



Kashmiri Youth Fuel Theater's Metamorphosis From Social Taboo to Development Tool



by Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi

Live theater, once stymied by regional conflict and still considered a socially unacceptable profession, is undergoing a revival in Kashmir thanks to youth interest. Nongovernmental and governmental academies strive to expand opportunities for youth to pursue live theater, which enthusiasts champion as a key platform for state development.

by [Afsana Bhat](#) Senior Reporter

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SRINAGAR, KASHMIR, INDIA – Passion drove Shahnawaz Bhat, 25, into theater.

“Theater is my first love,” says Bhat, who is not related to the reporter. “It is my passion, and I am pursuing it as my career.”

"I have to make my nation wise and vibrant – that is why I do theater."

- Bhawani Bashir Yasir, Director, Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi

But in Kashmir, this is rare. Theater garners little social respect as a profession, though actors such as Bhat are starting to change this.

Bhat says there were few opportunities to explore theater as a youth. But he finally got a chance to exhibit his talent in 2007 while pursuing an arts degree at Amar Singh College in Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital.

“When I was a B.A. final-year student, I got a chance to play a role of an insane person,” he says. “My performance was appreciated, and that inspired me. Though I was interested in theater since my childhood, but I never got a chance.”

After graduating in 2009, Bhat found an advertisement in a local newspaper for a 10-day theater workshop conducted by Naseeruddin Shah, an Indian theater icon, and organized by Act Now for Harmony and Democracy, an Indian socio-cultural organization.

"I applied, got selected, thus, started my career," he says.

Bhat played a lead role in a Bollywood film called "Harud" in 2008 and 2009. He acted in two TV series and served as a production assistant in another. But he hungered for more live theater experience.

"I felt need for more training and joined Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi School of Drama and Repertory in June last year to undergo one-year regular course in theater arts," the young artist says.

Bhat aspires to join the National School of Drama, funded by the federal Ministry of Culture, next year.

But he says that it's hard to pursue his passion without the support of his family, as theater is not a respected career in Kashmir.

"My family doesn't support me," he says. "They feel theater has no scope. I tried to convince them by asking them to give me a year or so to prove myself in the field. I even told them that if I fail, then I will do what they want me to do."

He says his friends don't understand his dream either.

"Even my friends don't know anything about theater," he says. "No one is aware about it here."

But Bhat says that people don't realize how dynamic live theater can be.

"In theater, you can explore many things, so I opt for it," he says.

Theater enthusiasts cite a lack of societal acceptance among the greatest challenges facing the recent revival of live theater in Kashmir. They not only urge society to take live theater seriously as a profession, but they also insist that the art can play a crucial role in the development of the state following decades of conflict. While governmental and nongovernmental players debate the extent of the state's support for live theater, both sides agree that more needs to be done to fuel its revival.

Bhawani Bashir Yasir, a renowned theater director and the director of Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi, says theater has been revived in Kashmir during the past decade following conflict in the region.

"Due to conflict, theater activities here got closed down," he says. "A decade from 1980s and 1990s was a golden era for theater. During 1990s, culture – especially theater – became the first casualty of conflict. Theater is for masses, and there was no proper space to hold theater activities. Theater, however, started reviving in 2002."

In addition to regional conflict, Yasir says that the growth of the theater industry has also faced obstacles because of social stigma. He calls society's lack of respect for the profession the art's greatest challenge.

"Theater in itself is a challenge," he says. "Without challenges, theater doesn't exist. Money and financial constraints aren't challenges to me. How theater is acceptable to people of my country is my only challenge."

Theater is considered a taboo profession in Kashmir. Many say it's a waste of time.

"Yes, theater is considered a bit as social taboo in Kashmir Valley, especially for girls," he says. "It hasn't been encouraged as a serious, respectful profession by any institution of the state. Besides, general masses take it as entertainment profession. They don't see career in it, when in India and across the world it is a serious and challenging career."

Theater is especially taboo for women, although the number of actresses pursuing the art is growing.

"Women are generally not being encouraged for theater," Yasir says. "Besides, very less percentage of women opt for theater. Mostly, women opt for television."

He says that Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi is encouraging women to enroll, though it currently has just one female student.

Yasir says that using theater to explore substantial topics can win the art – and its practitioners – more respect.

"We've to earn legitimacy," he says. "We don't own public and social legitimacy. We've not been honest to make our theater the most relevant. Issues have to be relevant. Theater here hasn't been honest enough to address social, political, economical, cultural and aesthetical issues."

By addressing these issues, Yasir says that theater can be a crucial development tool for the state and the country.

"I have to make my nation wise and vibrant – that is why I do theater," he says. "We've to be responsible. Unless theater is responsible and sensible, we can't help society to grow."

He says the creativity of theater can lead the region away from the violence that it has known for decades.

"It is a modest expression of one's inner arrogance," he says. "It curtails violence."

A National School of Drama alumnus, Yasir says that theater is ideal for involving youth in regional development.

"If Kashmir [wants] to prosper, young generation needs to be directed," Yasir says.

Junaid Ahmad Rather, 19, says he loves theater.

"It is my career, plus passion, plus love," he says.

Rather started his theater career in 2006 when he participated in a children's theater festival organized by the Human Effort for Love and Peace Foundation, a local nongovernmental organization. An eighth-grade student at the time, Rather bagged the award for best actor, which inspired him to pursue a career in theater.

Later, Rather participated in another theater festival in 2009 organized by Act Now for Harmony and Democracy. In 2010, he was selected for a solo performance at the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, an autonomous body set up by the state constitution. He has also been receiving a scholarship from the Centre for Cultural Resources and Trainings, an autonomous body under the national Ministry of Culture, since 2007.

Rather joined Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi in June 2011 to further enhance his skills. Like Bhat, he also attended the theater workshop conducted by Naseeruddin Shah.

"It was beyond my imagination," he says of the workshop.

He says it was so challenging that only a fraction of the 350 actors selected to participate could handle it.

"Only 20 could successfully complete it," he says.

Rather and Bhat were among these 20.

"One has to live that moment," Rather says of his strategy for success. "I never aimed theater during my childhood days."

Actors cite the lack of social acceptance, awareness, existence of opportunities and family support among the reasons for not getting involved with theater earlier.

Yasir says that a lack of governmental support is a major factor. He says that the state has no indigenous cultural policy.

“No scheme is offered by state government to encourage artists,” he says. “One theater festival in a year by Academy of Art, Culture and Languages isn’t enough. Besides, cultural department shouldn’t be merged with Department of Tourism but should be independent and should introduce schemes to encourage theater.”

He says that the academy conducted a folk theater festival this year – after not holding one for five years.

“This ought to be regular, continuous and proper activity,” he says. “All folk groups should take it as a serious affair. Academy here has become a mere cultural agency. Cultural academy has to institutionalize, promote and preserve art, whereas cultural agency just conducts and organizes cultural events.”

He says that the academy neither has a drama instructor in Kashmir nor in-house productions. He also regrets that amateur theater activists act as a hobby, which is not enough to revive theater.

“Only professionals are committed to this,” he says. “Others do it for mental luxury.”

He says that schools also need to make theater a more central subject.

“State considers theater as an extracurricular activity, whereas it is the most important curricular activity,” he says. “In future, it will be most important subject in educational institutions.”

He says that the national government has begun to recognize this.

“National Council of Educational Research and Training, government of India’s apex resource organization to assist and advise center and state governments on academic matters related to school education, has prepared syllabi right from primary to [high school] and is planning to introduce it at school level,” he says. “We need trained people to teach it and need to develop infrastructure.”

The theater director believes that a state-financed yet independent theater school could boost the theater movement in the Kashmir Valley.

“Once it will be independent, theater will grow, and only then it can offer schemes and scholarships to encourage growth of theater in Kashmir,” he says. “Younger generation needs to be encouraged by seniors.”

He says there has been some but not enough progress on this front.

“In 2007, government of India sanctioned one regional school of drama for the state,” he says. “But so far, state hasn’t provided a campus for it. It seems state isn’t serious enough to promote it.”

Until last year, he used his personal resources to operate the Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi.

“Now, Ministry of Culture, government of India has financed us,” he says. “Being NSD [graduate], I get an individual grant. NSD offers grants to professionals, institutions and salary grants for artists.”

Last month, the academy was also able to hold an international workshop.

“In April 2012, EKTA had an honor to hold five-day, full-time residential international theater workshop conducted by performing artists team from Germany under Kashmir-Berlin cultural exchange,” he says.

Ashraf Tak, chief editor of the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, says that the academy plays an important role in the promotion of theater activities in the state.

“Everything that has happened in state vis-à-vis modern theater is because of the academy,” he says.

He mentions the recent theater festival.

“Every year, academy conducts theater festivals at state- and district-level,” he says. “Academy has its own productions and conducts theater workshops for children as well.”

Tak says that the academy also offers financial assistance to nongovernmental organizations involved with theater activities.

“We organize workshop about costumes, lighting and playwright,” he says. “Theater groups are sponsored by academy to perform outside state, and extension lectures are held. Theater has special publications in Urdu and Kashmiri. Many renowned theater artists have been groomed by academy by providing them technical know-how.”

The academy has a separate wing for theater, and there are separate drama instructors in Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh, he says.

“Drama instructor is responsible for promotion of theater in state,” he says.

Javaid Rahi, chief editor of the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages sector that works with nongovernmental organizations, says that modern theater is undergoing a revival and that the academy works with state and national governments to foster this.

“Apart from conducting workshops for youth, various schemes are available for them, like 15-days-long summer camp; scholarships for theater artists; fellowships to senior artists and pension to theater activists by Department of Culture, government of India,” he says. “The state gets about two to five scholarships every year.”

Still, he acknowledges the many obstacles to the revival of live theater.

“It faces certain basic problems, like absence of theater,” he says, explaining that there are few places to perform. “Concept of light, sound and effect is missing.”

Rahi says that the state has sanctioned the Regional School of Drama but still needs to find the land for it.

“Though it has been decided that the school will be at Rajouri, being equidistant from Srinagar and Jammu, but identification of land isn’t yet over,” he says. “It is in progress.”

He agrees that more needs to be done to further this progress.

“Acting is instinct,” he says. “But to promote theater in valley, we need to harness skills of interested youth, provide them a proper platform and attract them.”

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