges, concepts and conflicts, it becomes irrelevant.

What has been the role of your academy?

The tragedy of the theatre in Kashmir is that the state has never made any honest or concerted effort to institutionalize it. But as having said that, we have had to play our part.

Primarily establishing EKTA is aimed to institutionalize the theatre of Kashmir which could then pave the way for providing professional training in theatre-arts to the promising, upcoming and young talented artistes of Kashmir, who are deprived of such avenues outside the state. And for that matter, EKTA has two organs. EKTA – the School of Drama and the Repertory. The School of Drama provides training and the Repertory provides a professional platform for trained artistes to earn professionally.

Kashmir is commonly perceived as a conservative and Islamic society. Can theatre survive and grow in such an environment? What has been the public response to your academy?

Yes. This is a big challenge. So far the public response has been appreciating. I don't see it otherwise. I believe theatre to be the most important public institution in nation building. The only criteria is how you put it, present it and above all how you personally behave in society. Had that not been the case, there would have been no theatre in other pan-Islamic countries of the world at all. As I have said we have to earn legitimacy. For that matter we have to be honest, bold, true, committed and sincere to our people. Theatre has to grow and prosper in the given environment. That is the challenge.

Since the inception of militancy in the Valley, cinemas were closed and theatre brought to halt. Can you recover the loss?

I hope I have already answered this question above. And with the blessing of the Almighty and given our commitment and dedication I am hopeful that we can recover the loss and help the theatre of Kashmir to reach the zenith of its glory again.

Any threats or risk to life?

Life is always full of threat and risk. Given my strong will to do something great for my people, God will help me. I have never been overpowered by any threat or life risk.

Short URL: <http://currentnews.in/?p=3495>