

Moloyashree Hashmi:

I am a school teacher by profession. When children are not able to go to school because of social and economic circumstances, it is violence of a kind. But what about those few who do finally reach school? They have to go through a highly prescriptive educational process, and that too is a kind of violence. I am not talking about the emotional violence and brutalization that we often hear about – too often, actually. But once the child enters even primary school, what happens there? Here, the kind of curriculum methods used, the teaching methods, the actual classroom transactions, there is a kind of insidious violence being perpetrated on the mind of the child, which is also unfortunately quite deadening. This is a sort of brutalization of the mind, a deadening of thought. This is a very primary kind of violence, and as theatrepersons we need to address this. I don't have any answers. I am not raising this issue only from the perspective of theatre for children, or theatre and education. Those are of course important. But I am raising this as a practicing teacher, and as a theatre person. This is the violence that many of us have internalised even before we ourselves begin to do theatre. How do we address this?

A number of speakers before me have spoken of overt and covert violence. I don't want to go over issues that have been taken up already. Let me talk about another sort of violence which I see around me in Delhi, the city I come from. This is the violence that the working class has to face, the very naked violence of the industrialists.

While performing recently, we saw this garment factory where many workers had got burnt when a fire broke out. Why? Why didn't people get out? Well, they couldn't go out because the door was locked from the outside. This is quite common, by the way. All over Delhi, Ghaziabad, Faridabad, Noida, there are factories where the owners lock the workers in. They can't go out. The work conditions are inhuman. 16 hours of work, 18 hours of work, abysmally low wages, high degree of regulation, including bathrooms that are opened only twice a day, and then you cannot even escape if there's a fire.

Then there is a factory called Bhushan Steel in Ghaziabad. It is a huge factory. It gets scrap metal from all over the world, including war zones like Afghanistan and Iraq. This includes empty artillery shells. Except that sometimes these are not spent shells, but actual live bombs. A few years ago, one such accident took place. There was a blast. People got killed. How do you count the dead? Normally, when workers go into a factory, they sign a roaster. Not here. Since the work is hazardous, the workers sign when they exit. In other words, if you come out fine, then you sign. If there is an accident, the management can easily say the worker was not working there that day at all. Your existence is not recorded when you work, but when you survive work. So when the last accident happened, how did the trade union comrades figure out how many had died? By counting the number of hard hats that were missing. The management may get workers to sign the roaster when they leave, but they can't do that with hard hats – they have to be issued when the workers enter!

Then there's other kinds of violence we don't see as violence. Women have to do some work, home based work, in order to survive, in order to add very marginally to their domestic budgets. How marginally? At one place, women have to clean a small machine part – they have to dip it in one chemical, clean it, wipe it, then dip it in another chemical, dry it, and then pack it in small plastic pouches. Of course all this is done with no protection for the hands. And how much is the payment? Two rupees fifty paise for cleaning and packing 144 pieces. And this work is done alongside all the chores at home, cooking, cleaning, etc. So the women doing this kind of

home based work are actually working non-stop from 6 in the morning till about 11 or 12 at night. For what is less than a pittance. This is also violence.

The last two days we have been hearing from Devi of Praja Natya Mandali, from Sanjay Upadhyay, Sushma, Dakxin about their experiences. I think their work is immensely important, because it is rooted in the community. This kind of work becomes the voice of the community. The economic and social violence that is faced by the community is explored through this theatre. That is what gives their work a certain power. However, there are other theatre groups which are not rooted in the community quite in the same way. But the issues they address are often quite similar, and the work can be quite powerful. I belong to one such group. We are not rooted in any particular community, but our work derives whatever value it may have from a larger alignment with the cause of the working class. I think this kind of larger connection is essential for anyone doing theatre. I don't mean that everyone should do activist theatre. I do it, out of choice, but I understand that different people do theatre with different sorts of motivations. So that is not what I mean. I only mean that some larger connection to the real world, a world where people strive very hard to make ends meet, where they are subjected to all sorts of violence and brutalization, a connection with this world is essential for our theatre to come alive. Otherwise, theatre may have skill, it may have technical finesse, it may have a grand conception, but it will not have life, it will not become part of life.