

**THEATER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE PUNJAB STATE
OF INDIA**

by

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1998

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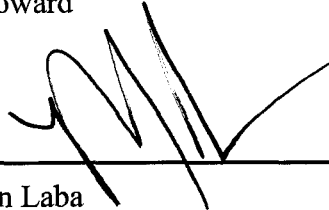
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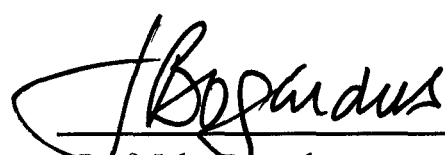
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Abstract

This thesis is about the theater for social change (TSC) in the Punjab State of India. It looks at how the TSC is being carried on and what is its importance in the process of social change in Punjab.

The analytical framework used in this thesis contends that the role of TSC is to make people aware of their oppressive reality as well as to explore with them the various ways and means to change this reality. On the basis of this contention, this thesis examines and analyzes the subject matter and the practice of TSC in Punjab.

It is found that the subject matter of TSC in Punjab deals with the difficulties and problems faced by the oppressed people. To fully understand the causes of these problems, the TSC's subject matter analyzes these problems at the macro level in connection to the social, cultural, political and economic conditions of Punjab and India.

The TSC in Punjab has adopted its practice according to the material conditions in Punjab. It meets its needs from resources available within society. It has close links with people and their organizations, which play a crucial role in its functioning. To counter various challenges faced by TSC, on one hand, the practitioners do theater in a way that minimizes the constraints and limits resulting from these challenges and on the other hand, they work to change those conditions that give rise to these challenges.

The thesis concludes that the TSC is an effective communicative and mobilizing tool in the process of social change in Punjab. It has empowered audience members and theater practitioners to stand against oppression. Its unique practice has enabled it to be accessible to its audiences as well as to be sustainable in the long term.

To three women, who have given me a lots of love, support, encouragement and
inspiration throughout my life.

My maternal great grandmother, Bebe Bhani

My mother, Harbans Kaur Hundal, and

My wife Anju Hundal

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I am grateful to Martin Laba, my senior supervisor, who has taken a keen interest in this project from beginning to end. I thank him for his support and encouragement. Brian Lewis, supervisor, and John Bogardus, external examiner, have made valuable comments and suggestions on this work. Many thanks to them. I thank Neena Shahni and other members of the staff at the School of Communication for their help in administrative matters. More thanks to Nirmaljeet Sandhu for proofreading the final draft of this thesis.

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Introduction

During the last four decades, theater for social change (TSC) has become a significant movement in the Punjab State of India. The practitioners of TSC feel that the status quo in Punjab is not serving the interests of oppressed people¹ (small farmers, workers, women, *dalits* or lower caste people, unemployed youth and others) and that need for social change is critical and urgent. In order to bring about such change, TSC practitioners are educating and informing oppressed people through theater about the conditions of their oppression and means and ways to change these conditions. There are approximately 18 TSC groups in Punjab who give close to 500 performances and reach almost a million people per year across Punjab. As majority of the Punjabi people live in the villages, most of TSC performances take place in the villages.

This thesis considers how the TSC has been carried out and its importance in the process of social change in Punjab. To fully explore this issue, this thesis asks the following questions: What is the subject matter of TSC plays? How is the practice of TSC being adopted to fit physical, social, cultural and political conditions in Punjab? What is the relationship between the audience members and theater practitioners? What kinds of feedback mechanisms are there for the audience? On what

¹ In this thesis, the word people is used to describe the oppressed, dominated and disadvantaged people.

level do women participate in the TSC activities? What is the organizational structure of TSC groups? How are the funds raised for the TSC? What is the relationship of the TSC groups with the government and non-government agencies? What kinds of relations do the TSC groups have with other organizations that are working for social change in Punjab and other parts of India?

Theater is being employed as an effective communicative tool to bring about social change in many parts of the world. It is effective because it overcomes barriers of illiteracy; it is an interactive and live form of communication, and facilitates face to face communication; further, does not require large financial resources; and is a collective and communal medium of communication (David Kerr, 1991 & 1995; Epskamp, 1989; Morrison, 1991 & 1993). This thesis reviews TSC activities from many parts of the world and finds that although TSC in each part of the world is dealing with the unique material conditions, there exist many similarities in the content and practice of TSC around the globe. These similarities are brought together in the thesis to develop a conceptual framework to examine the TSC activities in the Punjab.

TSC consciously analyzes everyday difficulties and problems at the macro level. It links the causes of oppression to the social, cultural, political and economic conditions of Punjab in particular and India in general. Above all, TSC is accessible – it is readily available to the people as its performances occur in venues that are part of the everyday lives of

people in villages and towns. The TSC in Punjab is sustainable as it has adopted its practice very well according to the theater facilities available in the rural Punjab and it has developed a supportive relationship with the village level organizations that sponsor its programs. However, TSC has been facing many challenges in Punjab. One of the biggest challenges in front of TSC in Punjab is the low level of women's participation in TSC. In the near future, the TSC's practitioners in Punjab have to find innovative ways to get more women involved in various levels of TSC's activities.

This study is important for many reasons. Firstly, it shows the capacity of theater as a communicative tool for social change. Secondly, by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of TSC in Punjab, this study provides learning opportunities for people (theater practitioners, educators and political and social activists) interested in bringing about social change in society through TSC. Third, by linking the TSC experience in Punjab to the overall TSC projects happening in various parts of the world, this study broadens the knowledge base about TSC across the world.

Methodology

I have employed literature review, direct observation, in-depth interviews, and group interviews as research methods. I have found that these methods complimented each other. For example, direct observation

became the basis of a number of questions to be asked during interviews, and interviews in turn gave me opportunities to clarify many issues that arose from observations. As well, as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1995), the information collected through each method allowed me to test and substantiate information gathered from other methods.

I have reviewed literature about the theory and practice of TSC in various parts of the world. This literature review provided an insight into various aspects of TSC and helped to develop a framework to study TSC in Punjab. Specific to the Punjab State of India, I have read scripts of the plays performed by TSC practitioners, articles, discussion papers, interviews and books about TSC and about the economic, political, social and cultural situation in the Punjab. Through this literature, I have become most familiar with the subject matter of TSC's plays, the history of TSC in Punjab, the ideas and perspectives of TSC's practitioners about the theater and social change in the Punjab, and the broader material conditions in Punjab. A majority of the literature about Punjab is in Punjabi language and the quotes from this material are my translations.

During my field research between January 20, 2000 to May 1, 2000, I observed theatrical activities of five theater groups – *The Chandigarh Natak Kala Kendar* or The Chandigarh Theater Art Center, *The Lok Kala Manch Mulanpur* or The People's Art Forum Mulanpur, The Art Center Samrala, *The Kala Sangam Phagwara* or The Art Union Phagwara and the *Navchintan Kala Manch Beas* or the New Thinking Art

Forum Beas. I selected these groups for a number of reasons. The *Chandigarh Natak Kala Kendar* is run under the leadership of Gursharan Singh, who has been doing theater for more than 40 years and is considered to be the leading figure of TSC in Punjab. As well, I have developed a personal relationship with him during his four theater trips to Canada since 1983. During two of these trips, he was a guest in my home for close to two weeks each time. As a result, I had opportunities to closely observe him and have extensive discussions with him about his work. I was greatly impressed by his theater style and his commitment to social change through theater, and in fact, the whole idea of studying TSC in Punjab occurred to me during a discussion with him at the time of his last trip to Vancouver in November 1997. It was natural therefore, to select his group for observation during my research. I also developed connections with a few members of the Art Center Samrala and the *Lok Kala Manch Mulanpur* in 1997 when they came to Canada as members of Gursharan Singh's theater group. As a result of these connections, it was easier for me to contact these two theater groups and gain permission to observe their theater activities. The *Kala Sangam Phagwara* was selected because a woman theater director, Suman Lata, leads it. The *Navchintan Kala Manch Beas* was selected because its leader Hansa Singh is a long time theater practitioner as well as to create a regional balance in groups'

selection.² I wanted to observe more groups, particularly the theater group led by Ajmer Aulakh, another prominent figure of TSC in Punjab but due to time constraints, I was unable to do that.

As part of my observations, I sat in group-meetings and watched play rehearsals, traveled with theater practitioners to the villages where plays were performed, and attended 16 theater programs. I was able to observe first hand things such as preparation of plays, interaction between members of theater groups, theater facilities, performances, composition of audiences, audiences reactions to plays, audiences interaction with theater practitioners and to a limited extent workings of sponsoring organizations. Furthermore, I was able to have informal conversations with theater practitioners. In agreement with the claims of Burgess (1984), Anderson (1987) and Marshall and Ross (1995) direct observations enabled me to understand the TSC in Punjab in its fuller context, as it happens, based on theater practitioners' perspectives and in their own language.

I have conducted seventeen in-depth interviews³ -thirteen with the theater practitioners and four with the members of the sponsoring

² There are three prominent regions in Punjab – *Malwa, Doaba and Majha*. The Art Center Samrala and the *Lok Kala Manch Mulanpur* are located in *Malwa*; the *Kala Sangam Phagwara* is located in *Doaba* and the *Navchintan Kala Manch Beas* is located in *Majha*. The *Chandigarh Natak Kala Kendar* is located in *Chandigarh*, a union territory and the capital city of Punjab.

organizations. Four out of the thirteen theater practitioners interviewed were women. In addition to individual interviews, I had also recorded three group interviews with the members of the *Lok Kala Manch Mulanpur*, the *Kala Sangam Phagwara* and the *Navchintan Kala Manch Beas*. All these interviews were audio-taped and they were 1 1/2 hours to 3 hours in length. All of these interviews were recorded in the Punjabi language and all direct quotes from these interviews are my translations.

I was able to gain trust of my research participants immediately because, as mentioned earlier, I have developed a personal relationship with Gursharan Singh and some members of the *Lok Kala Manch Mulanpur* and the Art Centre Samrala knew me. Furthermore, I was involved in TSC activities in the Indo-Canadian community of Vancouver between 1983 to 1990⁴, and I was also involved in sponsoring TSC teams

³ I interviewed these people: Gursharan Singh and Suleman Bhatt from the *Chandigarh Natak Kala Kendar*; Tirlochan Singh, Baljinder Kaur and Swaran Singh from the *Art Center Samrala*; Harkesh Choudhary and Kamalpreet Kaur from the *Lok Kala Manch Mulanpur*; Hansa Singh and Harjit Kaur from the *Navchintan Kala Manch Beas*; Suman Lata from the *Kala Sangam Phagwara*; Ajmer Aulakh from the *Lok Kala Manch Mansa*; Kewal Dhaliwal from *Manch Rangmanch*; Tera Singh Chann, a theater practitioner who was active in the Indian People Theater Association and the theater squads of the Communist Party of India in the 1950s and 1960s; Hardev Singh Sandhu from the *Kirti Kisan Union*; Baljinder Singh from the *Lok Sangram Morcha*; Bhajan Singh from the Ludhiana unit of the *Tarksheel Society Punjab*; and Dr. Jagdish Singh, a member of the sponsoring group from the village Kangna.

⁴ I am a founding member of the Vancouver Sath, an Indo-Canadian theatrical and cultural group based in Vancouver. The Vancouver Sath was formed in 1983 and between 1983 to 1990, the Sath produced several plays about the experiences and struggles of Indo-Canadians. For more information about the Vancouver Sath, see Binning, Sadhu (1998). *Vancouver Sath: South Asian Canadian Theater in Vancouver. Canadian Theater Review, 94, Spring 1998, 14-17.* and Jackson, David (1985). *Union Activism: Punjabi Theater in B.C. Fuse, Fall, 10-14.*

from Punjab to Canada. Most of my research participants knew about my involvement in TSC and therefore trusted me. As a result of this trust, I was able to obtain open and candid responses to my questions during interviews and informal conversations with my research participants.

Chapters outline

This thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter states that the key objective of TSC is to depict the reality of the oppressed people as well as to explore ways and means to change this reality. In order to find out about how the TSC practitioners are working to fulfill this objective, this chapter reviews literature about the theory and practice of TSC taking place in the various parts of the world. As a result, the key characteristics of TSC are identified, which constitute a conceptual framework to study the TSC in Punjab.

The second chapter provides an introduction to the socio-economic conditions in the Punjab. The key points of this chapter are that Punjabi society has failed to meet the basic needs, such as the education and health care of a large number of its citizens. After three and half decades, the development model based on Green Revolution has completely failed to better the lives of a majority of Punjabis. Instead of bringing about prosperity, it has created debt and hardship among marginal, small and

semi-medium farmers and agricultural laborers. The Punjabi women have to face discrimination and violence on a regular basis. The number of dowry deaths had gone up in recent years and there exists a wide spread practice of female feticide in Punjab. As TSC is a product of the material conditions in a society and works to change these conditions, it is imperative to understand these material conditions.

The third chapter provides a brief historical background about the origin of TSC in Punjab and extensively deals with the subject matter of TSC plays. More than a dozen plays covering a wide range of subjects are discussed in detail. The discussion introduces various kinds of issues and problems addressed in TSC plays in Punjab. Furthermore, the discussion shows that these plays clearly demonstrate the link between the oppression and various macro level political, economic and social factors operating in Punjabi society. As a result, audience members of these plays do not only see their oppression, they also understand about the various forces that are the causes of their oppression.

Chapter four documents the day to day working and operation of TSC groups in Punjab and looks at the various challenges being faced by them. It is shown that in response to lack of theater facilities in the villages of Punjab, the TSC practitioners have developed a unique minimalist style of theater. Various characteristics of this style are discussed in this chapter. It is also noted that in response to challenges, TSC practitioners, on one hand, adopt their theater practices in a way

that minimizes the constraints and limits resulting from these challenges; and on the other hand, they work to change those conditions that give rise to these challenges. Finally, it is argued that the ability of TSC to adopt its practice according to physical, social and cultural conditions in Punjab is the key reason behind its effectiveness and sustainability.

In chapter five, I begin with answering the obvious question: How important is the role-played by TSC in the process of social change in Punjab? My view is that as an effective communicative and mobilizing tool, TSC plays a significant role in the process of social change in the Punjab. While it may be difficult to measure the effect of TSC on audience members in quantitative terms, a qualitative analysis demonstrates that TSC has profoundly affected the lives of audience members and theater practitioners. Finally, I make a few recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of TSC in Punjab.

Chapter 1

Theater for Social Change: A Conceptual Framework

Introduction

The key objective of theater for social change (TSC) is to resist and oppose domination and oppression in society and to initiate and/or support the process of social transformation toward a just and equitable society. In order to accomplish such social transformation, the people need to understand the causes of their domination and oppression and the connection of these causes to social, political, economic and cultural structures of society. Further, the people need to find ways to come together and act to change those structures of society, which support domination and oppression in society. Therefore, along with informing and educating the oppressed about the causes of their domination and oppression, TSC helps to mobilize the oppressed to act against their domination and oppression.

The content, form and practice of TSC are determined by prevailing social, economic and political conditions in society. As a result, in the different regions of the world, TSC has acquired different characteristics. Nevertheless, as a result of its shared objectives, a number of similarities also exist in TSC being practiced in various parts of the world. On one hand, these similarities are creating a global connection between the

various kinds of TSC happening in numerous locales around the world; on the other hand, they help to develop a broad conceptual framework to understand the practice of TSC in the world. In order to develop such a framework, this chapter will document similarities in TSC across the world with regard to subject matter, venues, creation and presentation of plays, props, autonomy and partnership with other organizations working for social change. In the following chapters, this framework will be used to examine and understand the practice of TSC in the Punjab state of India.

Subject Matter

The subject matter of TSC deals with the concerns, issues and problems related to the lives of people. Some of the issues which are being dealt by this theater around the globe include: exploitation of workers and their struggles for better working and living conditions, land reforms, women's rights, drug abuse, child abuse, poverty, unemployment, police brutality, the US imperialism, arms race, migrant labor, dowry, black marketing, alcoholism, oppression on the basis of caste, corruption in governments, civil rights, religious fundamentalism, communal riots, the lack of or deficiencies in education systems, women's emancipation, hikes in bus fares and others (Bakshi, 1989; Erven, 1987, 1992; Hashmi, 1989; Kerr, 1995; Kidd & Rashid, 1984; Weiss et al. 1993). The presentation of issues close to people's lives helps

them to focus their attention on these issues and problems (Morrison, 1993). Clearly, the theatrical depiction of people's reality causes them to identify with the performances. As a result, the "performances create a sense of community among the spectators and between spectators and performers" (Morrison, 1991, p. 35). This sense of community among spectators is a matter of great significance because the sense of community helps them to build a link between the performance and their real lives. As Theodore Shank (1982) argues, "If the spectator's focus becomes wholly absorbed in the illusion, it must periodically be brought back to the actual world. The spectator must be physically present in order to form a community with others and to make the necessary connection between the events in the play, the conditions referred to, and the circumstances of her or her own life" (p. 58).

In addition to drawing people's attention to their reality, the subject matter also explores ways to change this reality (Brecht, 1964; Boal, 1979). Firstly, such change is initiated not by discussing people's issues, concerns and problems in isolation, but discussing them in connection to the existing political, economic and social conditions and power relations. As a result, the spectator fully understands the various causes of his/her oppression and sees that his/her social position is directly connected to the structural inequalities built within the system (Brecht's views in Epskamp, 1989). The failure to link oppressed people's problem to their structures of oppression could result in

blaming the victims (Kerr 1991, 1995). Let us suppose a play that deals with the health problems of people living in a slum and shows that people's health problems in this slum are caused by the unsanitary conditions in people's houses and on the streets of the slum. Further, as solutions to the problems, the play shows people how to keep their houses clean and encourages cooperation among them to keep streets of the slum rubbish free. However, the play neglects to discuss the economic and political decisions and policies of the government, which have failed to provide adequate housing to the people living in this slum. Such kind of play would be a good example of plays that blame victims for their problems and advocate a change in victims instead of the structures of their oppression (Kerr 1991). Secondly, the oppressed people need to act upon their reality. The subject matter of TSC encourages such action by discussing reality in a historical context. According to Brecht's views presented by Epskamp (1989), the discussion of reality in historical context makes "it clear to the spectator that his own social position is the result of a man-made historical process of stabilizing power relationship. (And) only with this awareness can the spectator 'takes his 'destiny' into his own hands, taking action to intervene in social events outside the theatrical performance" (p. 48-49).

As politics play a key role in just or unjust organization of a society, therefore, the subject matter of TSC does not hesitate to address the politics of its time. Holderness (1992) claims that,

politics is normally understood to be concerned with systems of government, the processes by means of which such systems are changed, and the nature of social participation in those changes; with relations between those systems of government, in cooperation and competition, peace and war; and with the individuals, parties and ideas which sustain, develop, defend and overthrow governments and the ideological formations by which their power is maintained. (2)

Clearly, the subject matter of TSC carefully examines the processes of government decision making, the participation or lack of participation of people in these processes, and the impact of such decisions on the lives of people. Further, the TSC's subject matter identifies various institutions in society and their role in maintaining the status quo. However, it is not sufficient for TSC's subject matter to show the oppressive nature of politics in a society. In order to become a vehicle for change in society, TSC's subject matter has to explore alternative forms of politics and means for political participation for the people. If the subject matter of TSC fails to do that, then there is a danger that TSC may serve to maintain the existing political order (Holderness, 1991). By elaborating on an example provided by Holderness (1991), let us consider a play that deals with the political corruption in a society and shows in detail the corrupt deeds of political leaders and the impact of their corruption on the lives of people. Nevertheless, the play does not go beyond this and fails to explore any other forms of politics and actions, which could be taken by the people to end this corruption. There is a danger that this play would cause spectators to see their political reality "as natural, inevitable, flawed but unalterable" (Holderness, 1991, p. 9).

While addressing the politics of its time, does TSC's subject matter have to follow a party line? There are a number of examples in the world, where the practitioners of TSC were aligned with the political parties, especially the parties of the left, and sought directions from them regarding the subject matter of their theater. At the same time, there are other examples where the practitioners of TSC fought against the officials of political parties and refused to tow any party's line. At present, thinking has emerged in this regard, according to which the subject matter of TSC should be loyal to the politics of people instead of the politics of any political party. Swadesh Deepak (2000), an Indian theater director, sums up this position as follows when he says, "to me 'being political' never means to work for some political party. It simply means to be aware of the suffering of common man at the hands of these monstrous politicians" (p. 20).

There is another question that needs to be answered with regard to politics and theater: would not the discussion of politics in theater compromise its artistic qualities? There are many theater critics who raise this question. However, this question itself is a political question, as Ngugi wa Thiong explains:

A critic who in real life is suspicious of people fighting for liberation will suspect characters who, though only in novel, are fighting for liberation. A critic who in real life is impatient with all the talk about classes, class struggle, resistance to imperialism, racism and struggles against racism, of reactionary versus revolutionary violence, will be equally impatient when he or she finds the same themes dominant in a work of art. In criticism, as in creative writing, there is an ideological struggle.... The choice of what is relevant and the evaluation of a quality is conditioned

by the national, class and philosophical base. (quoted. In Steadman, 1991, p. 78)

To challenge the dominance of the oppressors, the subject matter of TSC challenges dominant ideology. This challenge is posed by asking “those questions which the rulers shy away from and turn(ing) them into a public debate” [Dutt, 1988, p. 23]. Such questioning is not limited to the current events only, it involves history as well. In the words of Utpal Dutt (1988), a political theater practitioner from Bengal, India, “the political theater rediscovers the true facts of history (p. 11).” TSC’s subject matter brings forward those events of history, which document the resistance of the oppressed to their oppression but somehow are absent from the official version of the history presented by the dominants. Such a challenge to dominant ideology, creates new values and culture among the oppressed people and frees them from the inferiority complex inculcated in them by the dominant ideology (Frerie’s views in Erven, 1988).

How should the subject matter of TSC deal with the tradition and the past? A number of TSC’s practitioners make a conscious effort to incorporate traditions and myths of people into TSC’s subject matter. Firstly, they believe that such incorporation empowers people by creating positive self-image and self-identity among them. Secondly, the use of traditional subject matter, language, symbols and forms in theater is more effective in communicating ideas because people are familiar to

them. David Kerr (1995) writes about a number of theater experiments in Africa where traditional art forms have been used successfully to communicate ideas for social transformation. However, there are a number of theater practitioners who argue in favor of developing a critical outlook towards traditions and the past. They claim that often traditions do not oppose authority and consequently support dominant values (Hashmi in Erven, 1989; Kid & Rashid, 1984; Weiss et al. 1993). While commenting upon traditional and folk drama, Weiss et al. (1993) write, "it rarely, if ever, questions authority or challenges fundamental beliefs. It actually honors authority, either directly, in the person of the councillors, the government, or the priest; or symbolically, in its devotion to religious icons" (p. 14). Similarly, Kidd and Rashid (1984) explain how in the past, the Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, were used to "reinforce feudal status quo and the Brahmanic hegemony" (p. 35). Rustom Bharucha (1983) makes a similar point regarding Sanskrit dramas of India. The supporters of critical outlook towards tradition and the past feel that the use of tradition in theater can be useful if it is somehow related to current situations. Finally, it should be noted that the value, the meaning and the usefulness of tradition change with the passing of time. Consequently, the subject matter of the TSC can not have a static relationship with the tradition.

Venues

As a result of their life situations, it is close to impossible for people to attend theater activities in centralized facilities away from their communities. Therefore, TSC commits itself to go the people. As Safdar Hashmi (1989) puts it, “if the people are not coming to the theater, the theater must go to the people” (p. 33). In order to fulfill this commitment, the practitioners of TSC do their theater in local communities. In most of the cases there are no ‘conventional theater facilities’ in the local communities, and therefore the theater activities of TSC are carried on in places such as parks, playgrounds, village plazas, bus stations, railway stations, markets, in front of factory gates, street corners, barnyards, churches, schools, gymnasiums, basketball courts, community halls, union halls, empty fields, restaurants, prisons and so on (Bakshi, 1989; Erven, 1987, 1988, 1992; Hashmi, 1989; Kidd & Rashid, 1984; Weiss et al., 1993). The stage for theater performance could range from a circle of 15 to 20 feet in radius surrounded by audience members to a some kind of permanent or make shift structure. The admission fee is either free or very minimal so that everyone in the community can afford it. One thing to note here is that there is no contradiction if the theater activity takes place in the ‘conventional theater facility’ provided the facility is under people’s control or available to people with no strings attached.

It is obvious that the occurrence of theater activity in local communities increases accessibility of theater to the people. In addition, in some instances, it becomes an action to exercise people's claim or control over common spaces in their communities. Kidd and Rashid (1984) tell a story to illustrate this point. A landless group in a village in Bangladesh was planning to perform a play in the village schoolyard. The play was about the corruption of the local bank manager. The bank manager pressured the school's headmaster to stop the performance of the play in the schoolyard. To fulfill bank manager's demand, the headmaster refused to provide electricity for the performance from the school. In response, the performers and the people who came to see the play collectively went to the headmaster and demanded that he provide the electricity. The headmaster gave in to their demands and the performance went on as scheduled.

Finally, when a theater activity takes place in a local community it has to confront and deal with the same kind of obstacles and barriers that the people confront everyday in their lives (Kidd & Rashid, 1984). For example, let us consider a situation in a small village where landless people are oppressed by the village landlord. In order to stifle landless people's expression, the landlord uses various methods of control, such as threat of violence against anyone who dares to speak against the landlord. Now if a play, dealing with landlord's oppression, is going to be performed in that village, then the theater practitioners would have to

face the landlord's threat of violence and devise ways to overcome it. The act of devising ways to overcome and challenge landlord's threat of violence would itself be a key intervention to change the social reality in this village.

Creation and Presentation of Theater

The practitioners of TSC take two approaches in the creation and presentation of their theater. Based upon the approach taken, a theater can be termed as the Performance Theater or the Participatory Theater. The practitioners of both of these approaches share same ideals and objectives about social change; however, they have a different perspective on the role of the audience in the creation and presentation of theater. This role is central to the distinction between Performance Theater and Participatory Theater.

Performance Theater

In the Performance Theater, a group of theater artists and/or workers create scripts, prepare plays and then perform them in front of an audience. The script writing and preparation of the plays (which includes directing, set designing, stage lighting, publicity etc.) are done individually or collectively (Hashmi, 1989; Weiss et al., 1993). The subject matter of the plays deals with the issues and concerns of the oppressed people and analyzes the situation to forward their interest. In

order to decide about the topics of their plays the writers either draw upon their own experiences and observations, or they consult with other organizations working for social change. On a number of occasions, theater groups conduct research among people and communities to find out about their concerns, problems, and proposed solutions. As plays are developed for performance, the groups perform them at the various venues, which are accessible to the target audience. In most of the cases, a formal or informal discussion with the audience takes place after performances. Usually, the scripts go through numerous changes to incorporate the points raised by members of the audience during rehearsals and discussions after the performances (Weiss et al., 1993).

The Performance Theater aids in the process of social change in many ways. First of all, it challenges the notion that theater is only for the elite by taking theater to the ordinary people. Secondly, it deals with the issues, such as structural causes of poverty, which are not dealt with in the mainstream media. It brings people's issues to a public forum for debate, and presents alternative perspectives and analysis. In this way, it acts as an effective vehicle to challenge dominant ideology. Thirdly, it brings out people to a common place to watch the performance and thus generates a sense of community among them. Fourthly, when it is performed with the collaboration of people's organizations (and this is most often the case), theater helps these organizations to build vital and enduring links with people. Fifthly, when this theater is performed in

protest marches and rallies, it acts as an effective vehicle of protest and an expression of opposition.

However, many people have criticized the Performance Theater for numerous reasons. It is considered a top-down theater where outsiders perform and people watch as spectators. Further, this approach ignores cultural and creative resources of local communities and makes them culturally dependent on outsiders (Kidd & Rashid, 1984). The people have no control over the creation and presentation of theater, and therefore this theater represents, “an imposition of outsider’s agendas and analysis” (Kidd & Rashid, 1984, p. 35). Moreover, the critics claim that if people do not participate in theater, then it is doubtful that they would participate in the actions for social change suggested in the theater. In the words of Ross Kidd , “if people are left out of the action and dialogue in the play it’s difficult to turn them on like a tap when it is all over” (quoted in Kerr, 1995, p. 161).

Participatory Theater

The central point of participatory theater is the involvement of audience in the creation and presentation of plays. This approach is based upon the writings of Paulo Frerie and Augusto Boal. According to Boal (1979), the main objective of the theater of the oppressed is “to change the people – ‘spectators’ passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic

action” (p.122). He further believes that, “all the revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that people themselves may utilize them. The theater is weapon, and it is the people who should wield it” (p. 122). In addition to Boal, there were a number of theater practitioners in Asia, particularly in the Philippines, who did original work to develop participatory TSC. In order to involve people in the creation and presentation of theater, the practitioners of TSC take following steps: 1) they go to a specific community and get to know the people there; 2) learn from people about the conditions of their lives; 3) teach people basic theatrical skills; 4) work with people to create plays about their lives; 5) present plays before the local audience; and 6) get audience feed back about the plays (Boal, 1979; Erven, 1992; Kidd and Rashid, 1984). According to Erven (1992), the theater practitioners in Asia give great significance to the contact with people before and after the workshops:

They discovered the importance of investigating the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of a community before exposing it to a theater for liberation workshop. They also realized that follow-up activities such as monitoring, refresher courses, advanced leadership and theater training (the so-called “trainer’s training”), and the integration of the community in a regional or national network were crucial to the long-term survival of the theater of liberation. In other words, they regarded the theater of liberation workshops as a vehicle for establishing community theater groups that would eventually merge into a nationwide (or even an international) cultural movement. (p. 20)

The proponents of Participatory Theater believe that people learn more through theater when they themselves are involved in the creation

and presentation of theater. The people's involvement in the process of finding solutions for their problems enables them to judge the merits, obstacles, challenges and disadvantages of each solution (Bharucha, 1983; Kerr, 1991). Moreover, when many members of the audience take part in discussion about the problems and solutions, then there is a possibility that they would explore more than one solution to their problems. According to Boal (1979), that should be the role of theater. In his words, "it is not the place of the theater to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined" (p. 141).

There is a commonly held belief among TSC practitioners and scholars that Participatory Theater in itself is emancipatory. However, they need to be cautious and remember that theater "is neutral as a technique, it can serve purposes of oppression as well as of liberation" (Epskamp, 1989, p.166). David Kerr (1991) makes several important points in this regard based on his theater work in Malawi. In his first example, he talks about a theater project initiated to educate villagers about primary health care. The people who were involved in this project included primary health care officials from government side and members of village health committees from people side. The theater made use of local language and cultural forms to communicate key ideas and basic information about primary health care. The project was so successful in achieving people's participation that more than twenty

theater groups came in to existence in villages as a result of this project. However, Kerr makes two key observations, which would suggest that this theater project was not leading villagers of Malawi to their liberation. First, the primary health officials attempted “to blunt the element of class and social conflict raised by the plays” (p. 66). Second, the presentations of plays were organized in such a way that they served to justify the state’s ideology. Kerr was very surprised to see that theater groups, with villagers as members, presented the ideas of the “elitist ‘extensionismo’ drama, even though the tools of creativity have been placed into the hands of villagers themselves” (p. 66).

In the second example, Kerr compares a performance style or elitist play called, *They call it Africa*, which was collectively created by university students and directed by Kerr, to participatory plays created and produced by villagers regarding primary health issues. Kerr writes that the play *They call it Africa*, in spite of being an elitist play, is able to deal with the macro level issues such as economic exploitation of Africa by multinational corporations and challenges the efficacy of developmental aid. On the other hand, the plays produced with the active participation of villagers failed to link the issues of villagers’ underdevelopment to economic and political order operating at the national and international level. Based upon this observation, Kerr argues:

As long as these villagers are condemned to a state of ignorance through lack of access to education and through authoritarian structures of information and development, even the most imaginative, culturally appropriate, and apparently democratic schemes of participatory theater will fail to produce the conditions that might elevate consciousness raising into social or political transformation. (p. 68)

Consequently, Kerr warns against the tendency among TSC practitioners to see Participatory Theater as the only theatrical approach capable of bringing social transformation in society. According to him, which theatrical approach would work in a society depends upon the various contradictions in that society. Therefore, on a tactical basis, he advocates for “theatrical pluralism”:

The dominant forces in world power structures are adapting with astonishing speed to the convulsions of late twentieth century politics, and they are quick to appropriate any weapons that are turned against them. Under such circumstances, the popular theater activist must be equally adaptable and eclectic, and he or she must be able to use a wide variety of theatrical approaches, as dictated by the nature of the struggles in which the people are engaged. To extrapolate a particular model of participatory popular theater and to sanctify it into dogmatic praxis serve only to reduce the tactical maneuverability of the people in their cultural struggle for power at a time of rapid transformation, at a time when they need to retain as much flexibility as possible (p. 73).

Props

There are no fixed rules in relation to the use of props in TSC. In most cases, the resources of a theater group determine the kinds of props the group would use in their plays. Salvador Tavora, founder of a theater group, la Cuadra de Sevilla in Spain says, “we created it [theater] with all those things that we used in our daily lives for our survival or

subsisting” (quoted in Erven, 1988, p. 150). Brenda Fajardo, chief designer of Philippines Education Theater Association (PETA) believes that an artist should always work within his/her means. She questions, “how can an artist claim to be socially responsible when he mounts high-cost productions during times of deprivation” (quoted in Erven, 1992, p. 37)? Another criterion around the use of props in TSC is that the use of props should be adaptable to the venue and the situation at the time of the performance. For example, at the time of Marco’s regime, theater workers in the Philippines faced a risk of being arrested by the police due to the political nature of their performances. In order to minimize risks, the actors used “light masks, throw-away props, and little or no costumes to avoid being easily identified by the police” (Erven, 1987, p. 63).

Although, there are some TSC groups who make elaborated use of props, however a majority of such groups use minimum props. For example, Badal Sircar, a Bengali theater director from India, believes in only using “the body of the actor and its relation to space” (quoted in Barucha, 1983, p. 143) in his plays. He acquired this belief from his theater experience. According to Barucha, Sircar used to use theater devices such as lights in his plays. Once, in the middle of a performance, an electric fuse went off and spotlights stopped functioning. As a result, the remaining play was performed in the light of the house lights. This did not create any disruption in the audience and

the audience watched the play with full concentration. As a result of this incident, Sircar started believing that stage lights are not a necessity in a play's production. In conclusion, TSC uses props according to its needs and resources and is always cautious that its elaborated use of props and other devices should not make the play inaccessible to its target audience.

Autonomy

Since TSC does not support the interests of the powerful elite in society, therefore, it is very important for TSC to remain autonomous and independent. Yet, can TSC depend upon government and other powerful interests in society for financial support and its economic stability and still remain autonomous and independent? There are some TSC groups who believe that they can maintain their autonomy and provide information and education to people even after receiving financial support from government. For example, the Jagran theater group in Delhi, India gets some of its funding from the government and work for "community education and development" through their theater in the slums of Delhi (Bakshi, 1989). However, there are other theater practitioners who believe that TSC can not depend upon the establishment for its economic survival. According to the Bengali theater director Badal Sircar, the financial support from the establishment (government or other powerful interests) will ultimately result in

compromises made by the theater group (Bharucha, 1983). David Kerr (1991, 1995) also indicates that there exists a danger that when working under the sponsorship of government or in collaboration with government, TSC would express the interests of the government rather than the people. He provides some detailed examples of theater for development in Africa where government officials were involved in the theater projects. The government officials made serious attempts to control these projects and used them to create support for the government. He writes:

The participation of government officials pointed to a crucial ambiguity in the Theater for Development programmes. The jargon used by popular theater workers to describe Theater for Development ('participatory', 'bottom-up', 'conscientization', 'liberation' and so on) derived from the combative Frerian language of popular resistance. But the actual practice had to conform to the paternalistic (or, in some cases, repressive) realities of government hegemony. (1995, p. 159)

In the light of above examples, TSC practitioners should look at the issue of financial support from government and other powerful interests or collaboration with government and other powerful interests very carefully and cautiously. If there is a slight chance that such arrangement would compromise their work in any way, then they should refrain from getting into it. According to Weiss et al. (1993), a theater cannot be considered a grass root theater if it "does not exercise a significant measure of independence from state or other structures with regard to artistic decisions, selection of subjects, and development of material..." (p. 140).

Partners in social change

Theater can play an effective role in providing people with information, as a forum for discussion, and as a means for critical analysis of their situations. However, these things alone can not bring about social change. Rather, collective action is needed for a process of social change to begin and to be sustained. The appropriate vehicles for organizing and mobilizing such actions are social, political, labor, women and such types of other organizations working within communities to bring change. Therefore, TSC needs to link, build supportive relationship and partnership with such organizations. According to Kidd and Rashid (1984), “organizing struggle on the stage is different from doing it in real life and the distinction must not be blurred. Theater must be linked with organizing and struggle. Where these conditions are met, the performance itself can become a form of struggle”(p. 32). If TSC fails to connect with such organizations or there are no such organizations in the community, then it becomes almost impossible to put actions, which are explored through theater, into practice (Kerr, 1991). A. Mangai (1998) makes a similar point in her case study of a play on female infanticide/foeticide in the Tamil Nadu State of India. In her case study, an actor says that on some occasions, during the discussion session at the end of the play, the actors were not able to answer all the questions raised by audience members. The actor feels that “maybe, we need to go

beyond theater onto social movements as well” (p. WS-71). However, a number of theater workers raise concerns in this regard. In particular, these workers note that leaders of various social change organizations, especially the organizations from the left, do not give full credit to the TSC activities and see theater only as a means to attract crowds to the gatherings of these organizations. This is a serious concern and needs to be addressed by social change organizations and TSC groups. The leaders of social change organizations must understand the true nature and the role of TSC, which is explained by one actor from the Philippines as follows:

In essence, what we're trying to do is to get the rotten, colonial culture out of people's heads. Fight the enemy from within, you know. Ours is a crucial instrument for the creation of a new mentality and a more just society. We show the true issues that affect our people. We promote traditional and indigenous cultural forms. We teach the people to make their own dramas and songs with whatever means are available to them. We form groups that become, in fact, small alternative, democratic, creative communities. All of that is, off course, part of the revolutionary process towards attaining change in society. (Erven, 1992, p. 77).

Conclusion

The above discussion has drawn an outline of TSC, which provides us with a clear picture of TSC practiced all over the world. As part of a broader social process, TSC is dynamic and constantly changing. Therefore, this outline should be considered as a guide that is neither rigid nor inflexible. However, to obtain a general understanding of TSC,

its key characteristics based upon the discussion above can be identified as follows.⁵ TSC

- deals with the issues and problems related to the lives of the oppressed people;
- builds a sense of community among the oppressed;
- draws attention of oppressed people to their reality and explores ways and means to change this reality;
- depicts oppression of oppressed people and shows how this oppression is linked to structures and institutions of society;
- examines people's reality in its historical context;
- does not hesitate to deal with politics;
- challenges official versions of history;
- challenges the dominant ideology;
- uses traditions and myths of the people while maintaining a critical relationship with these traditions and myths;
- involves people in the creation and performance of theater as much as possible;
- respects cultural and creative resources of local communities;

⁵ Kidd and Rashid (1984) have also listed some of the key features of "People's Theater" in point form. As I have incorporated their ideas in the development of this framework, some of the features of "People's Theater" discussed by them have become part of these characteristics.

- uses venues which are accessible to the people and are under their control;
- uses props which are within their resources and means and are adaptable to their venues and situations;
- remains autonomous and independent; and
- builds partnerships with other organizations, which are working for social change in society.

In the following chapters, this conceptual framework will be used to understand TSC in the Punjab State of India. However, before that in the next chapter, we will discuss the socio-economic conditions in Punjab to map out the arena for struggle for TSC in Punjab.

Chapter 2

Mapping the Arena for TSC: A Socio-economic Introduction to the Punjab State of India

Introduction

Theater for social change (TSC) is an esthetical and political response to socio-economic reality within a society because various causes of people's oppression emanate from this reality. On the one hand, to transform society, TSC acts upon the socio-economic reality of a society; and on the other hand, this reality plays a key role in shaping TSC. For example, the issues, concerns and problems addressed in TSC arise directly from the experience of people in their socio-economic reality. Similarly, the process of doing TSC is dependent upon the means and resources available to people working within their socio-economic reality. In other words, the content and practice of TSC in a society is determined by the socio-economic conditions of that society. In light of such a relationship between TSC and the socio-economic reality in a society, this chapter will provide an introduction to the socio-economic conditions in the Punjab State of India so that TSC in Punjab can be understood in its proper context.

The State of Punjab is located in the north east of India and is one of the smallest states in India with an area of 50, 362 square kilometers, which equals to 1.5 per cent of the total area of India. According to 1991

census, the total population of Punjab was 20.3 million, which constituted 2.5 percent of total population of India at that time (Mangat, Kaur & Kaur, 1999-2000). Seventy per cent of this population lives in villages. In the union of India, the Punjab is a prosperous state. An average Punjabi earns sixty five percent more than an average Indian. The value of bank deposits of an average Punjabi is twice than that of an average Indian (Shiva, 1991). In 1996-97, the per capita net state domestic product (NSDP) for Punjab was 18,213 Indian Rupees,⁶ which was 1.66 times more than the per capita net domestic product for the whole of India. In the same year, the per capita power consumption in Punjab was 790 kwh. This was highest in the country and was 2.34 times higher than the per capita power consumption for the whole of India. There were 103.2 vehicles registered per 1,000 persons in Punjab in comparison to 44.0 vehicles registered per 1,000 persons all over India. As of March 31, 1999, there were 5.34 telecom lines per 100 persons, which were again highest in the country and two times higher than the telecom lines average for the whole of India (Kurian, 2000).

However, this prosperity is not shared equally by all Punjabis. A large number of Punjabis have to struggle hard to meet their daily needs and face inequality, discrimination, injustice and marginalization. They include the small and marginal farmers, landless agricultural laborers,

⁶ At current rate, one Canadian dollar approximately equals to 30 Indian Rupees.

workers, women, *dalits*⁷ or the lower caste people, migrant workers and poor. To fully comprehend the unequal and marginalized position of above mentioned people, we will examine the agriculture-based economy of Punjab and its impact upon the lives of Punjabis. In so far as education, health care and the position of women are among the key indicators to measure the human development in a society, the conditions of these indicators in Punjab will also be examined. Let us begin with the agricultural sector.

Agricultural sector

Punjab's economy is an agricultural based economy. Eighty four percent of land in Punjab is being used for agriculture (Shiva, 1991). In 1996-1997, forty four percent of the net state domestic product of Punjab came from agriculture (Kurian, 2000) and seventy percent of Punjab's population directly or indirectly depend upon agriculture to earn their living (B. Singh, 1999-2000). Clearly, the situation in the agricultural sector in Punjab profoundly affects the lives of Punjabis.

Under the Indian development model, the State of Punjab was selected as a site for the Green Revolution in the middle of 1960s. In the next three and half decades, the Green Revolution in Punjab has

⁷ The literal translation of Punjabi word *dalits* is the oppressed. In this thesis it is used to describe the lower-castes people of Punjab because they prefer to be known as dalits.

completely transformed agriculture in the state from a subsistent to commercialized agriculture. Now the agriculture process in Punjab has become mechanized, capital and energy intensive and fully commercialized. For example, the use of tractors in agriculture has increased 56 times since 1960. In 1960-61, the state had 0.5 tractors per thousand acres of cultivated area, and in 1990-91, this ratio has increased to 28 (Shergill, 1998). Consequently, one third of Punjabi farmers own tractors and one third of total tractors in India are in the Punjab (S. Singh, 2000). The use of power driven tube-wells for irrigation purposes also shows the same pattern of increase. In 1960-61, there were 1.6 tube-wells per thousand acres of cultivated area and in 1990-91, this number has increased 48 times to 76.9 tube-wells per thousand acres of cultivated area (Shergill, 1998). As a result of increased number of tube-wells and other methods of irrigation, ninety five percent of total cultivated area in Punjab is now under irrigation whereas in 1960-61, only 54 per cent of the total cultivated area were under irrigation (Mahil, 1999-2000). Fertilizer use in agriculture in Punjab during the three decades of the Green Revolution has risen dramatically. In 1960-61, the Punjabi farmers used 0.4 kilogram of fertilizers per acre and In 1990-91, they were using 65.9 kilogram of fertilizers per acre, which is 165 times more than the amount they used in 1960-61 (Shergill, 1998). Moreover, the farmers of Punjab are now completely dependent on chemicals to control pests and insects and kill

weeds in farming and use 923 grams of pesticides per hectare annually, which is the highest usage in India (Khanna, 2001).

As a result of Green Revolutionary farming, Punjab has achieved a significant increase in its agricultural production. According to H. S. Shergill (1998), between 1960-61 and 1990-91

farm production in Punjab grew at a steady rate of 5.05 per cent per year and as a result agricultural output in the state has more than quadrupled in these thirty years. Net state domestic product originating in agricultural sector grew at the rate of 4.04 per cent per year over the same period and has tripled in these 30 years. Output of Wheat and Rice grew at even higher rates of 6.99 per cent and 11.80 per cent per year respectively over this period and Wheat and Rice production increased by 7 times and 28 times respectively. (p. 1)

Overall, Punjab produces 21 percent of wheat, 9 percent of paddy and 21 percent of cotton in India (S. Singh, 2000). However, this increase is not continuing anymore and the agricultural production in Punjab has reached its limits. In the earlier years of the Green Revolution, the yield per acre for various crops increased tremendously. For example, in 1960-61, the yield of wheat per acre in Punjab was 503 kilograms and in the middle of the 1980s, this yield increased 2.7 times to 1354 kilograms per acre. However, during the next ten years, the yield of wheat per acre has only increased nominally, from 1354 kilograms per acre to 1617 kilograms per acre. A similar situation exists in the case of rice. In 1960-61, Punjab was producing 408 kilograms of rice per acre and in the middle of 1980s, the amount of rice produced per acre in Punjab increased 3.2 times of the 1960-61 amount to 1308 kilograms per acre.

However, in the middle of the 1990s, the per acre yield of rice in Punjab was 1359 kilograms, which is almost the same as the per acre yield of rice in the mid 1980s (Shergill, 1998). Summarizing his findings in this regard, H.S. Shergill (1998) notes, that between 1985-86 and 1995-96, “yield of wheat has grown at a very slow rate, yield of rice has remained stagnant and yields of cotton (American) and cotton (Desi)⁸ have actually declined. Similarly, yields of sugarcane, maize, and potato have remained stagnant” (p. 8).

Along with increased agricultural yields, came the increased cost of production. Under Green Revolution a Punjabi farmer has to use increased amount of fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides, irrigation and other inputs; therefore his farming expenses have gone up significantly. According to H.S. Shergill (1998), in 1974-75, at current prices, a farmer had to spend 425 Indian Rupees in cash per acre for wheat, 437 Indian Rupees in cash per acre for paddy and 341 Indian Rupees in cash for per acre for cotton. In 1996-97, the same farmer had to spend 2810 Indian Rupees in cash per acre for wheat, 4485 Indian Rupees in cash per acre for paddy and 2674 Indian Rupees in cash per acre for cotton. However, the ratio of increased cash expenses per acre is much higher than the ration of increased agricultural production per acre. In Shergill’s (1998) words, “ a comparison of growth rates in agricultural production and

⁸ *Desi* in Punjabi means native.

productivity... and the growth rates in the cash expenditures per acre on the production of major crops like wheat, paddy, cotton... leads to the clear conclusion that modernisation of Punjab farms over the last about three decades has resulted in a much higher growth in cash expenditure on farm inputs compared to growth of farm output” (p. 4).

How has the Green Revolution farming affected the well being of Punjabi farmers? Has it fulfilled its promise to better the lives of Punjabi farmers or has it become a cause for their grief and frustration? Though the Green Revolution in Punjab has brought some benefits for the large farmers, it has caused devastating consequences for the marginal, small and semi-medium farmers⁹, which constitute a majority of farmers in Punjab. For example, land ownership statistics of Punjabi farmers show that 44.72 per cent of farming households own less than 2 hectare (5 acres) of land per household, 25.86 per cent of farmers own between 2 – 4 hectares (5 acres to 10 acres) of land per household, the 23.41 per cent of farmers own 4 – 10 hectares (10 acres to 25 acres) per household and 6.01 per cent of farmers own 10 hectares (25 acres) and more land per household. The combination of the first and second group together

⁹ The Statistical Abstract of Punjab, 1997 cited in the Institution for Development and Communication’s (1998) study, divides farming households in Punjab into four categories based upon the ownership of land per household. These categories are as follow: marginal and small farmers own below 2.0 hectares (5 acres) of land per household, semi-medium farmers own 2.0 – 4.0 hectares (5 to 10 acres) of land per household, medium farmers own 4.0 – 10.0 hectares (10 to 25 acres) of land per household and large farmers own 10.0 hectares (25 acres) or more land per household.

shows that 71 per cent of farming households in Punjab own less than 4 hectares (10 acres) of land per household (Institute for Development and Communication, 1998; Mahil, 1999-2000). In its early years, the Green Revolution gave some boost to marginal and small farmers' income but that trend did not continue (S. S. Gill, 1995). Gradually, the income of a large number of these farmers had fallen below the poverty line.

According to Sukhpal Singh (2000), in the 1990s "about 20 per cent of total farming population, 24 per cent of small farmers and 31 per cent of the marginal farmers had incomes below poverty line" (p. 1889). For marginal and small farmers, agriculture is no longer a viable option to earn their living. They are either selling or leasing their land to large farmers and getting out of agriculture. Consequently, "the distribution of operated land has shifted in favor of the richer farmers" in Punjab under the Green Revolution (Dasgupta qtd. in Shiva, 1991, p. 177). Kanwaljit Kaur Gill and Sucha Singh Gill (1990) and Ghuman and Riar (1998-1999) also confirm this assertion. According to Ghuman and Riar (1998-1999), between 1970 – 1971 to 1990-91 the number marginal operational holdings decreased 42.78 per cent and number of small operational holdings decreased by 21.62 per cent. During the same period of time the number of medium size operational holdings increased by 2.73 per cent and large size operational holdings increased by 5.54 per cent. The marginal and small farmers who are getting out of agriculture are either becoming landless labourers or finding other kinds

of jobs to earn their living. However, as most of them do not have any skills other than farming, they are finding it very hard to obtain suitable jobs to earn their living (S. S. Gill, 1997).

Another consequence of Green Revolutionary agriculture in Punjab is that it has created chronic indebtedness among the farmers. In order to meet their short term and long-term¹⁰ farming expenses, a large number of Punjabi farmers have to take loans. According to H.S. Shergill (1998), in today's Punjab, 86 per cent of farmers take short-term loans and 27.53 per cent of farmers take long term loans. At present, the total amount of debt owed by farmers in Punjab is 57 billion Indian Rupees. Further, the formal credit agencies such as cooperative banks and societies, commercial banks etc. are unable to meet the credit needs of farmers, and farmers are forced to borrow from informal lenders such as commission agents. According to Sukhpal Singh (2000) and H.S. Shergill (1998), close to 50 per cent of the debt of farmers in Punjab is owed to commission agents. These commission agents charge a 24 – 36 per cent annual rate of interest which is two to three times higher than the interest rates of formal lending institutions (S. Singh, 2000; Shergill,

¹⁰ According to H.S. Shergill (1998) short term loans are loans, which are taken by farmers to meet their day to day farming expenses such as to buy fertilizers and other inputs, to pay labour, to buy diesel for their tractors and pay electricity bills etc. These loans have to be paid back at the end of each crop season. The long-term loans are those loans which farmers take to buy machines such as tractors, threshers, harvesting combines etc. The amount of these loans is big and the pay back time for these loans is longer than a crop season.

1998; A. Gill, 1996). As a result, interest burden on debt owed by Punjabi farmers is very high. According to Shergill (1998) and Sukhpal Singh (2000) annual interest paid on their debt by the Punjabi farmers is equal to 11.03 billion Indian Rupees. To understand fully the extent of debt owed by Punjabi farmers, H.S. Shergill (1998) observes that the

total debt is about 70 per cent of the net state domestic product originating in agriculture in the state in a year. It means almost three-fourth of one year's total agricultural income of the state has to be paid if the amount of debt is to be liquidated. ... Looked at from another angle, it may be seen that 13.25 per cent of total farm land area of the state must be mortgaged out by farmers (at the current going rate per acre of mortgage money) to even freeze the annually recurring interest charge on total debt (p. 69).

Marginal and small farmers are the ones who carry highest debt burden in the state. For example, average per acre debt owed by a small farmer in Punjab is equal to 10,105 Indian Rupees, whereas average per acre debt owed by a large farmer in Punjab is 4230 Indian Rupees. (Shergill, 1998, p.65). Thus, on average a small farmer in Punjab owes 2.38 times more debt per acre than that of a large farmer. Moreover, the rate of accumulation of the debt owed by small farmers is unbelievable. A recent news story about the loans taken by farmers from commission agents provides documentation of this process of debt accumulation:

Mohinder Singh of Parjan Biharipur village in Nakodar subdivision ... had taken a loan of Rs. 20,000 from a village commission agent two years back, who was 'demanding' an amount of Rs. 5 lakh (500,000) from him now. ...

Similarly, Sukhjinder Singh of Lohgarh village ... had taken a loan of Rs. 40,000 about a year back, but the money-lender was still demanding an amount of Rs. 1.3 lakh (130,000) even as he had 'returned' an amount of

Rs. 30,000 after taking a loan from a bank after pledging an acre of his land. ...

Gurmail Singh of Adarman village ... had taken a loan of Rs. 52,000 from a commission agent about four years back the later was demanding an amount of Rs. 9.3 (930,000) lakh from him now. ...

Makhan Singh of Sidhwan Dona ... had to hand over his three acres of land about three years back to the commission agent for a small loan amount of Rs. 32,000 which he had taken about six years back. (V.Singh, 2001).

In addition to charging high interest rates on loans, the commission agents use two other methods to exploit farmers. First, in order to obtain loans, the farmers have to pledge their crops as collateral. As a result, farmers have to sell their crops to those commission agents from whom they have taken the loans. Secondly, most of the commission agents own shops or have shares in shops that sell agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides etc. and other consumer items. When giving loans to farmers, the commission agents set conditions that farmers will have to buy their agricultural inputs and other items from the shops owned by the commission agents. Most often, in these shops the agricultural inputs and other items are sold at prices higher than the market prices and thus further exploitation of farmers is carried on (A. Gill, 1996; Shergill, 1998).

The debt burden on Punjabi farmers is so heavy that farmers are using desperate means to keep their head above the water. In order to meet their loan obligations towards one agency, they borrow from a second agency, and to pay off the second agency, they may even borrow

from a third (B. Singh, 1999-2000). When they become unsuccessful in obtaining more loans, they are forced to sell their new farm machinery, such as tractors, to raise cash to meet their loan obligations and daily expenses. According to a senior bank official, “in Bathinda, Faridkot and Mansa districts (of Punjab) more than 1,000 new tractors had been sold off by the farmers in the bazaars, immediately after their delivery from the showrooms in the past few years” (Parkash, 2000). These tractors are sold at bargain prices. These kinds of desperate measures generate cash for farmers on a temporary basis, however, in the long run they push farmers deeper into a proverbial sea of debt.

In the 1990s, for some farmers, the indebtedness and economic hardship had reached to a point that they saw no way out of it other than ending their own lives. According to a report by the Institute for Development and Communication (1998), in 1995, 1996 and 1997, a total of 254 farmers had committed suicide in Punjab. In its report on farmers’ suicides, the Movement Against State Repression (MASR) claims “poverty and indebtedness among the possible reasons for such acts” (P.P.S. Gill, 2000). While maintaining that there were multiple causes for suicides in rural Punjab, the report of the Institute for Development and Communication (1998) also finds that indebtedness and economic hardship played a significant role in these suicides. Some of the case histories of suicide victims among the farmers mentioned in this report clearly establish this point. According to one story,

... a former sarpanch (head of the village council) of village Sakrodi, Sangrur district, after killing his wife and son committed suicide. Investigations revealed that he was under heavy debt and in order to pay the debt, he wanted to sell some portion of his land. When he finalised the deal there was a severe conflict with his wife and one night before the buyers were to come he killed his wife and son with a sword and later himself consumed pesticide. (p. 33)

Another suicide story of a farmer from Longowal Khurd village in Gurdaspur district of Punjab, reveals similar facts. This farmer,

was reported to have incurred a heavy debt... In 1994, there was division of land in the family and only two acres came to his share. He had also to shoulder the responsibility of his sister's marriage as his brothers did not cooperate. For this purpose he had to sell five kanals (5/8 of an acre) of his land and had also to raise some loan. He could not return the loan but had to borrow more for meeting the needs of his family. His child was expelled from school of non-payment of fees. His sister paid the fees (of his child) and got him readmitted. ... This depressed him so much that he killed himself the next day. As this was not enough, his wife followed suit by killing her 10-months-old son and herself. All this due to indebtedness. (p. 69)

This report also found that most of suicide victims among farmers in Punjab come from small and marginal farmers. The report mentions that "the most striking feature (about suicides) is the decline in the percentage of suicides with increase in the size of land holdings" (p. 45)

In addition to farmers, the farm labourers constitute another group of people who are greatly affected by Green Revolutionary agriculture in Punjab. Since the beginning of the Green Revolution in Punjab, the percentage of farm labourers in the total work force of Punjab has increased continuously. In 1961, farm labourers were 6.1 per cent of the total work force in Punjab: This percentage, however, had risen up to 23.82 per cent in 1991 (Ghuman & Riar, 1999). These farm labourers

come from the lower caste people of the Punjab and migrant labourers who have come to Punjab from other states of India. Alike farmers, the lives of majority of farm labourers have not improved much as a result of the Green Revolution in Punjab. First, the farm labourers do not own any land, and depend upon the sale of their labour to earn their living. However, as a result of mechanization in agriculture, employment opportunities for farm labourers have greatly diminished in Punjab. Further, most of the work available to farm labourers is seasonal, and this limits the ability of farm labourers to gain reasonable wages. During the busy season, the farm labourers can obtain minimum wage or higher than minimum wage set by the government, but during other times of the year they are unable to get steady work and minimum wages (Dogra, 1988). As a result, in most cases, the incomes of farm labourers in Punjab are not sufficient to meet their living expenses and they have to borrow to cover these expenses. Because they do not have any assets to put as collateral, it is very hard for them to borrow from formal lending institutions. The only choice for them is to borrow from big landowners, put their labour as collateral, and become target of exploitation by these landowners. Anita Gill (1996) describes this exploitation as follow:

The arrangement worked out is that a loan plus some grains for consumption are given to the labourers, and in return they are required to work on the lender's land till the time the loan amount is repaid from the wages. The loan is interest-free at times, but work is taken from the labourers for as long as 18 hours a day, and the wages are much less than the market wage rate. Since no document is executed, the poor, illiterate labourer is not even aware as to how much he has actually paid to the landlord. In fact, I came across a most pathetic case in the survey,

where a labourer had not borrowed, but was forced to work for the landlord day and night because his forefathers had borrowed from the landlord and the loan had not been repaid as yet – an example of 'bandhua mazdoor' (bonded labourer) at its very best. (p. 588)

Bharat Dogra (1988) provides further insight into the living conditions of farm labourers in his profile of a landless farm labourer, Sharvan Ram, from one of the prosperous villages in Punjab. Sharvan Ram's family includes his wife, three daughters and three sons. One of his three daughters is already married. The remaining members of the family live in a single room of 90 square feet in area. They have another room, but they cannot use it because its roof needs repair. The roof has needed repair for the last five years, but lack of money has prevented any repair from taking place. The family does not have enough warm clothes for its members in the winters, and cannot afford vegetables or pulses in their daily diet. Most often they mix salt in their *rotis* or bread and eat them or eat their *rotis* with pickles. There are times in the year, when they don't even have enough *rotis*. The daily milk consumption for this whole family is 250 grams, which they use as a mixer in tea. This profile clearly shows that this family of landless farm laborers in one of the prosperous villages of one of the prosperous states of India lacks proper housing, clothing, and food.

The Green Revolutionary agriculture has not only failed to increase the economic well being of a large number of people in Punjab, it has also caused serious damage to the environment. For example, the

intensive use of fertilizers has decreased the fertility of agricultural land in Punjab and has reduced the yield per acre of various crops. As a result, the farmers in Punjab have to regularly increase the amount of fertilizers used per acre to maintain the same level of yields per acre (Shiva, 1991). The extensive use of pesticides on crops is another cause of environmental pollution in Punjab. According to Dr. M.S. Bajwa of Punjab Agricultural University in Ludhiana, a significant amount of pesticides used on crops “do not reach the target organisms and disperse in air, soil, and water” (qtd. in Khanna, 2001). Such leakage of pesticides into the environment is a serious health hazard.

The intensive irrigation under the green revolution has degraded a large acreage of agricultural land due to waterlogging, salinity and lowering of water table in various districts of Punjab. According to Shiva (1991) 286, 000 hectares of land in Punjab are waterlogged. The second problem of intensive irrigation is salination, which happens when an increased amount of water is used for irrigation in areas with low rainfall causing underground salts to come to the surface and remain there. The salination of land decreases its productivity “and, in extreme cases, ruin it forever” (Shiva, 1991, p. 137). Shiva (1991) estimates that “about 70, 000 hectares in Punjab are salt affected and produce either no yields or very poor yields” (p. 137). Those areas of Punjab, which use ground water for irrigation purposes, are experiencing a different kind of ecological problem, the drastic fall in the water table. For example, between June of

1999 and June 2000, the water table in Punjab had fallen by 0.4 meters. The ongoing fall in ground water table has raised serious questions about the “sustainability of agriculture... at the present level” (Khanna, 2001).

The effects of environmental damage described above are not limited to farming in Punjab. They are also causing various kinds of social problems. For example, it has become difficult for people living in waterlogged area of Mansa district to find marriage partners. As a result of waterlogging, farmer boys are being forced to abandon farming and do *dehari* or manual labour job on daily contract in nearby towns and cities. This lowers their status and chances of marriage. As explained in a report, “No farmer having an iota of self-respect gives his daughter to a boy doing *dehari* “ (Sarbjit Singh, 1999). In case of girls from this area, no one is willing to marry them. Some people from this area explained “we have nothing with us to spend on the marriage of our daughters so nobody accepts their hand” (Sarbjit Singh, 1999).

Education

Education is the foundation of an egalitarian society. However, Punjabi society has failed to meet this requirement, and there exists a number of inequalities and discrepancies in the provision of equitable education for all of its population. People belonging to different economic classes, castes, regions and gender have different level of educational

opportunities available to them in Punjab. This section will document these inequalities and discrepancies.

On the whole, only 58.5 per cent of Punjabis are literate, which means that more than 40 per cent of Punjabis cannot read or write (Brar, 1998-1999). The categorization of the literacy rate based upon gender, region and caste shows that certain groups of Punjabi people are more disadvantaged than others are. For example, the rate of literacy among Punjabi men is 65.66 per cent and the literacy rate among Punjabi women is 50.4 per cent. This means that half of the women in Punjab are illiterate. Further, there is a wide gap between the literacy rate of rural and urban populations of Punjab. The literacy rate for the rural Punjab is 52.77 per cent and the literacy rate for urban Punjab is 72.08 per cent. A breakdown of literate Punjabis on the basis of caste shows that scheduled castes (lower castes) people have literacy rate of 41.09 per cent whereas the literacy rate among non-scheduled castes is 67.90 per cent. However, the literacy rate among scheduled castes women is only 31.03 per cent (Brar, 1998-1999). This means that scheduled castes women in Punjab face double discrimination in education based on gender and caste and 2/3 of them are illiterate.

The literacy statistics demonstrate the deficient state of education in Punjab. However, if we look at the numbers about how many children enter grade one and how many of them stay in school to finish grade 12, then we find that the state of education in Punjab is even worse.

According to Sharma (2000), in 1995-1996, the drop-out rate among grade one to grade five students was 23 per cent, among grade one to grade eight was 39 per cent and among grade one to grade ten was 51 per cent. That means that only 49 per cent of students who enter grade one complete grade ten. Sharma (2000) further provides statistics, which show that out of 614,000 students who wrote grade five exams in 1991, only 145471 wrote grade twelve exam in 1998. Thus out of six students who complete grade five, only one completes grade twelve. As well, a large number of children in Punjab do not enter school. According to one survey in 1986-87, in the rural area, there were 29.2 percent and in the urban area, there were 9.5 per cent of school age children who had never entered school. In 1995, there were 160,000 school age children in Punjab who were out of schools and 140,000 of them were from the rural area (Brar, 1998-1999). A majority of children who do not enter school or drop out of school belong to poor and scheduled caste families. The main reason behind this drop out rate is economic as most children start working as labourers in farms, brick kilns, road construction sites, restaurants, tea-houses, grocery stores, bicycle and scooter repair shops etc. after dropping out of school.

The current education in Punjab is provided by two types of schools - the private and government schools. The private schools have modern facilities and infrastructure and provide quality education. However, education is expensive in private schools and only 20 per cent

of Punjabis from the rich and middle classes can afford to send their children to these schools. The remaining eighty per cent of ordinary Punjabis send their children to government schools (Stop Commercialisation, 2000). The facilities and infrastructure of government schools is so poor that it is impossible for them to provide quality education. According to Dr. Meenakshi (1999) 30 per cent of government primary schools in Punjab do not have their own buildings. Twenty per cent schools only have one room for five grades. There are 58 per cent of primary schools in Punjab that do not have *tat*, *tappar* and *dariyan* (different kinds of floor mats) for students to sit on. Many schools in Punjab do not even have chairs for teachers. Approximately, 42 per cent of schools do not have black boards and 95 per cent of schools lack sporting equipment or any kind of audio-visual material. In schools without buildings, classes are held in the open in winter and under trees in summer. According to teachers of one of such school, “the class keeps on moving into shadows along with the movement of the sun” (Walia, 2000). Many school buildings are in poor shape. A newspaper report about some of the primary schools in Dasuya sub-division, describes the situation of school buildings as follow:

There were just tow rooms for five primary classes in most of the institutions. There was overcrowding, classes were being held in the open and the children were forced to sit on *kutchha* (mud floors), uncovered floors... There were rat holes inside classrooms, roofs had collapsed and windows and doors were broken. ... due to an inadequate drainage system and low level of compounds, water from lanes accumulated on the premises of certain schools. Almost all buildings were without electricity.

... In all schools there were no proper toilets arrangements for girl students and women teachers. ... No funds were being received to get broken furniture repaired and for the purchase of chalk, registers, etc. Most of the classrooms were without blackboards. (Sud, August 25, 2000).

Further, the government schools suffer from severe shortage of teachers. In January 2001, the Education Minister himself admitted “that 496 government schools in Punjab were without teachers” (30,000 vacancies, 2001). There are 30 per cent of primary schools in Punjab that have only one teacher to teach the five grades in the school (Meenakshi, 1999). On the whole, 30,000 positions of teachers in government schools in Punjab are vacant (30,000 vacancies, 2001). Such a lack of proper facilities and infrastructure and the shortage of teachers in government schools mostly attended by children of poor and other disadvantaged people, seriously compromise the quality of education. After spending years in this school system, most of the students do not gain any skills and knowledge to advance in their lives. On the other hand, expensive private schools, attended by the children of rich and middle classes, provide quality education. Clearly, a wide gulf has been taking place between haves and have-nots in the field of education in Punjab.

Health

Health is a key determinant in a person’s capabilities and chances to achieve his/her fullest potential in life. For this reason, the World

Health Organization, in its constitution states that “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being...” (World Health Organization, 1985). As a member-state of World Health Organization, India is committed to provide at least primary health care for all its citizens. However, after 54 years of its independence, India has not succeeded in fulfilling this commitment. For a large number of people in India, a health care of a reasonable quality is not available. Similar to education, the key reason for this is that there exist two streams of health care system – privatized and public- in India. The privatized system provides better health care but it is expensive, and therefore, is accessible only to the rich and middle classes. The public system, upon which the poor and other disadvantaged people depend upon, is in very bad shape. This section will provide some examples to demonstrate the poor condition of the public health care system in Punjab.

The public health care system in Punjab does not have appropriate infrastructure to meet the needs of recipients of its services. A large number of health centers in Punjab do not have their own buildings (Ghuman & Singh, 1998-1999). There are others that have their own buildings but these buildings are ill suited to serve the sick. For example, many of these buildings do not have electricity (or experience a lack of funds to pay their electric bills), and do not have drinking water and toilets for patients. Some of the buildings of government health

centers have mud floors and leaky roofs (Sud, October 19, 2000).

Usually, basic medicines are not available in government hospitals. In February 2001, a news report about the district hospital in the Mansa city of Punjab described the situation in the hospital as follow: “basic medicines (had) been out of stock for the past two years. There (was) a shortage of x-ray films, laboratory chemicals and family planning devices. Often the patients (were) asked to purchase x-ray film from the market” (Goyal, 2001). Such a situation is not limited to rural or small cities’ government hospitals. The key government hospitals in the main cities of Punjab are also unable to maintain their equipment and services. The situation in Government Rajindra Hospital in the city of Patiala illustrates this. The Rajindra Hospital is the only government hospital in Punjab that provided radiotherapy treatment for cancer patients in the Punjab. In September of 2000, its chemotherapy machine stopped functioning due the depletion of its radioactive source, and the hospital was unable to replace this machine due to lack of funds. As a result, the hospital stopped providing this treatment and patients had to go to private hospitals to get this treatment. This circumstance put an extreme financial burden on 35-40 cancer patients coming daily to this hospital for chemotherapy because this treatment at private hospitals is twenty times more expensive than the treatment which was provided at the Government Rajindra Hospital (J. Singh, 2000).

Due to the lack of appropriate infrastructure in public hospitals, sometimes patients go through horrible treatment and care at these facilities. For example, in the summer of 1999, the beds of TB patients in a government hospital in the city of Jalandhar were put in the open under a banyan tree for months. According to a newspaper report, “patients were lying on their broken beds, breathing laboriously, while inhaling mud as their designated ward under the open sky in next, to the place where heaps of mud (were) being dumped” (Sandhawalia, 1999). Moreover, these patients were not receiving drugs for the treatment of their illness on a regular basis. The quality of food received by them was very poor. They had to collect money among themselves to get tea, sugar and milk from the market in order to prepare tea for themselves.

On the whole, the health of the public health care system in Punjab is alarming and the government of Punjab is not doing much to improve the public health care system. On the contrary, the government is neglecting the public health care system in Punjab and moving away from its responsibility to provide basic health care to all its citizens. For the last few years, it has decreased its expenditures on the health care system. For example, in 1984-85, the Punjab Government expenditures on health and family planning services were equal to 1.26 per cent of the Net State Domestic Product, and in 1994-95, the percentage of this expenditures to the Net State Domestic Product was decreased to 0.72 per cent. Further, under the liberalization programs, the Punjab

government has taken some steps to privatize the public health care in Punjab. Under the guidance of World Bank, the government has handed over 150 government hospitals to the Punjab Health Systems Corporation. The hospitals under the administration of the Punjab Health Systems Corporation are allowed to charge user fees (Harjit, 1996). Consequently, these hospitals have considerably raised the existing fees such as admission fees and introduced a number of new charges for services such as blood tests, major and minor surgeries, ECG, CT scan etc. As a result of these fees, a variety of health care services provided by the government hospitals have gone beyond the reach of the poor. In December 1999, six months after the increase in fees and introduction of new charges, a survey done by the Tribune newspaper in the city of Amritsar in Punjab showed that there was a 30-40 per cent decrease in the number of patients coming to the government hospitals for treatment (Walia, 1999).

Position of Women in Punjab

In Punjabi society, women are not equal to men and face various kinds of discrimination in their lives. Females are unwanted at birth – the female child mortality rate in Punjab is higher than the male child mortality rate, and Punjabi women are considered a burden on their parents, and in their married lives, their status is inferior than that of their husbands. There are many aspects of Punjabi society that show

the subordinate position of women in that society. However, the two practices which are most obvious and have become the center of debate, are the practice of female feticide and the harassment, in some cases the murders, of married women around the issue of dowry. These practices in Punjabi society do not only devalue women; they also exert a reign of terror and violence upon them. An understanding of these practices is key to understanding the position of Punjabi women in society.

Punjabi couples prefer to have a male child. 'May god bless you with sons' is a common blessing given to married women by elders. The birth of a son in a family is a cause for celebration. On the other hand, the birth of a new baby girl is accepted as a result of fate and with a hope that next child would be a male. The new born baby girls are less cared for as compared to new born baby boys. In mid 1980s, Monica Das Gupta (1987) conducted a study in 11 villages in the district of Ludhiana, the most prosperous district in Punjab, about the "selective discrimination against female children in rural Punjab". She found that on the basis of provision of food, clothing and medical care to children, the female children received less care as compared to the care received by the male children. In case of medical expenditures, "more than twice as much was spent on boys as on girls" (p. 86). The provision of less medical care for females, perhaps is one of the reasons for higher mortality rate among female children in Punjab. According to Gupta (1987), "for all ages from one to 59 months female mortality rates are far

higher than male rates. Between one and 23 months, when a large proportion of total childhood deaths takes place, the female rates are nearly twice those of males” (p. 81). Another interesting finding of this study is that if a family already had a daughter, then the future daughters born into this family would receive less care as compared to the first one. On the whole, the key point of this study is that Punjabi families prefer to have sons, and employ various practices to get rid of the unwanted daughters. In Gupta’s (1987) words, “the evidence suggests that Punjabis have a preference for removing daughters as early as possible by such means as infanticide, neglect at early ages, and, most recently, feticide. Once girls are past early childhood, the extent of discrimination is reduced” (p. 93).

The removal of unwanted girl children from families has increased in a dramatic proportion with the arrival of pre-natal sex determination technology. Now with the help of this technology, a couple can find out the sex of their unborn child and abort it if it is an unwanted girl child. This practice is so widely prevalent in Punjab that it is seriously affecting the female/male sex ratio in the state. At present, there are 882 females per 1000 males in Punjab. This ratio is well below the average female/male sex ratio of 927 females to 1000 males for the whole of India. In this regard, the state of Punjab is third from the bottom out of the 15 states in India (Kurian, 2000). Further, three out of the ten districts having the lowest female/male sex ratio in India are in Punjab

(Bharadwaj, 1999). A woman in Patiala city of Punjab told a reporter that she had aborted eight female fetuses before giving birth to a baby boy (Rashid, 2000).

Why do couples prefer to have sons instead of daughters?

According to Madhu Kishwar (1995) women themselves suffer much discrimination in their lives and see no better life in society for their daughters; therefore, they do not want to bring a female child in to this world. A Punjabi woman told Kishwar that “because she had eight sisters and had suffered so much as a result, she herself never wanted to give birth to a girl” (p. 19). Kishwar further argues that the birth of a daughter lowers the status of a woman in family, and on a number of occasions, becomes a cause for woman’s abuse. Therefore, women do not want to bear female children. Moreover, living in a society which value male more than female, the women internalize the worthiness of men over women. They see womanhood as a handicap and they want to overcome this handicap by becoming mothers of men. According to Dr. Ashi R. Sarin, “from her childhood, a girl is taught to consider man a superior being. When the girl turns into a woman, it gives her a sense of achievement to bear a male child” (qtd. in Rashid, 2000).

The practice of dowry is another cause of mistreatment of women in Punjabi society. There are regular reports in newspapers, which describe the harassment, in extreme cases the murder, of women by their husbands and in-laws because these women did not bring enough

dowries in their marriages. A usual news story goes like this: a short while after the marriage the husband and in-laws start complaining about the inadequate dowry brought by the woman in her marriage and demand that the woman should bring more money from her parents. In order to put pressure on the woman, her husband and in-laws use different means of harassment. In extreme cases, this harassment leads to the murder of women by her in-laws. According to a report, the number of women deaths due to inadequate dowry has been on the rise in recent years. In 1986, there were 55 dowry deaths of women in Punjab and in 1997 this number had reached to 157 (Vinayak, 1997). However, these numbers do not depict the true picture of harassment of women due to dowry in Punjab because a large majority of dowry harassment cases go unreported. A study by the Institute of Development and Communication based in Chandigarh, found "that in 1995, although 59 cases were reported, a staggering 17,649 cases of dowry harassment were not" (qtd. in Vinayak, 1997, p. 44).

The causes for the practice of dowry have economic, social, and cultural roots. In Indian and Punjabi society, women are not given their share from their parent property. According to law, the women in India and Punjab have equal rights to their parents' property. However, the transfers of parents' property to their children in India and Punjab are performed in such a way that in most of the cases only the male children acquire their parents' property. Thus, the dowry is the only way for

women to get some share from their parents' property (Dang & Dang, 1999). Further, in a society that places low value on women, the dowry is used to compensate for their low worth. In the words of Pramod Kumar, Director of the Institute for Development and Communication, "in such a detrimental gender system, dowry is the main consideration for a woman's status elevation" (qtd. Vinayak, 1997, p. 44). Moreover, the Punjabi women do not have control over their marriage decisions and sexuality. It is not an acceptable choice for a woman in Punjab to stay unmarried. This plays a significant role in the continuation of dowry system in Punjab. Commenting upon the dowry system in India, Dorothy Stein (1988) says, "it is my view that they (evils of dowry) will persist until single women are accepted in Indian society" (p. 465). Another reason for increasing demand for dowry at present times is the wide spread of consumerism in Punjabi and Indian society. The bridegrooms and their families see dowry as a vehicle to fulfill their desires for consumer items. (Dang & Dang, 1999; Stone & James, 1995). Stone and James (1995) explain below how consumerism has escalated the demand for dowry,

... now, especially among the urban middle classes, expectations of television, motor scooters, refrigerators, large sums of cash, and so on are usual. Many observers relate modern dowry and dowry deaths to the frustration of the urban middle class, caught in a new consumerism, status-seeking, and rising expectations of a life style they cannot on their own earning power quite afford. (p. 127).

Finally, the threat of harassment and violence against women who bring inadequate dowry in their marriages is a powerful factor to perpetuate the practice of dowry in Punjabi society. The Punjabi parents make every effort to give sufficient dowries to their daughters so that they are not mistreated at their in-laws' houses. A future bride explains such position of her parents in these words, "my parents have no choice but to spend so much. The fulfillment of my in-laws' expectations (is) very important for my future happiness. We all know the fate of those who don't take along a dowry" (Mehta, 2000).

There exists an interrelation between the practice of feticide and the practice of dowry. The key slogan in pre-natal sex selection clinics' advertisements in Punjab is "pay Rs. 500 now and save Rs. 500, 000 later". This slogan tells couples that by spending Rs. 500 to know the sex of their child during the pregnancy and abort the pregnancy if it is a female child, they can save Rs. 500,000 in future dowry expenses. And it appears from the results of a survey conducted among couples who go for sex determination tests, that Punjabi couples are accepting the logic of this advertisement. In this survey, nine out of ten couples reported that they could not afford birth of a daughter because they would have to spend Rs. 400,000 to 500,000 at the time of her marriage (A.J. Singh, 2001).

The above discussion clearly show that women are in a disadvantaged position in Punjabi Society and as a result of this position

they experience a substantial amount of violence in their lives. The situation of violence against women is further aggravated when the perpetrators of such violence are not dealt with strictly by the Justice System in Punjab. According to a report, out of “331 accused, against whom cases of harassing their wives were registered during 1995 and 1999, just nine got convicted...” (V. Singh, 2001). A similar situation exists regarding other crimes such as rape and murder committed against women in Punjab. There are many reasons for this. First, the police in Punjab consider the harassment cases against women as family matters. As a result, they do not conduct proper investigations to build cases against the accused. Secondly, when crimes against women are committed, the victims’ families do not follow up the cases against the accused to the fullest extent. . Suresh Arora, Deputy Inspector General in the Punjab Police, says “it has been observed that if crime has been committed against a female, the family is even reluctant to get a case registered or if at all it does, it does not prefer to carry the legal battle for long for so many pressures from many social quarters” (V. Singh, 2001). The women victims’ families do not want to hurt the honour of their women or their families by dragging the women or their names through the legal system. Further, a majority of people in Punjab, do not trust police, and do not go to the police in such cases. Instead, they seek out of court settlements. Finally, in some cases, gender bias operates to its fullest extent and the whole blame for dowry deaths is put on the women

members of the families of the accused. According to Ramesh Vinayak (1997), “in a bizarre trend, the onus of (dowry) murder is often put on the women to protect the men. Sometimes it is by consent. Often, old mothers-in-law embrace all the blame to bail out their sons and husbands. Sometimes it is by sheer deceit” (Vinayak, 1997, p. 45). Commenting upon such situation, Pramod Kumar of Institute for Development and Communication, says, “mostly the anti-dowry law becomes an instrument to protect the gender system rather than question its survival” (qtd. in Vinayak, 1997, p. 45).

Conclusion

Punjab is one of the wealthiest states of India. However, this wealth is not equally shared by all members of its population. A substantial number of people in the state have income below the poverty line. The indebtedness among Punjabi farmers is so severe that in recent years, some of the farmers resorted to suicides to deal with their indebtedness. The situation of agricultural labourers is not much different. The state of Punjab has failed to provide adequate education and healthcare, the key necessities of human growth and development, to a majority of its population. As a result, the gulf between have-nots and haves in the field of education and health care has been widening steadily in Punjab. The increased incidents of feticide and increased number of dowry deaths show that gender discrimination against women

is well entrenched in Punjabi society. On the whole, the current status quo in Punjab is not fair, just and equitable for a majority of the population in Punjab.

To ensure the well being of all Punjabis, the current status quo has to be changed. The people in Punjab need to explore ways to become aware about the injustices and inequalities entrenched in the current structures of society and act upon these structures and change them. The participation of people in such actions of change will increase if methods and means used to create awareness among people are accessible to them and within their means. In light of the widespread illiteracy and under-literacy in Punjab, theater for social change (TSC) can be one such method that is accessible and within the means of people. That may be the reason there exists a vigorous theater for social change (TSC) activity in Punjab. The following chapters will deal with the working of TSC in Punjab.

Chapter 3

Theater for Social Change (TSC) in Punjab: Historical Background and Subject Matter

Introduction

As discussed in chapter 2, inequality and injustice constitute major social problems in Punjab and the people of Punjab employ various means of resistance in response to these problems. One of the means of such resistance is the theater for social change (TSC). At present, there are approximately 18 theater groups¹¹ who are actively and regularly doing theater with a commitment to social change in Punjab. These groups give approximately 500 performances annually and reach close to one million people per year across Punjab.

How has the TSC in Punjab been aiding and creating a process of social change? To answer this question, we need to examine the subject matter and the practice of TSC in Punjab. The examination of subject matter will illustrate and analyze issues raised and ideas expressed by TSC in Punjab; further an examination of the practice of TSC will demonstrate its operation and organization in Punjab. This chapter will examine the subject matter and the next chapter will consider the

¹¹ Some of these theater groups (alphabetically) are the Art Centre Samrala, the Chandigarh Natak Kala Kendar (formerly known as the Amritsar Natak Kala Kendar), the Chetna Kala Manch Chamkaur Sahib, the Kala Sangam Phagwara, the Lohian Natak Kala Kendar, the Lok Kala Manch Machiwara, the Lok Kala Manch Mansa, the Lok Kala Manch Mulanpur, the Navchintan Kala Manch Beas and the Punjab Kala Manch Mansa.

practice. However, before beginning the discussion about the subject matter, it would be useful to know a brief history of TSC in Punjab.

History of TSC in Punjab

The beginning of TSC in Punjab can be traced back to the activities of the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA) in the late 1940s and the Communist Party of India's (CPI's) drama squads in the late 1950s. At the national level, the IPTA was founded in May 1943 with a purpose to use theater and other art forms to educate and mobilize people against fascism, imperialism and other political oppressions (Bharucha 1983; Chann 1995). In order to meet its objectives, the IPTA performed its theater in places accessible to ordinary people, such as streets and fields instead of proscenium theater halls. As a result, "the IPTA was responsible for changing the very structure and conception of theater in various parts of India. By performing for the masses rather than for limited audiences, it made theater more available to those sections of society who had previously ignored it, or had been prevented from seeing it" (Bharucha, 1983, p. 42). Furthermore, the artists of the IPTA made a conscious effort to employ traditional folk art forms in their work so that their message was easily understood and accepted by people (Bharucha 1983; Chann 1995).

At the time of IPTA's formation at the national level, it was decided that the units of IPTA would be formed in various parts of India. The responsibility of establishing a unit of the IPTA in Punjab was given to a committee of Aric Saprian, M. Wajudin and Sheela Bhatia (Chann, 1995)

and in 1945, the Punjab unit of the IPTA was established in Lahore of the undivided India. Sheela Bhatia played a key role in earlier activities of the IPTA in Punjab. She and her team prepared songs and operas about social evils, patriotism, women's rights and the famine in Bengal and performed them in various colonies and localities of Lahore (B. Singh, 1987). However, the IPTA of Punjab was an infant when India achieved independence and Punjab was divided in two parts – East Punjab in India and West Punjab in Pakistan. After partition, Sheela Bhatia moved to Delhi and the development of the Punjab IPTA was interrupted.

The drama squads of the CPI in Punjab were organized in the early 1950s. These drama squads used songs, operas and skits to educate peasants and workers about issues and problems confronted by them in their daily lives (Anand, 2000). Some of the issues dealt with by these drama squads include exploitation of small peasants and farmers by moneylenders, poverty, impact of partition on the lives of Punjabis, opposition to war and international issues such as 1956 Suez Crisis. According to Tera Singh Chann¹² (personal interview, April 19, 2000), one of the organizers of these drama squads, the activities of the drama squads attempted to satisfy the cultural needs of ordinary people while conveying the message of the Communist Party of India to people. These drama squads were very popular with people who came in the thousands to see the programs presented. The effectiveness of their cultural

¹² The other notable members of these drama squads included Joginder Baharla, Narinder Dosanjh, Jagdish Farihadi, Hukam Chand Khalili, Asha, Amarjit Gurdaspuri, Prof. Naranjan Singh Mann and Preet Mann.

activities can be ascertained from the fact that the government of Punjab directed its Public Relation Department to organize cultural programs containing government messages to counter the message of the drama squads. Some of these drama squads also functioned as units of IPTA in Punjab and a number of members of these units had connections with IPTA units in other parts of India and participated in their activities and programs (personal interview with Tera Singh Chann, April 19, 2000). Drama squads performed only at the functions of the Communist Party and trade union and peasant organizations affiliated with the party in Punjab. As a result, the politics and quarrels within the party affected the functioning of these drama squads. Due to the split within the Communist Party of India in early 1960s, the activities of the drama squads slowed down and eventually faded away.

In the beginning of 1960s, Gursharan Singh began his theater activities, which would lead to the present day TSC in Punjab. Although Gursharan Singh staged his first performance in 1959, his theater activities took an organized form when he established the *Amritsar Natak Kala Kendar* or the Amritsar Theater Art Center in 1964. He believes that “the role of literature is not to watch, in silence, the injustices taking place (in society), but to intervene actively against these injustices” (Parwana, 1999, p. last page). This belief played a key role in shaping his theater and its goal of working with people to identify their problems and oppression and to encourage them to fight against oppression (Atamjit, Manchan 25). In the beginning, Gursharan Singh’s theater activities were limited to the city of Amritsar. However, in 1969, the year of 500th birth anniversary of Sikh’s first guru, Guru Nanak, Gursharan Singh prepared a couple of plays related to the life of Guru Nanak and took them to the

villages of Punjab. The village people received these plays enthusiastically and Gursharan Singh performed one of these plays, *Jinh Sach Palle Hoi* or the Truthful People 1000 times over the next three years. This experience introduced Gursharan Singh to the villages of Punjab and made him aware that audiences for his theater live in the villages. Consequently, after 1970, the villages of Punjab became the arena of Gursharan Singh's theatrical focus and initiative.

Gursharan Singh writes, acts in and directs his plays. He has been carrying out his work with a singular determination and consistency and in the last four decades, he has written close to 150 plays and given more than 6000 performances. He has become the leading figure in the development and practice of TSC in Punjab. Gursharan Singh has developed his theater in such a way that it can be easily performed in places that lack basic theater facilities. This democratization of theatrical performances, and indeed, of the actual theater itself has encouraged many people to do TSC in Punjab.

With the formation of a number of new TSC groups in Punjab, there arose a feeling among some theater people that these theater groups could work more effectively if they developed closer ties and supportive relationships with each other. As a consequence, in 1982, Gursharan Singh collaborated with the *Punjab Natak Kala Kendar* or the Punjab Theater Art Center¹³ to form a Punjab level organization, *the Punjab Lok Sabhyacharak Manch* or The People Cultural Forum of

¹³ It was another theater team, organized in 1979-80, in Punjab, which was using theater to convey message of social change to the people of Punjab and was organized under the leadership of Amolak Singh. Hansa Singh directed its plays (personal interview with Hansa Singh, March 24, 2000).

Punjab to bring together various TSC groups to produce and promote progressive culture in Punjab (G. Singh, 1987). At the time of its formation, the key objective of the *Punjab Lok Sabhyacharak Manch* was defined as “to express people’s feelings, hopes and problems artistically, make people aware of injustice, oppression and exploitation and inspire them to struggle for better, respectful and dignified life” (“Punjab Lok Sabhyacharak...”, 1982, p. 19). At present there are close to a dozen theater and music teams affiliated with the *Punjab Lok Sabhyacharak Manch*.

The theater of Gursharan Singh and teams affiliated to the *Punjab Lok Sabhyacharak Manch* constitute the bulk of present day TSC in Punjab. However, there is one exception, the *Lok Kala Manch Mansa* or The People’s Art Forum Mansa, a theater group established by playwright and director Ajmer Singh Aulakh. He began his theater activities in the early 1970s as part of youth festivals organized by colleges and universities. However, a few years after his initial theater, he took his performances to villages of Punjab. He feels that his plays deal with the lives of people living in the villages of Punjab and therefore the primary audience of his plays is villagers of Punjab (personal interview with Ajmer Singh Aulakh, April 7, 2000). As he notes, “through my theater I want to convey to a person, particularly to the village person, that he is not going to achieve happiness within the socio-economic system in which he is living. I try to suggest to him artistically, that he will achieve emancipation only by changing the present socio-economic system” (Verma, 1997, p. 228). Like Gursharan Singh, he has also adopted his theater to the theater facilities available in rural Punjab. His theater group presents 40-50 theater programs annually.

Subject Matter

One of the key criteria for the subject matter of TSC is that it should depict the oppressive nature of people's reality and explore ways and means to change this reality. How the subject matter of TSC in Punjab meets this criterion is the focus of this section. Here I will examine the depicted reality and the exploration of various ways and means to change this reality in the subject matter of TSC in Punjab.

Depicted Reality

According to Gursharan Singh, "the subject matter of theater should deal with the problems of people and be a part of contemporary life and society..." (Sagar, Manchan 25, p.84). Clearly, the subject matter of TSC in Punjab fulfils this requirement and depicts oppression experienced by Punjabi people in various spheres of their lives. Based upon their main themes, the plays of TSC in Punjab can be classified as: 1) plays dealing with economic hardship suffered by people; 2) plays dealing with the political and institutional oppression of people; 3) plays dealing with the oppression of women and 4) plays dealing with the history and traditions of Punjab. Obviously an overlap of themes exists in a number of plays. However, for the organizational convenience of discussion, I will discuss the subject matter of plays based upon the classifications listed above.

Economic hardship

Several TSC plays in Punjab document, detail and analyze the economic hardship experienced by people. The play - *Bgane Bohar Di Chan* or In the shadow of Someone Else's Banian Tree (1997a) by Ajmer Aulakh will be discussed here as an example. Ajmer Aulakh pays particular attention to economic issues in the everyday lives of people. He says, " the main problem addressed in my plays is economic hardship. The other problems that are discussed in my plays arise from economic hardship" (personal interview with Ajmer Singh Aulakh, April 7, 2000).

The play *Bgane Bohar Di Chhan* (Aulakh, 1997a) tells the story of a small farmer, Gajjan Singh, and his family living in a small village of Punjab. Other members of his family include- his wife Gurnam Kaur, his elder son Tehla, his younger son Binder, and his daughter Jeeto. Gajjan Singh's younger brother Gayla and his wife Seeto are part of Gajjan Singh's extended family, and are living in the same ancestral house with Gajjan Singh. However, they have a separate kitchen and living area from Gajjan Singh in this house. The ancestral farming land had also been recently divided between Gajjan Singh and Gayla and both of them farm their share of land separately. Each of them has less than five acres of land. Gajjan Singh's elder son Tehla works with him in the farm and younger son Binder studies in college and helps in the farm occasionally. Gajjan Singh's wife Gurnam Kaur and daughter Jeeto take care of domestic chores of the household and help in farm work whenever there is a need for it. Jeeto is engaged and is going to be married soon. Although there are other characters from the village in the play, the main focus of the play is Gajjan Singh's family.

Gajjan Singh's family works hard, but is still unable to earn enough income to meet various needs of their household. Firstly, there is not enough space in Gajjan Singh's house to accommodate his family. Gajjan Singh's father, according to his family need, built this house a generation ago. Now this house has been divided into two parts, one belonging to Gajjan Singh and the second to Gayla. Both of them have families. Compared to their father, Gajjan Singh and Gayla are raising their families in half of the living space. As a result, Gajjan Singh and his family are forced to use village common space in front of their house to rest on hot summer afternoons and other occasions. The banian tree that provides shadow in common space in front of Gajjan Singh's house belongs to someone else. During the play, Gajjan Singh is resting in this common space in the shadow of the banian-tree. He is not, however, sure for how long he would be able to use that space which does not belong to him. Secondly, Gajjan Singh is unable to get proper health care for himself and his family. In the play, Gajjan Singh has injured his leg. Instead of going to a properly trained doctor in the nearby town for his treatment, he relies on the ill-trained village doctor. One character in the play describes this doctor as one who specializes in killing his patients. Gajjan Singh knows this, but still gets his treatment from this doctor. Why? Because going to a properly trained doctor in the nearby town would cost money and may push Gajjan Singh's family into debt. That is what happened when Gajjan Singh's elder son got sick a few years back and Gajjan Singh had to bring him to a city hospital. At that time, Gajjan Singh had to take a loan of five thousand Indian Rupees from the village moneylender. After years, Gajjan Singh had not been able to repay this loan back. Thirdly, Gajjan Singh is unable to meet educational expenses

of his college going son, Binder. Finally, Gajjan Singh does not have the financial means to handle the expenses of marrying his daughter Jeeto. In Punjabi society, marrying one's daughter is considered a huge responsibility that every parent must fulfill. Therefore, in order to marry his daughter, Gajjan Singh is going to take a loan from the village moneylender. This loan will add to his already existing loan that he had taken first time when his son was sick and for the second time when he had to buy fertilizers for his fields. Chances are that in order to get this loan, Gajjan Singh will have to mortgage some of his land because the moneylender is not willing to give him another loan without attaching land to it. A similar situation exists in Gayla's, Gajjan Singh's brother's, family. After trying hard and failing to earn his living from his land, Gayla has given up and has become self-destructive. He does not work hard in his fields and he abuses alcohol. In order to meet his expenses, he has also mortgaged two acres of his land.

Furthermore, the lack of economic resources has created intense discord within the family. Everyone in the family blames someone else within the family for his/her troubles. For example, Gajjan Singh blames women in the family, particularly his brother's wife Seeto, for the family's incapacity to build adequate housing for his family. Gajjan Singh's wife Gurnam Kaur blames him for his financial incapacity to marry his daughter. Binder blames his parents for not meeting his college expenses and threatens his mother that he will run away from home if his demands were not met. Seeto, Gajjan Singh's brother's wife, accuses Gajjan Singh of not being fair to Gayla when family property was divided between brothers. She feels that her husband, Gayla, did not get an equal share in his father's land and that is the reason for her family

troubles. Gayla beats his wife Seeto because he considers her the root cause of his problems because she forced him to separate from his brother. In this way every member of Gajjan Singh's family is blaming and fighting with each other, causing a lot of mental pain and suffering for each other.

There is a small scene in the play that focuses upon the life of a landless farm worker in Punjab. This interaction occurs between Gajjan Singh, a landless farm worker Daula and his ten years old son. In the beginning of the interaction, Daula's son comes running to Gajjan Singh, followed by his father. Daula's son is crying and scared and asks Gajjan Singh, "*Baba* or grandfather save me. He (my father) is going to beat me" (Aulakh, 1997a, p. 16). Why is Daula angry at his son? In order to marry his daughter, Daula has taken a loan of 5,000 Rupees from a large farmer in the village. According to the terms of the loan, Daula is not going to pay any interest on this loan; instead, his ten years old son will work for this farmer and take care of farmer's cattle and other animals. Daula's son starts working with this farmer, but the number of this farmer's cattle and animal is large and the boy is unable to control them. The boy tells his father about his inability to handle the animals and that he cannot work for this farmer anymore. Daula becomes angry with his son and forces him to go back to work. Gajjan Singh asks Daula to send his son to school and Daula replies, "what are you talking about sir. How can we survive if we send him to school? If we send him to work with some farmer like you, then we will be able to get some grain from him..."(Aulakh, 1997a, p. 18).

There are other plays, such as *Jadon Bohal Ronde Ne* or *When Heaps of Freshly Harvested Wheat Cry* (Aulakh, 1997b), which tell the

stories of small or marginal farmers in Punjab. The stories told in these plays closely reflect the economic reality of many families in Punjab. These families are not able to adequately meet their food, shelter, cloths, healthcare and education needs. In order to meet their basic needs such as health care, they have to borrow money and gradually their burden of debt is increasing. In addition, the lack of economic resources creates discord within families and diminishes people's capacities to break away from these dismal economic circumstances. Although, these plays mainly focus upon the lives of marginal and small farmers, they also provide some insight into the lives of landless farm workers.

Political and institutional oppression

The subject matter of TSC in Punjab does not shy away from engaging directly with the politics of its time. It analyzes and comments upon the functioning of various levels of governments and their institutions. It asks if governments and their institutions are responsive to people's needs and problems; and it examines how the operations of governments impact the lives of ordinary people. A description of the content of a few well known Punjabi plays demonstrates this political content.

Gursharan Singh's play *Hawai Gole* or *Shots in the Air* (1990) focuses upon a session of the parliament of India. The two issues under debate in this session are adulteration by the suppliers in materials such as groceries and medicines and famine in one part of India. These two issues are causing havoc for people. One person's sick son dies because the medicine he buys from the market has been adulterated. In the

famine stricken area, people are dying of hunger. In the parliament, the discussion on adulteration unfolds in the following way:

- Opposition: What is government doing regarding the issue of adulteration?
Government: The government is taking urgent action about it.
Opposition: What action?
Government: The government has ordered its officials to stop the adulteration.
Opposition: Then why has not it stopped?
Government: Because people are dishonest.
Opposition: Are people dishonest or the officers taking bribes?
Government: Government is taking action to stop bribery.
Opposition: What action?
Government: In the five year plan, the government has allocated 50 million Rupees to deliver anti-bribery message among people and according to reports received by the government, the progress is satisfactory on this issue. Thirty million out of fifty million rupees have already been spent.
Opposition: What are the results of that?
Government: The function of the government is not to look at the results what to perform its duties and the government is performing its duties. (p. 61-62)

In regards to famine, the debate revolves around the death of a hungry child. Because there was no food available to eat, the mother of the child cooked some tree leaves and fed them to the child. At the end the child dies. The parliament discusses this child's death as follows:

- Opposition: A mother's son has died.
Government: The government is extremely sorry for that.
Opposition: He died because of government's ineffectiveness.
Government: No, he died because he was sick.
Opposition: He was sick because he was hungry.
Government: No, he was sick because he ate cooked tree leaves.
Opposition: He ate cooked leaves because he was hungry.
Government: Still, technically he died because he was sick.
Opposition: No, he died because he was hungry
Government: I can provide hundreds of proofs in support of my argument.

Opposition: I can provide thousands of proofs in support of my argument. (p. 66)

The parliamentary debate on these issues shows that government has no solution for and vision to deal with the issues related to the life and death of people. The opposition only reacts to the government and does not present any alternative solution to the problem. In addition, the government and the opposition do not have a real connection with the sufferings of ordinary people. That is why for them the main issue for debate is not child's death, but only the technicalities of the death. Their purpose for debate is not to find solution to the problem but to deflect responsibility. By showing the futility of debate in the parliament, the play successfully exposes the limits of the Indian parliamentary system. It is clear from the play that where people's participation in the political system is limited only to voting once every five years in general elections, that political system is not going to respond to people's needs.

In order to deliver their services, governments set up a number of agencies and institutions. However, when governments are not responsive to people needs, then these agencies and institutions become tools of repression against people. This has happened in Punjab and as a result, various government institutions and agencies oppress people. A number of plays in Punjab deal with the oppression of people by police, administration and judiciary. For example, Gursharan Singh's play *Hor Bhi Uthsi Marad Ka Chela* or *Another Disciple of the Man Will Rise* (1994) centers around police oppression and shows that instead of protecting

people, the police protect criminals and in return receive protection money from criminals on a monthly basis. Instead of serving people, the police serve politicians and powerful people. For their part, politicians use their influence to get promotions for members of the police. This whole nexus of relations and influence between criminals, police and politicians is clearly depicted in this play. The play also shows the impact of this collusion among the powerful upon the lives of ordinary people. In this kind of environment, people's property, dignity and lives are not safe. In the play, there are accusations by people that the local MLA has raped and murdered a woman and is sexually harassing and exploiting other women in the area. When people come to the police station under the leadership of a young man, Lalli, to file a complaint against the MLA, the Station House Officer refuses to register their complaint. According to him, there is no substance in the complaint. On the other hand, the Station House Officer goes to MLA's house to hear his complaint against Lalli. The MLA informs the officer that Lalli is speaking against him and his government and then asks the Station House Officer to give a thrashing to Lalli. The Station House Officer assures the MLA that his order will be carried out soon.

In these circumstances, people have no choice other than to take law into their own hands. Consequently, someone murders the MLA. This incident brings the whole police department into action to investigate the murder. There is a lot of pressure on the Station House

Officer to make an arrest in this case as soon as possible. The process of this murder's investigation shown in the play gives audiences a clear picture of police corruption. Consider the following monologue of the Station House Officer:

The Deputy Superintendent of Police is calling regularly and saying that the murder should be solved as soon as possible. If there is no lead, then arrest any young man, take him to the bank of a canal and shoot him. Next day, give a statement in newspapers that the murderer of *Sardar Sahib* (the MLA) has been killed in a police encounter. In that way, the matter will be closed. (p. 85)

The Station House Officer arrests Lalli in MLA's murder case without any evidence. In order to obtain a confession from Lalli, the Station House Officer interrogates Lalli about the planning of the murder. When Lalli replies that he does not know anything about it, the Station House Officer threatens him:

S.H.O.: You will be hanged upside down.
Lalli: Then?
S.H.O : Your nails will be pulled out with pliers?
Lalli: Then?
S. H. O.: After putting sweet paste on your body, you will be forced to sit on a colony of ants.
Lalli: Then?
S. H. O.: You will be shot. (p. 88)

The monologue of the Station House Officer and his interrogation of Lalli, dramatically points out the routine process of fabrication of false cases against people by police, and the mistreatment and the torture that people regularly encounter in police custody in Punjab.

The TSC's plays in Punjab have become an effective medium of comment upon government policy. Gursharan Singh's play, *Raj Maharaja*

Ranjit Singh Da or *The Rule of Emperor Ranjit Singh* (unpublished) is a good example of such a play. When the government of *Akali Dal*, a political party that represents mostly the Sikhs in Punjab, came into power in Punjab in 1997, it promised, among other things, that it would end corruption in government and will provide free electricity to farmers in Punjab. This play, written and produced in 1999-2000, considers if the government has fulfilled these promises. At the beginning of the play, a representative of the government announces in a public rally that the government is committed to end corruption in the state. Anyone who would help government to catch a corrupt government official or employee will be given a reward of 50,000 Indian Rupees. One man in the audience decides to claim the reward. He files a report with the government that the head of the local police station is a corrupt officer and requests the government to take action against this officer and pay the complainant the reward. Instead of acting against the officer, the minister informs the police officer about the complaint and the complainant. As a result, the police officer arrests and beats the complainant severely as the play ends. In this way, the play exposes the duplicity of government's commitment against corruption.

One political issue for which TSC in Punjab has devoted a substantial effort to address for over 15 years was the bloody conflict between the security and military forces of the state and fundamentalist Sikh militants fighting to establish a separate Sikh state called *Khalistan* or *The Land of the Pure* in the 1980s and early 1990s. The conflict began in early 1980s under the leadership of *Akali Dal*. The *Dal* launched a peaceful agitation against the central government of India to address a number of grievances. Instead of negotiating in good faith, the central

government of India played political games to weaken and discredit the *Akali Dal*. Soon after its beginning the leadership of this agitation was taken over by fundamentalist and militant Sikhs who advocated for the formation of a separate Sikh state *Khalistan* and started a campaign of violence and terror to achieve their demands. In response, the government began a brutal and violent campaign against militants and their supporters or suspected supporters. All of this gave birth to a cycle of violence in Punjab that lasted for more than a decade. The people of Punjab were the real victims of this cycle of violence. In the name of fighting terrorism, the police, para-military and military forces of Punjab and India, arrested, detained, tortured and killed in real and fake encounters militants, suspected militants, and family members of militants. In addition, the government took various measures to silence the members of media, human rights activists, lawyers, political leaders and members of the public who criticized and spoke against government actions in Punjab. The militants killed, kidnapped, attacked and threatened government officials, members of the security forces, political leaders, police informers or suspected police informers, Hindus, Sikhs and other members of the general public. In addition, they murdered a number of journalists, intellectuals, writers, poets, artists and political activists who disagreed with the militant cause and fundamentalist ideology and spoke against them. Overall, during the one and half decades of this violent conflict, thousands of Punjabis lost their lives.

In this period of violence and terror, when only the political issue relevant in the eyes of people was this conflict, the TSC felt a strong obligation to address this issue. The TSC met this obligation and produced many plays on this issue. These plays documented the

sufferings and victimization of Punjabis by government and militants, condemned violence of both parties engaged in the conflict, presented ideas and stories to restore breached harmony between Hindus and Sikhs and other sections of society and provided political analysis of this conflict. Here we will discuss the play, *Ik Morcha, Ik Kursi Ate Hawa Vich Latkde Lok* or *An Agitation, A Seat of Power and People Hanging in the Air* (no date, Baba Bolda Hai) by Gursharan Singh as an example.

This play was written in 1983 when the conflict was in its initial stage. The main assertion of the play is that this conflict was a power struggle between two factions of the ruling elite in Punjab and had nothing to do with ordinary people's problems, issues and interests. There are two main characters in the play, one, the *Khadardhari*, who represents the governing party, the Congress, and the second, *Giani*, who represents the opposition party the *Akali Dal*. There are other characters in the play that represent ordinary people in Punjab. The play shows that the *Khadardhari* and the *Giani* are holding their position in a stubborn manner and are not interested in negotiating a settlement. The *Giani's*, i.e. opposition's, plan is to topple the government by creating disturbances in the state. On the other hand, the *Khadardhari*, i.e. government, is willing to take whatever steps necessary to keep its hold on power, to discredit the opposition and suppress the agitation. Both, the government and opposition are so much engrossed in their power struggle that they have forgotten about the problems faced by ordinary people. This fact is illustrated by various characters – an educated but unemployed youth, a worker facing layoff, a father of a raped woman and a farmer – all of whom take their problems to *Khadardhari* and *Giani* and ask their help in solving the problems. Neither the *Khadardhari* nor the

Giani however show any interest in people's problems. The representative of the government gives different answers to different people to avoid addressing their problems. He tells the unemployed educated youth that, "If I am holding the seat of power, that does not mean that I have to solve everybody's problems" (p. 2). He further says, "I did not ask you to get Master's degree. You should have gotten less education" (p. 2). To the worker facing layoff, he says, "The government has no money" (p. 2) to run the project which is being terminated. However, the opposition's representative *Giani*, has only one answer for people who go to him for help. He tells all of them that he cannot help them because he is busy running his agitation.

The play further questions the various demands made by the opposition in its agitation and shows that these demands have no relevance to the lives of the ordinary people in Punjab. The following dialogues between the ordinary people and *Giani* illustrate this point. The unemployed youth asks the government representative, *Khadardhari* that either the government should provide sound administration or resign. In response to the youth, *Giani* says, "That is what I am saying to him that he should resign and hand over the power to me" (p. 3). Then the youth asks *Giani*:

The Youth: Then, will you give me work?
Giani: Whether we give you work or not, we will teach you to accept God's wish and whoever accepts God's wish, does not suffer any more. (p. 3).

When *Giani* tells the worker that he cannot do anything because he is busy in running his agitation, the worker asks *Giani*, what are his demands. *Giani* replies,

Giani: We want more rights.
The worker: If you get more rights, will that stop my layoff?
Giani: I cannot say that.
The worker: What can you say?
Giani: That, we are agitating... (p. 7)

The father of a raped woman asks *Giani*, about the demands of the agitation:

The father: What is your agitation about?
Giani: We want (the city of) Chandigarh.
The father: If you get Chandigarh, will then my daughter's honour be safe...?
Giani: This is not a demand of our agitation.
The father: Will the police stop fabricating false cases (against people)?
Giani: That also is not a demand of our agitation. (p. 7)

In this manner, the play shows that the real issues and problems faced by ordinary people are not part of the opposition's agitation. After establishing this as a fact, the play further makes a point, through the characters of ordinary people, that in order to solve their problems, the people have to wage their own struggle and that such struggle should be against the government as well as the opposition.

Women's oppression

The oppression of women in Punjabi society is a complex and glaring social problem infected with a range of historical and cultural factors. In order to create a just and equitable society in Punjab, this oppression must be eliminated. According to Gursharan Singh, there will be no change in Punjabi society until Punjabi women become aware of

their oppression and take a stand against it (personal interview with Gursharan Singh, April 18, 2000). Consequently, Gursharan Singh and a number of other practitioners of TSC in Punjab have made conscious efforts to address various kinds of inequalities and injustices suffered by Punjabi women. Some of the women's issues raised in their plays include discrimination against childless women in Punjabi society, sex-selection, dowry, negative attitudes towards working women, sexual harassment at the workplace, social restrictions on widow marriages, restrictions on women to make their own marital choices and many others.

The play *Banjh* or *The Barren* (1996) by Gursharan Singh and *Sukki Kukh* or *The Infertile Womb* (1997a) by Ajmer Aulakh deals with the discrimination experienced by childless women in Punjabi society. In *Banjh*, an educated woman from a middle class family has not become a mother after two years of her marriage. As a result, in the eyes of her mother in-law, she has become a worthless person. Her education, her good family background and the substantial amount of dowry brought by her at the time of marriage are not enough to secure her a place in her in-laws' family. In the play, her mother in-law says, "People are saying that she belongs to a rich family and has brought a lot of dowry. However, what am I going to do with the furniture (brought in as dowry) if my son could not have a child from her" (p. 25). With this kind of mind-set, the mother in-law is planning to send this childless woman back to her parents and re-marry his son. She feels, "What am I going to do with her diplomas? Am I going to send her to work and receive her earnings? People do not keep a barren animal at home and she is a woman afterall..." (p. 26).

In the play *Sukki Kukh* (Aulakh, 1997a), the main character is a childless woman, Dhanno from a poor and lower caste family in Punjab. Her story in the play shows that a childless woman in Punjab experiences social discrimination as well as physical and emotional abuse. Dhanno's husband, Toti, sees her as a burden and wants to get rid of her. He feels that because of her childlessness, Dhanno has failed to provide him with a home. He fights with Dhanno and beats her regularly. One scene in the play depicts this violence. During this scene, Toti is beating and expressing his feelings as follows:

Hey barren woman! Get out of my house! I have not kept you in my house to waste food. A female pig is better than you are who reproduces again and again and fills her den. Go away hey witch. (p.54)

A neighbor, sympathetic to Dhanno, intervenes and tries to stop Toti from beating Dhanno by saying these words, "Be wise! Why are you self-destroying your family" (p.54)? Toti replies to her:

What is there to be destroyed in this home? Do childless people have a home? A home is established with children, with whom a man and his family gain roots and flourish. I have brought this stump at home, which instead of sprouting is destroying my home like white ants. (p. 54)

However, becoming a mother is not enough for a Punjabi woman to secure a place and respect in her in-law's house. To do that, she must become a mother of a son. The play, *Sirjana* or *The Creation* (unpublished) by Pali Bhupinder deals with this issue. The play revolves around an educated woman Sirjan who works in a bank. She is married to Deep, a field officer in a co-operative society, and belongs to a rich

family. The couple already has one daughter and Sirjan is pregnant with her second child. Biji, Sirjan's mother in-law, has brought Sirjan to an ultrasound clinic to determine the sex of the fetus. Biji has instructed the doctor at the clinic to abort the fetus, if it is a female and keep it if it is a male. Biji has not discussed this with Sirjan and Sirjan came to know about this at the clinic. However, Biji has already talked to her son Deep and he is in agreement with Biji. Sirjan does not want to go along with it. She wants to make her own decision about her pregnancy and wants to give birth to her second child. It does not matter to her whether her second child is male or female. For her, aborting a female fetus is "inhuman". However, Biji and Deep are not ready to let her decide about her pregnancy. Biji tells this to Sirjan in unequivocal terms:

... Look dear, every person has needs... and I need this... I need a heir to my property. However, if you want a daughter, go find another house to live. If you think Deep will go along with you, then take him with you too. I can donate my property to a *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) or a *mandir* (Hindu temple) but I cannot give my hardly saved property in dowries to your daughters. If you don't want to do this (to abort the female fetus) then go back where you come from. You cannot give birth to a stone¹⁴ while living in my house (p. 6).

The play, *Sirjana*, also highlights the widely prevalent evil of female feticide in Punjab. In pursuit of their desire to have a male child, Punjabi families are willing to eliminate their unborn daughters without any

¹⁴ It is implied here that giving birth to an unwanted daughter is equal to giving birth to a stone. This kind of language is commonly used while describing the birth of an unwanted daughter. The use of the word stone in this context alone tells a lot about how devalued women are in Punjabi society.

guilt. This fact is illustrated in the following discussion between Sirjan and Biji as Sirjan asks to Biji:

Sirjan: What is the guarantee Biji that next time it will be a male
 (child).
Biji: That we will see the next time.
Sirjan: How long? For how long, these experiments will be carried
 out?
Biji: Until, I get an heir to my property. (p. 6)

The three plays discussed above clearly point out that Punjabi women have no reproductive rights and their position in society is closely linked to their reproduction capabilities. If a woman cannot become a mother, particularly a mother of a male child, then she has no place in her family and suffers considerable physical and emotional abuse. She is pitied and discriminated against by her own family as well. These plays also show that discrimination based on women's reproduction capabilities cut across classes. It does not matter if a woman is rich or poor, educated or uneducated - if she cannot give birth to a male child, she must face severe discrimination in her life.

History and past

The role of TSC is not limited to re-telling history dramatically, but it is to tell history with a perspective of social change. To fulfill this role, TSC's subject matter in Punjab deals with historical issues in particular ways. First, it presents those events in history that inspire people to resist and fight against oppression; second, it brings to the centre stage the history of struggle and resistance that is ignored or marginalized in the dominant versions of history; and thirdly, it creates a link between

the past and the present and uses history to shed light on contemporary situations.

Gursharan Singh notes that “history of our forefathers has always inspired me for today’s struggles” (1981, p. 3). Therefore, he has dramatized a number of inspiring historical events and myths from Punjab. Two of his plays – *Chandni Chownk Ton Sirhind Tak* or From Chandni Chowk to Sirhind (G. Singh, 1981) and *Dhamk Nagare Di* or The Thunder of a Kettle-drum (G. Singh, 1979) - can be detailed here for illustration. The events in the play, *Chandni Chownk Ton Sarhind Tak* (G. Singh, 1981) focus upon the fight of Sikhs against the Emperor Aurengzeb and other Mughal rulers of India, between 1675 – 1704. The play shows, on one hand the fierce repression exercised by Mughals against Sikhs, and on the other hand, the determination and resolution of Sikhs to continue their fight for survival against all odds. This gives a clear message to the audience that any amount of repression cannot stop people’s struggles for freedom and liberation.

Further, Gursharan Singh tells this story in such a way that it does not represent the fight between two religions – Islam and Sikhism- but it represents the fight between good and evil, between rulers and ruled and between oppressors and oppressed (R. Singh, Manchan 25). For example, in the play, the Mughal emperor Aurengzeb is obsessed with converting everyone in India to Islam. *Darvesh*, a character in the play who represents history and time, questions the Emperor Aurengzeb as follows:

Darvesh: Aurengzeb, millions of your subjects live without two meals a day, without clothes, without shelter. If they convert to Islam, will they get food, clothes and shelter?
Aurengzeb: Afterall, they will go to paradise after death.

Darvesh: Fake promises. Hey! Emperor of India, you also have nothing for your people except fake promises. The ill fate of this land is that, whoever sits at the throne of Delhi has nothing for his people except fake promises. (G. Singh, 1981, p. 3).

By pointing out the failure of Aurangzeb, himself a Muslim ruler, to provide basic needs even to his Muslim subjects, Gursharan Singh establishes that the real fight is not between Muslims and Sikhs but it is between the oppressors and the oppressed. At various intervals in the play, *Darvesh* shatters Aurengzeb's illusion of absolute power over his subjects. *Darvesh* points out that even being a ruler, the emperor Aurengzeb cannot suppress truth and cannot impose his ideas and will upon masses. On one hand, it shows audiences the limitation of oppressors over the oppressed, and on the other hand, it again shows that the real conflict is not between Muslims and Sikhs but between the powerful and the powerless.

The play *Dhamak Nagare Di* (G. Singh, 1979) tells the story of Dulla Bhatti, the hero of a Punjabi folk legend from the time of the emperor Akbar's rule in India. In the minds of Punjabi people, Dulla Bhatti is an anti-establishment rebel and a Robin Hood type of character who fought bravely against the large army of the emperor Akbar for local autonomy. In the play, Dulla Bhatti is shown as the representative of the oppressed and the emperor Akbar represents the oppressor. Such representation adds a new meaning to this folk legend - that the fight between Dulla Bhatti and the Emperor Akbar is not only a fight between an outlaw and the state, but also a fight between the oppressors and the oppressed (Atamjit, Manchan 25; R.Singh, Manchan 25). For example, one elder tells Dulla Bhatti:

Now this fight has not remained a fight between Lahore (the capital) and *Baar* (Dulla Bhatti's region in the periphery), but has become a larger fight – the fight for the rights of all human beings. We, who produce things of this world, are on one side, and the parasites and the bloodsuckers are on the other side (G. Singh, 1979, p.46).

By focussing on the story of Dulla Bhatti's courageous fight and his willingness to take great risks to uphold honor and dignity, the play inspires people to fight against their oppressors.

In a number of plays, Gursharan Singh brings events in Punjabi history in the broader context of India's struggle for freedom. For example, in *Inqilab Zindabad* or *Long Live The Revolution* (G. Singh, no date, Ghuman Gheri) he tells the story of Bhagat Singh, a revolutionary who, along with his party, believed in armed struggle and wanted to establish workers rule in India after ousting the British. The British government in India hanged him in 1931 at the age of twenty-four. After his death, he has become a compelling symbol of struggle and courage in minds of Indian people. In the official history of India, the story and figure of Bhagat Singh is marginalized and trivialized. Such plays challenge the official versions of history and introduce people to their heritage and culture of struggle and resistance.

The most important role of historical plays in the process of social change is that their subject matter comments upon and educates people about their contemporary situations. This is done firstly, by emphasizing universal messages from history. For example, the play *Chandni Chowk Ton Sarhind Tak*, (G. Singh, 1981) was produced first time in 1975 when the Prime Minister of India at that time, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, had imposed Emergency Rule over India in which democratic rights and civil

liberties were suspended. This play, although set in 1675-1704, brought forward a number of universal messages that were relevant to 1975 situation in India. As mentioned earlier, one of the key messages in this play is that rulers don't have absolute power over people and they cannot suppress people's demands. This message clearly told people in 1975 that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Emergency Rule would not be able to control people ideas and expression. Further, the last dialogue of the play creates a link between the historical event of the play to the situation in 1975 and challenges people to take a stand against the Emergency Rule. At the end of the play, the character *Darvesh* offers this wisdom to the people:

... my people, why have you forgotten that if, today, you watch oppression as spectators, then, tomorrow, your children, your next generations will have to pay a price for that... (G. Singh, 1981, p. 52).

In India of 1975, this dialogue asked people to rise up against undemocratic Emergency Rule. After a few performances of this play, Gursharan Singh was arrested and kept in prison for months. Clearly, the authorities saw the message of this historical play relevant to current situations and as a threat to their power.

Another way to teach people lessons from their history is to re-enact the dark and shameful incidents of history so that such incidents are not repeated. Ajmer Aulakh's *Annhe Nishanchi* or The Blind Marksmen (1997b) is such a play. It is set in 1947 when India was divided into two nations – India and Pakistan- after independence. As a result of this partition, Punjab was divided into two parts – one part became the domain of Pakistan and the other remained in India. The

partition caused a bloody cycle of violence that continued for months. Blinded by their religious passion, Muslims killed thousands of Sikhs and Hindus in Pakistani Punjab and Sikhs and Hindus killed thousands of Muslims in Indian Punjab. Women were raped and properties were looted on both sides. The play *Annhe Nishanchi* (Aulakh, 1997b) documents this horrible experience of partition. The play was produced and performed in the 1980s, when Punjab was passing through the recent cycle of violence caused by fundamentalist Sikhs' movement to create a separate state of *Khalistan*. Due to the tactics and strategy employed by the *Khalistanis*, Hindu fundamentalists and the security and military forces of India, there was a danger of emergence of a rift between the Sikhs and the Hindus in Punjab. The play *Annhe Nishanchi* (Aulakh, 1997b) was a reminder to Punjabis that such a religious based rift was not in their interest and could produce disastrous consequences for ordinary people. The play conveys to Punjabis a message that religious-based massacre of people in 1947 is a tragic and shameful incident in their history and they should not repeat it again.

Exploring ways and means to change reality

The subject matter of TSC in Punjab furthers the process of social change in many ways. Firstly, by focusing on issues and problems related to people's oppression, TSC's subject matter makes these issues and problems a part of public discourse. Moreover, it presents people's issues from the point of view of the people and challenges mainstream and dominant points of view on these issues. Consider the issue of indebtedness of Punjabi farmers. Some segments of Punjabi elite assert

that the reasons for Punjabi farmers indebtedness are that these farmers do not work hard - they drink a lot and they spend beyond their means on consumer items. However, the realities of Punjabi farmers depicted in Aulakh's plays challenge this assertion. For example, Bhagta, the head of the family in *Jadon Bohal Ronde Ne* (Aulakh, 1997b) does not drink. The family does not spend any money on luxury and consumer items. This fact becomes obvious when Bhagta tells his son and his sharecropper, Madho, that he has consumed a glass of Mango shake only once in his lifetime. The play clearly demonstrates that the indebtedness of this family is not because members of this family drink or spend beyond their limits on consumer items; rather it is because this family does not have enough income to meet its basic needs.

By making people's problems a part of public discourse, TSC's subject matter promotes a sense that individual problems are widely shared social problems and that experiences are collective. For example, the depiction of economic hardship experienced by the family of a small farmer in Punjab in Ajmer Aulakh's play, *Bgane Bohar Di Chhan* (1997a) would help create a sense of shared experience among all small farmers of Punjab. Moreover, by linking the oppression of different oppressed groups in Punjab to same repressive forces, the subject matter of TSC creates inter-group solidarity among oppressed people. In Aulakh's play *Jadon Bohal Ronde Ne* (Aulakh, 1997b) a small farmer Bhagta and his sharecropper Madho come from different groups of oppressed people in Punjab. Bhagta owns some land and belongs to a higher caste. On the other hand, Madho is a lower caste landless laborer. However, both of them are in same predicament. Both work hard but can not meet basic

needs of their families, and both of them owe money to the village moneylender.

Similarly, in his plays Gursharan Singh brings together stories of oppressed people from different sections of Punjabi society. For example, in *Ik Morcha, Ik Kursi Ate Hawa Vich Latkde Lok*, (G. Singh, no date, Baba Bolda Hai) the problems and issues of a wide range of people - an educated but unemployed young man, a laid off worker, the father of a raped woman and a small farmer - are ignored due to the infighting among the ruling elite. In the play *Khamba Wali Kuri* or *The Girl With Wings* (G. Singh, unpublished), a young Punjabi woman from a rich farmer's family and a migrant laborer working for that family are oppressed by the male head of that family. Both of them understand sufferings of each other and sympathize with each other. On the whole, the plays described above show to oppressed people from different sections of Punjabi society that they share common experiences and oppression. This often creates a sense of solidarity and plays a vital role in the process of social change.

Secondly, the subject matter of TSC in Punjab examines people's reality critically and in relation to their economic, political, social and cultural settings. For example, in *Bgane Bohar Di Chhan*, (1997a) Ajmer Aulakh relates the indebtedness of Gajjan's family to current capital intensive agriculture, and the failure of the Punjab government to meet the basic health needs of its populations and the social evil of dowry. Gajjan Singh is in debt because he borrowed money to buy fertilizers and to cover medical expenses for his son's illness. As well, he is going to borrow more to pay for his daughter's dowry. Commenting upon the failure of the Green Revolution to better the lives of a majority of Punjabi

farmers, Pita, a character in the play, says to Gajjan Singh, "... (the) situation of us farmers is not going to change.... Now there are new seeds, new fertilizers and new tractors. ... Nevertheless, what difference have they made to us... Small farmers' situations has not changed..." (Aulakh, 1997a, p. 9). In fact, the title of the play *Bgane Bohar Di Chhan*, metaphorically informs small farmers of Punjab that they are living in a economic and political system that caters to someone else's interests; that is, the interests of the rich and the powerful. There is further suggestion to small farmers that as long as they live in this system, they are going to suffer continuously (personal interview with Ajmer Aulakh, April 7, 2000).

In his plays, Gursharan Singh examines people's issues and problems in relation to the existing political system in the country. He establishes a clear link between people's oppression and the ineffective and corrupt politics and administration in the country. For example, in *Hawai Gole* (G. Singh, 1990) he makes the point that the cause of famine in the country is irresponsible, unaccountable, incompetent and corrupt government. He further explains that one reason for the existence of such government in the country is an electoral process that limits people's understanding of and participation in politics. As a result, the elected members of the government are representatives of a small minority. In a dialogue with an elected member of the government, one character explains,

...out of millions of people in the country, only 50 per cent are registered as voters, out of those (registered voters) only 50 percent cast their votes, and the winning candidate, on average, gets only 35 percent of (the cast) votes. In this way, you (elected member) are elected by only 8-9 percent of people (p. 68)

The electoral process of the country does not only limit people's participation in the political system, it also breeds corruption. The process of contesting elections and staying in power is very expensive in the country. In order to meet these expenditures, the elected members, especially the ministers ask government officers and employees to raise funds. One of the ways used by government officers and employees to raise funds is to collect bribes from people, keep a share for themselves, and send an appropriate portion of these bribes to elected members. This process of bribe distribution is beautifully explained in Gursharan Singh's play, *IK Morcha, IK Kursi te Hawa Vich Latakde Lok* (no date, Baba Bolda Hai). A farmer complains to the government representative, *Khadardhari*, that on a number of occasions, the employees of the electricity department shut the power supply off unnecessarily and as a result, farmers cannot irrigate their crops properly. In response to the complaint, the following conversation takes place between the farmer and the *Khadardhari*:

- Khadardhari:** We will instruct the electricity department not to shut the power supply off.
Farmer: However, they shut the power supply off to collect money illicitly.
Khadardhari: Why do they collect money?
Farmer: They say, they have to collect money.
Khadardhari: Why have they to collect money?
Farmer: They say that they have to send monthly payments to high-ranking officers who then have to send money to you.
Khadardhari: Then it is all right. Look at this seat of power, it has its many expenses. (p. 11)

In regards to women's oppression, the TSC's subject matter clearly points out the linkage between women's oppression and social and

cultural values and property relations of Punjabi society. One character in the play *Banjh* (G. Singh, 1996) says that the discrimination of childless women is a result of old traditions and ideas in Punjabi society. At the end of the play, the same character tells the childless woman, "dear daughter, you are not barren. It is the thinking of society, which is barren..." (G. Singh, 1996, p. 37). In his play, *Sukki Kukh*, (1997a) Aulakh introduces traditional values about women's fertility through a song sung by a wandering *sadhu* or a holy man. According to this song:

A woman gets value with her children,
without children, she has no place in home.
Children are flowers of the courtyard,
without them, the place is desolated. (p. 52)

The singing of this song by a wandering *sadhu* shows that ideas and values presented in this song run as a deep undercurrent in Punjabi society and play a key role in shaping and reinforcing today's thinking about women. The play *Sirjana* (Bhupinder, unpublished) discusses the issues of discrimination against women who have not given birth to a son, and female feticide in connection with the practice of property inheritance and social custom of dowry. Legally, daughters have equal rights to their parents' property in Punjab. However, in a majority of cases only sons inherit their parent's property. According to the social and cultural norms of Punjabi society, sons are the real heirs of their parents' property. Therefore, the property-owning classes of Punjabis are willing to do anything to have sons in their families. On another level, Punjabi parents consider their daughters as huge burdens because they have to give dowries at the time of their daughters' marriages. One of the messages of the play *Sirjana* (Bhupinder, unpublished) is that the

prevalent social and cultural values regarding property inheritance and dowry are the main causes of women's oppression in Punjab.

By examining people's reality in relation to their social, cultural, political and economic conditions, TSC's subject matter makes people aware that the causes of their oppression lie in these conditions, and that these conditions need to be changed in order to end this oppression. Moreover, by identifying the role of dominant groups in society to maintain status quo, TSC's subject matter shows people that these conditions are socially constructed and therefore can be changed by social actions and struggles. Therefore, TSC's subject matter in Punjab inspires and invites people to take action against the status quo. While discussing his theater, Gursharan Singh claims that he wants people not to lose courage, not to feel helpless and to rebel against their conditions ("Baba Bolda Hai", Manchan 25; personal interview with Gursharan Singh, April 18, 2000). In order to convey this message, most of his oppressed characters go through a transformation during plays and at the end they act against their oppressors. For example in *Hawai Gole* (G. Singh, 1990) and *Ik Morcha, Ik Kursi and Hawa Vich Latkde Lok*, (G. Singh, no date, Baba Bolda Hai) the oppressed people tell the mainstream politicians that people no longer are going to tolerate their rule. In *Hor Vi Uthsi Mard Ka Chela*, (G. Singh, 1994) villagers come together to the police station to demand the release of their leader Lalli from illegal custody. In *Khamba Wali Kuri*, (G. Singh, unpublished) Mandeep, the heroine of the play, refuses to accept restrictions being put up by her brother in relations to her job and marriage. Similar character transformation occurs in the plays of other playwrights. For example, in Pali Bhupinder's (unpublished) play *Sirjana*, the main character Sirjan

refuses to abort her unborn daughter. Such transformations of oppressed characters in plays can inspire audience members to act against oppressive conditions in their lives.

Chapter 4

Theater for Social Change (TSC) in Punjab: The Practice

Introduction

In order to be an effective tool for social change, TSC has to be accessible to people and able to sustain itself in the long run. These two of the TSC's objectives are greatly influenced by its practice - which involves script development, preparation and presentation of plays, promotion, fund raising, obtaining feedback and participation of audiences, and many other activities. A flawed practice can seriously diminish TSC's capacity to contribute to social change. For example, if a play is performed at a venue that is somehow inaccessible to its intended audiences, then it will not meet its purpose effectively. Similarly, if a theater group uses an expensive set design, is unable to recover its costs, and finds itself with economic impediments, then this group has failed to meet TSC's objectives. Keeping such importance of practice of TSC in mind, this chapter will examine and document the two aspects of the practice of TSC in Punjab. First, we will look at those elements of practice, which are associated with the day to day workings and operation of TSC groups in Punjab. Included in these elements are structures and organization of theater groups; venues; sound, lighting and music; props and set design; finances; people/audience's participation; and interaction with other structures, organizations and institutions within society. Second, we will look at the various challenges faced by TSC arising from the social, cultural and political situations in

Punjab. This section will explore the cases of women in TSC and Sikh Fundamentalism against TSC.

Structure and organization of individual theater groups

As TSC groups work to create democratic, equal and participatory society, these groups need to be structured and organized in a way that promotes these values within the groups. Therefore, it is very important to examine the level of participation of members in creative and administrative activities of these groups. The structure and organization of TSC's groups that I observed in Punjab show great diversity and variation. These groups consist of a director or coordinator, or leader of the group and a number of actors. As well, some groups have their own musicians. Depending upon their expertise, some actors or directors also perform technical duties related to lighting, sound and stage setting. One of these groups, the *Chandigarh Natak Kala Kendar* or the Chandigarh Theater Art Center, is led by prominent playwright - Gursharan Singh and performs plays written by him. While Singh exerts considerable control over the subject matter of these plays, actors are encouraged to make suggestions and changes, which are later incorporated in the final scripts. In the case of other groups, the directors, in consultation with other members, select scripts for the plays to be performed by these groups. Occasionally, these groups develop scripts of their plays collectively in a workshop setting. In case of other creative tasks (role preparation, costume selection or design, lighting, stage setting etc.), although the directors or coordinators of the groups do the overall

coordination, the other members of the groups also play a substantial role. These members make final decisions about these tasks independently or in consultation with each other. Suleman Bhatt, (personal interview, April 17, 2000) a member of the *Chandigarh Natak Kala Kendar*, explains:

Gursharan Singh provides us (the actors) with the script of his new play and tells us that we will be performing the play in a week's time. He briefly explains us about different characters and then asks us to prepare our characters by ourselves. He also asks us to decide about costumes, stage movements, blocking and positioning on the stage by ourselves. Then we prepare the play. If after seeing a few of the initial performances, he does not like some things, then he will suggest changes.

Depending upon their individual interests, various members of these groups have learnt and specialized in different theater skills, such as lighting and set-design, in addition to acting. Consequently, they play a leading role during play preparation in areas of their specialization.

Gursharan Singh has complete control over political, administrative and financial matters in his group – this control could be attributed to his management style or other factors. He has been running his group for the last 40 years and other recent members of his group were not involved in the group for such a long period. All of them have been working with him for less than four years, and it is possible that these members left all decision-making regarding the above matters in the hands of Gursharan Singh. As well, there was substantial - 30-40 years - age difference between Gursharan Singh and members of his group and it could be possible that according to Punjabi cultural values the members of the *Chandigarh Natak Kala Kendar*, defer to Gursharan

Singh. In other groups, although directors or leaders play leading roles, other members have a greater say in political, administrative and financial matters of these groups.

Theater practitioners come from various segments of society. Some of them are teachers, students, social activists, government employees, shopkeepers and unemployed youth. Mostly, they belong to middle or lower middle classes. A small number of them belong to the lower classes. According to Harkesh Choudhary (personal interview, February 28, 2000) of the *Lok Kala Manch Mulan Pur* or the People's Art Forum Mulan Pur, there is a clear connections between class and participation in TSC:

The children of poor families face a great difficulty. They have to work after school. Some of them work in grain market after school and others help their parents in their work. The children of laborers and artisans in construction industry work with their parents and get paid on part time basis. Due to this difficulty, the children of the poor do not have time to do theater. It is true that they could do better theater. They experience more hardship and they could present this in a better way. However, (due to their financial needs) they cannot do theater and *The Lok Kala Manch Mulan Pur* does not have financial resources to pay them for doing theater.

In almost every group, women members make 20 - 25 percent of total membership and only one out of five groups that I observed is led by a woman. Very few scripts of the plays performed by TSC in Punjab are written by women. This under-representation of women, and the obstacles and social pressure they face in Punjab will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Venues

There are 12-15 theater halls in the whole of Punjab, which are fully equipped with theater facilities such as light and sound equipment, green room and auditorium fitted with chairs. All of them are located in cities (personal interview with Gursharan Singh, April 18, 2000; and personal conversation with Kewal Dhaliwal, March 3, 2000). Therefore, they are not accessible to more than 70 per cent of people living in villages. In order to reach these people, approximately 90% of TSC plays are performed in villages where the venues for performances include spaces such as village squares, intersections in the centre of villages, bus stops, school yards or play grounds, dried ponds and empty fields. Some of these places, like schools, have permanent platforms that can be used as stages. In other places, makeshift platforms are constructed by putting together tables or by placing wooden planks on temporarily erected walls of mud and bricks to use as stage. The spaces in front and on sides of the platforms are covered with *dariyan* or mats to act as the *pandal* or sitting area for the audiences. The audience members also use walls, *baneras* or roof-edges, roofs and any other kind of space available as the *pandal*. Usually, a small tent close to the platform or a nearby room in somebody's house acts as the dressing room. The following excerpts from my field notes about the venue of a performance by the *Chandigarh Natak Kala Kendar* on January 31, 2000 in the village Tahlian in district Mansa offers a detailed description of a typical venue for TSC in Punjab:

The venue is a *chownk* or an intersection in the center of the village where three streets intersect. The residential houses are built along sides of all these streets. On the West Side of the *chownk*, there lies a small *tharra* or platform made up from mud and bricks. That is the stage for today's program. *Dariyan* or mats are spread over this platform and a canopy is hung over it. *Dariyan* are also spread in the intersection, which will act as *pandal* or sitting area for spectators. *The pandal* is divided into two sections - one side for women and the other side for men. There are a number of women sitting on the *baneras* or roof-edges of the nearby houses and fifteen to twenty men are sitting on the seats of their bicycles and scooters. Two groups of people have come to attend the programs from the nearby villages in tractor-trolleys. They have parked their tractors on one side and remained sitting in their tractor-trolleys. This means that the boundary of *pandal* extends up to these *baneras*, bicycles and scooters tops and the two tractor-trolleys. Sound equipment is placed over a table on the right hand side of the platform. That table is our sound room for today's program. Right behind the *tharra* and towards the left end of it, there is a door that leads us into someone's *wara* or cattle-yard. This *wara* has a small shed on its south side and a small courtyard in front of the shed. The *wara* is enclosed within a 4 feet high mud wall. Inside the shed, two cattle are tied to two separate posts. Other things inside the courtyard include a *tokka* or a fodder-cutting machine, a heap of *pathian* or dungcakes and a *khurli* or a feeding trough for cattle. On the East Side of the *wara*, towards the door, the makeup material and costumes of the team are placed on two brown sheets of cloth spreaded on the ground. This *wara* is going to be our dressing or green room for today's program. The actors will enter and exit stage through the door leading to the *wara*.

One key thing to which the organizers pay special attention while selecting a venue is the accessibility of that venue to audiences - no walls or fences should be erected around the venue to restrict entrance. Anyone, who wishes to attend the performance, is welcomed. If a potential venue hinders audience attendance for any reason, that venue is rejected. For example, most of the schools in the villages have permanent platforms that can be used as stages, and they are ideal places for TSC's performances. However, if a school were outside the village, then it would not be selected as a venue for a night time performance because women might find it difficult to come to a venue

outside the village at night (personal interview with Ajmer Aulakh, April 7, 2000).

In the majority of cases, when a venue is a *chownk* in the center of the village, then that area is closed to traffic for the duration of the program. However, on some occasions a vehicle must pass during the performance and needs to proceed through the intersection. On such occasions, the performance must stop and the audience has to accommodate vehicle passage with an effort to create minimum disruption. The following excerpts from my field notes about the performance at the village Tahilian, describe such an experience:

At around 1:40 pm, before the start of the second play, a tractor-trolley enters the *chownk* from a side street. It has to go to the other side of the *chownk*. With people in its way, it cannot move and gets stuck in the *chownk*, with its engine running. Due to the noise from tractor's engine, the program cannot go on. A few organizers run towards the tractor-trolley and start asking people to move and give way to the tractor-trolley. While making a passage for the tractor trolley, people are cursing the tractor driver for choosing this route. They are asking him that why has not he taken the other route? Ignoring people's curses and questions, the tractor driver is moving his tractor slowly along the passage being created by organizers through the audience. Suddenly, the engine of the tractor shuts off. The driver cannot start the tractor because its batteries do not have enough strength. Now the tractor-trolley has to be pushed away through the audience. The organizers ask for a few volunteers from the audience to give a push to the tractor trolley. Finally, the organizers and volunteers from the audience push the tractor trolley through the audience to the other side. When the tractor trolley moves away out of the audience, the volunteer-pushers give a final push to help start the tractor-trolley. The whole episode takes about 5-7 minutes and after which, the program resumes.

Clearly, TSC's practitioners in Punjab use whatever space is available to them in a village as their venue. Mostly these spaces are places where other community activities take place on a regular basis. Accordingly,

TSC's performances do not happen in isolation, but are integrated into the routines of community life.

Sound, light and music

The sound equipment needs of TSC in Punjab are very simple. Usually, 4-6 microphones are used to capture actors' dialogues on the stage and one or two microphones are needed to project background voices and play music. Sometimes there are only two microphones for the stage and one microphone for the background voices. The amplifiers are usually hung on poles or trees, or are placed on the roofs of nearby houses or buildings. It is a great challenge for theater practitioners to meet their sound needs with such minimum equipment for many reasons.

First, the venues are acoustically imperfect. There are usually numerous surrounding voices with which the actors have to compete with. For example, during my field research I have attended 3 or 4 performances in spaces adjacent to busy roads. In these instances, the actors had to overcome interference caused by the traffic noises. Secondly, on various occasions the plays are performed in front of large gatherings of 10,000 to 15,000 people. Thirdly, in the worst cases, only one or two microphones work on the stage. The TSC's actors have prepared and developed various ways to overcome these difficulties. For example, actors minimize their movements and speak into the

microphones in cases where microphones are not strong enough to catch voices from a distance. Actors stand stationary in front of microphones and use movements of their upper bodies to express their characters. As well, they make more use of voice variations to create dramatic effects (personal interview with Suleman Bhatt, April 17, 2000).

In TSC's performances in Punjab, lights play a minimum role in artistic expression. They are only used to illuminate the stage and *pandal* so that audiences can see the action happening on stage and find their place in the *pandal*. On rare occasions, lights are used to create dramatic effects on the stage. There are good reasons for this. First of all, a large number of performances happen in broad daylight in the open, thus eliminating any need for lighting. Secondly, the venues of TSC's in Punjab do not provide sophisticated equipment and lighting controls. Therefore, it is not possible for TSC' practitioners to rely on special lighting effects to enhance their theatrical expression.

Music is an integral part of TSC's activities in Punjab. In almost every program, singers entertain audiences with their songs. In some cases, these singers are used to give a break to theater artists or give them time to prepare for the next play. Whether the songs and music are a part of the play depends upon the composition and capacity of individual theater team. For example, Gursharan Singh uses music or songs in his plays if one or more members of his team are able to perform music and sing songs. If he does not have anyone in his team to

perform this task then he will do his theater without music. On the other hand, Tirlochan Singh of the Art Center Samrala has very strong feelings about the music in theater. He feels that music is an essential part of theater and it enriches the performance (personal interview, April 22, 2000). Ajmer Aulakh also uses songs and music in the background in his plays to highlight certain points or situations in the play. However, he uses only pre-recorded and easily available music. As Aulakh noted, his team does not have financial resources to hire musicians on a regular basis (personal interview with Ajmer Aulakh, April 7, 2000).

Props and stage setting

While explaining his concept of stage setting, Gursharan Singh says, "You don't have to establish everything on stage. If you want to establish a scene in a house in the village, you don't have to construct a room with a courtyard of the house on stage. ... You can establish that by dialogues or by back stage voices (personal interview, April 18, 2000)." In order to illustrate his point; let us consider an example from his play, *Seonk* or *White Ants* (G. Singh, 1990). In a scene in this play, an unemployed youth goes for job interviews in government, semi-government and private offices. In order to set this scene, the unemployed youth comes on the stage with a chair. After placing the chair on the stage, the youth says, "This is a government institution." Then he brings another chair on the stage and tells the audience, "This is

a semi-government institution." Finally, he brings the third chair and informs the audience, "This is a private institution" (p. 80-81). This completes his stage setting for the offices of government, semi-government and private institutions. T.R. Vinod (Manchan 25) cites another similar example relating to the performance of Gursharan Singh's play, *Hawai Gole*. During a performance of *Hawai Gole*, a character placed a small iron box, which was used to carry teams costumes, in the center of the stage, stood on it, and announced "this is our parliament and I am its speaker. The ruling party is sitting on my right hand side and the opposition party is sitting to my left (p.51)." Thus, the parliament of India was established on the stage.

It is obvious that Gursharan Singh makes minimal use of props and stage setting. Usual props used in his plays include small chairs, benches, stools, *manjians* or cots and other small things, which can be easily available in villages of Punjab. Gursharan Singh points out that it usually takes two or three minutes in the beginning of a play to explain to the audiences about setting of the scene so they can understand it (personal interview, April 18, 2000). Most of other TSC's practitioners in Punjab also rely on minimal stage setting in their plays. For example, Ajmer Aulakh uses only three stumps or stools (whatever is available) as props in his three hour long play, *Bhajian Bahin* or Broken Arms (Kaur, no date). There are some TSC's groups in Punjab who use a little bit more elaborate set design in their plays. However, they are always

conscious about the fact that their sets should be small and light so that they can be easily transported to villages.

Finances

Usual expenditures of a TSC team in Punjab include various expenses for the preparation of the play, travel costs, honorarium payments to team members and small administrative costs. In addition to paying honorarium, some teams take care of educational and medical expenses of their members. In order to meet these expenses, TSC teams charge a performance fee to the sponsoring village level organizations. Depending upon the group, this performance fee ranges from 1700 Indian Rupees to 15,000 Indian Rupees. However, on average this fee range is between 3500 - 4000 Indian Rupees. At the same time on a number of occasions, TSC's teams have to perform for a very small fee or for a fee that is enough only to cover their travel costs. During an informal conversation (March 26, 2000), some members of the Art Centre Samrala told me that,

At present, our official fee per performance is 3500 - 5000 Indian Rupees. However, we cannot get this fee for every performance. Sometimes, the organizers tell us after the performance that they could not raise enough funds and therefore the team had to charge less. How much is less? That depends. It could be that organizers are only able to pay 500 Indian Rs. or 800 Indian Rupees or 2000 Indian Rupees as performance fee. In extreme cases, the organizers are only able to pay a token amount of 150 Indian Rupees.

In addition to the performance fee, sometimes TSC teams raise funds from individual donations from their sympathizers. Nevertheless, in most cases, TSC teams in Punjab are not able to raise enough funds to take care of their meager expenses.

The lack of funds affects teams in many ways. The most significant effect is that theater practitioners cannot pay full time attention to theater activities. In order to earn their living, they have to find other jobs thus cutting their time from theater. Sometimes, their jobs take theater practitioners away from their groups and interrupt their theater activities; or in other cases, they stop doing theater completely.

According to Harkesh Chouwdhari of the *Lok Kala Manch Mulan Pur* (personal interview, February 28, 2000), this situation is a key reason for high turnover of TSC's practitioners. As a result of this high turnover, a number of TSC teams have to struggle to keep consistency and continuity in their work. The shortage of funds also affects the functioning of the *Punjab Lok Sabhyacharak Manch*, an umbrella organization of TSC groups in Punjab. One of the functions of the *Manch* is to organize professional development workshops and seminars for theater practitioners in Punjab. According to Tirlochan Singh of the Art Center Samrala (personal interview, April 22, 2000), the *Manch* has not been very successful fulfilling this function because it does not have sufficient funds to undertake these activities.

People/Audiences participation

As discussed in chapter 1, one criterion of TSC's is to involve people in the creation and production of theater as much as possible. This is done to develop a sense of ownership of theater among people as well as to provide them with tools of expression and organization. In case of Punjab, we find that although there is a substantial amount of people's involvement in TSC' activities, it is somewhat limited in the initial stages of creative process. The script writing and preparation of plays at the initial stages are done by individual groups without any input from audience members. However, after performances the audience members use a variety of ways to give their feedback about the content and presentation of plays.

In interviews, a number of theater practitioners expressed that quite often audience members talk to theater practitioners after performances and tell them what they liked or disliked about the plays. Audience members also suggest that how the plays can be improved. In a number of cases, the scripts and presentations of plays get changed to incorporate audience members' comments and suggestions. For example, Harjit Kaur of the *Navchintan Kala Manch Beas* or the Newthinking Art Forum Beas (personal interview, March 24, 2000) tells the following about the play, *Gomti*.

This play is about Gomti, a beautiful lower class woman who is married to a mentally retarded man. Gomti works hard and takes care of her husband and son. Her husband's younger brother wants her to abandon her husband and live with him as his wife. She refuses his proposal. A couple of times her brother-in law tries to rape her. Finally, by bribing the police he gets her husband arrested. When she goes to the police station to get her husband released, the corrupt police inspector rapes her. Later on, her brother- in-law kills her husband by burning him alive inside the house. After the murder of her husband, she decides to take revenge on her brother-in-law and the inspector and finally, at the end of the play, she kills the police inspector and burns her brother in-law and his house.

In the initial presentation of the play, the scenes depicting the abuse of Gomti by her brother-in-law, her rape by the police inspector and killing of her husband by her brother-in-law were shown on the stage. The scenes depicting her revenge against her brother-in-law and the police inspector were shown at the back stage with the help of background voices. After one performance at the village Jagdev Kalan, 4-5 women came to Harjit and said that they did not like the ending of the play. They suggested to her that scenes depicting Gomti's revenge should also be shown on the stage where everyone in the audience could see what happens to the bad guys. According to those women, this new ending would make message of the play clearer and more effective. The

theater group accepted their suggestions and changed the ending of their play. This example shows that the audience members in Punjab have some input into the content and presentation of TSC's plays.

With regard to production and organization of TSC in Punjab, the village level people are involved a great deal. All programs of TSC in Punjab happen on the invitations of people's organizations at the village level. Included in these organizations are political parties and organizations from the left, peasants and workers' unions, teachers organizations, youth associations, organizations and associations of the *dalits*, democratic and human rights organizations, branches and units of Rationalist Society of Punjab, village welfare societies, sports clubs and many others. Through these organizations, village level people play a key role in deciding about venues and plays to be performed, financing, promoting, sound and stage setting, providing feedback to theater practitioners and taking care of many other small things.

The venue selection for a performance is always made by a village level organization. However, the decision about the theme of the play and the actual play to be performed is made through consultation between the theater group and the inviting organization. Sometimes, the organizers have already seen a play and tell the theater group to perform that play. Sometimes the organizers tell the theater group that they want to have a play on a certain topic and the theater group performs a play on that topic. In cases, where the organizers are planning a theater

program for the first time, usually the selection of play is left up to the theater group.

It costs approximately about 10,000 - 20,000 Indian Rupees to organize one theater program in a village of Punjab. Included in this cost are theater group's fee, rent for tents and sound equipment, promotion and other miscellaneous expenses. In all cases, it is the village level organization that takes care of these expenses. The organization raises these funds from village people. In their interviews, a number of organizers said that in order to raise money for these expenses, they carry on a fund raising campaign in the village a few weeks before the actual performance. During this campaign, the organizers go to almost every household in the village and collect from people whatever they can pay. The majority of people donate happily for these programs. According to Hardev Singh Sandhu of the *Kirti Kisan Union* or the Workers Peasants Union, an organization that arrange TSC programs on a regular basis, people become a part of the theater program by making these donations (personal interview, March 4, 2000).

The promotion of TSC programs is another area for which the whole responsibility lies with the local organizations. Depending upon their resources and intended audiences, the local organizations decide what means and ways they are going to employ to promote TSC programs. Usually, they prepare and distribute leaflets, issue posters, send out press releases to newspapers and visit people in their homes to

extend personal invitations. According to Balwinder Singh of the *Lok Sangram Morcha* or the People's Struggle Forum (personal interview, March 26, 2000) and Dr. Jagdish Singh, an organizer from village Kangna (personal interview, April 7, 2000), visiting people's homes is the most effective method of promotion. Both of them emphasized that their groups spent weeks before the TSC programs to visit people in their homes. In addition to promotion of TSC programs, these visits gave them opportunity to develop personal links with people and gather people's opinions about current issues to be incorporated into the creation of the plays and chalking strategies and actions for social change.

In most cases, the tasks of stage and sound setting are accomplished jointly by theater practitioners and local people. Usually, theater groups arrive at the venues a few hours before the program and a couple of their members work with local people to set up the stage and sound equipment. The theater workers tell local people about the theater groups' needs and local people tell theater workers about what is available. Finally, through discussion and collaboration, both groups set up the stage and sound equipment. On occasions, particularly when theater groups cannot reach in advance, local people set up all the stage and sound equipment and theater workers have to adapt accordingly.

Moreover, it is the local organization, which decides what is going to be the context and overall message of a theatrical event. Usually, a theatrical event consists of plays, songs and speeches. What kinds of

songs are going to be sung? Who is going to speak? What is he going to speak? All decisions around these questions are taken by the local organization. By doing so, the local organization significantly influences the overall message of a theatrical event.

Clearly, the local people through their local organization are greatly involved in TSC's activities in Punjab. Through their involvement, they influence TSC in Punjab in various ways and play a crucial part in TSC's existence in Punjab. That is why TSC practitioners feel that without the involvement and support of local people and organizations, TSC would not be possible in Punjab.

Interaction with other organizations and institutions

It appears that TSC practitioners in Punjab have distinguished various organizations and institutions into two categories. On one side are the organizations that are active in bringing about social change, and on the other side are the organizations and institutions, whose actions help to maintain status quo. Based on this distinction, TSC practitioners have developed different relationships with different organizations.

TSC's practitioners in Punjab have developed a partnership with organizations active in bringing about social change. As discussed in the previous section, the social change organizations play an important role in producing and organizing theater programs. In addition, the social change organizations are expected to organize and mobilize people for

action. A theater group can bring forward the issues, make people aware of their oppressions, and the need to take action against this oppression. However, it is the social change organizations that would work with people to develop an organized political response against this oppression (personal interview with Gursharan Singh, April 18, 2000; personal interview with Tirlochan Singh, April 22, 2000; and Balwinder Singh, March 26, 2000). On their part, a number of theater practitioners feel that they also have an obligation to participate in such political responses in a supporting manner. In their interviews, these theater practitioners cited a number of examples where they had participated in demonstrations, agitations and protest marches organized by social change organizations (personal interviews with Harkesh Choudhari, February 28, 2000; and Suman Lata, March 7, 2000).

With regard to organizations and institutions that are instrumental in maintaining status quo, TSC's practitioners have developed a critical relationship. Consider for example, the TSC's stand on government and its institutions. It is obvious from TSC's content that governments of Punjab and India have failed to address people's issues. Instead of alleviating people's sufferings, the plans and actions of these governments have exacerbated hardship and suffering among the people. At the level of practice, the TSC in Punjab has to deal with two key questions. Should TSC's teams participate in government sponsored programs? Should TSC seek government funding? At least on a

theoretical level, different opinions exist on these questions among TSC's practitioners in Punjab. According to one opinion, TSC's teams should not boycott government-sponsored programs and participate in them if invited to attend. In Gursharan Singh's words, TSC's practitioners, "should avail all opportunities to present their art in places, where people have gathered. However, they (TSC's practitioners) should be cautious that they do not compromise in the content of their presentations (1987, p. 8.)"

Gursharan Singh has a similar opinion about the government funding for TSC. He feels that the government money is people's money, and therefore TSC's groups should not feel guilty in obtaining government funding for their work. However, he again cautions TSC's practitioners that there should be no compromise in the content of their work. According to the second opinion, it is not possible to take part in government sponsored programs or to obtain funding from government without compromising the integrity of one's work (T. Singh, 1997). Consequently, this position implies that TSC in Punjab should not participate in government sponsored programs and should not seek government funding. In my observation, this debate is only relevant at a theoretical level. At the practical level, the truth is that usually, TSC's teams are not invited to government functions and they do not receive any government funding. Almost in all cases, they have to rely on people's organizations for organizational and financial support.

TSC's practitioners on one hand recognize religion as a positive force due to its values of caring and social justice, and on the other hand they look it as a negative and divisive force that gives rise to communalism, hatred and violence among people. In the early part of his TSC activism, Gursharan Singh prepared and performed numerous plays based on various incidents of Sikh religion. At that time, he felt that by presenting those episodes of Sikh history in plays where Sikh Gurus fought against oppression and injustices against all odds, TSC can inspire people to fight against oppression today (G. Singh, 1980, p. 42). His critics reminded him of various historical incidents of fighting and violence among people in the name of religion. They particularly reminded him of the year 1947, when millions of people were killed in the name of religion at the time of India's partition and, it was argued that religious plays could only divide people by causing chauvinism and fundamentalism. In the 1980s, when Punjab was engulfed in a cycle of violence caused by religious fundamentalism, Gursharan Singh himself realized that his religious plays could strengthen Sikh fundamentalism in Punjab. As a result, he stopped performing those plays. At present and in consideration of historical factors, TSC's practitioners in Punjab see religion as a divisive force and therefore are critical of it.

Challenges arising from social, cultural and political situations: The cases of Women in Theater and Sikh Fundamentalism against TSC.

Women in Theater

One of the biggest challenges that TSC groups face in Punjab is to get women involved in theater. The participation of women in theater is not seen as respectable in traditional Punjabi society. All the women theater practitioners interviewed for this study pointed out that, they faced extreme opposition from their families and other people from their communities when they joined theater. Suman Lata of the *Kala Sangam Phagwara* or the Art Union Phagwara says that although her husband was in support of her joining theater, other members from her family and her in-laws family were against it. They felt that, "my theater activities may bring dishonor for the family" (personal interview, March 7, 2000). Harjit Kaur of the *Navchintan Kala Manch Beas* says, "my parents gave me permission to do theater and I am really proud of them for that. However, other members of my family and people from my village did not like it" (personal interview, March 24, 2000). She further states that at one point "my grandfather told my father that he will not enter our house if my father does not stop me from doing theater" (personal interview, March 24, 2000). As a result of her theater activities, Harjit Kaur has to travel with male members of her team to distant places and often return home late at night. As a result, people from her village started talking about her character. The situation became so bad that Harjit's mother

had to fight with almost everyone in her neighborhood to stop gossip about Harjit (personal interview, March 24, 2000). Baljinder Kaur of the Art Center Samrala, states that, "My parents did not like my joining theater. They felt that it is not girls' place to go out and do such things. I have to struggle a lot to obtain my parents permission to do theater" (personal interview, April 21, 2000). However, obtaining permission from her parents did not end her problems. According to her, on a number of occasions, people from her village stopped her in the way and said to her, "no other girl from our village had done such thing before. Why are you doing this?" (personal interview, April 21, 2000). Clearly, people from her village were afraid that her theater activities would encourage other girls/women from her village to become involved in theater.

In addition to family members and neighbors, some of the audience members also look upon women's theater activities negatively. Most of the women theater practitioners interviewed for this research said that when they go to various villages, the people make comments about them such as "Here come the dancers". The word "dancer" is used here in a negative connotation to express disrespect for these women. It should not be assumed here that only the men in the villages make such negative comments about TSC's women. Some of the women in villages also look at women involved in TSC with disrespect. In her interview (March 7, 2000) Suman Lata of the *Kala Sangam Phagwara* discussed an incident in this regard. According to her, it became late after one

performance in the town Talwara and as a result, she had to stay overnight with the organizers of the theater program. One male organizer took her to his house and introduced her to his wife. His wife did not speak to her. Then the organizer asked her wife, "Please prepare a cup of tea for the sister". His wife refused to prepare tea and said, "I am not going to make tea. I don't know who she is. A sister or something else."

The key reason for such a view about women's participation in theater is social and cultural. It is not fully acceptable in Punjabi society that women should leave their homes and actively participate in the outside world, although the situation has changed in the last fifty years and continues to change everyday. The other reason for such view is the current treatment of women in public spaces. Kamalpreet Kaur of the *Lok Kala Manch Mulanpur* explains that "Whatever is happening around us also affects our parents views about our participation in theater. Everyday we read in news about women's rapes and molestation. In that kind of environment, parents do not prefer to send their daughters outside" (personal interview, February 27, 2000).

This situation affects participation of women in TSC in many ways. First of all, it has caused a lot of pain to women practitioners of TSC in Punjab. All the women interviewed for this research said "it really hurts" when family members and other people in society look at their work disrespectfully. Secondly, this disrespectful view about their work casts doubts in women's mind about their social standings and future plans.

For example, Harjit Kaur of the *Navhinta Kala Manch Beas* said, "Sometimes I get worried about what will happen (to me) in future. Will this (my theater activities and societal view about them) affect my marriage prospects" (personal interview, March 24, 2000). Finally, this strongly discourages involvement of more women in TSC and women remain a minority among TSC's practitioners.

The few numbers of women in TSC have significantly affected the inclusion of women characters in plays. In response to the shortage of women actors available for theater, the playwrights are writing fewer female parts in their plays (personal interviews with Ajmer Aulakh, April 7, 2000 and Tirlochan Singh, April 22, 2000). For example, a count of women characters in Ajmer Aulakh's fourteen plays reviewed by me shows that out of 157 total characters there are only 44 (28%) women characters. Similarly, Gursharan Singh's thirty-six plays reviewed by me only contain 14% women characters i.e. 28 women characters out of the total 201 characters. This is a conundrum. On one hand, these playwrights are responding to the ground reality of Punjab and writing their scripts in a manner so that they can continue their work even if there is shortage of women actors. On the other hand, they are reinforcing the low-level participation of women in TSC by providing fewer opportunities for women to act in plays.

The TSC teams are taking a variety of steps in response to this challenge. First of all, teams provide a harassment-free environment for

women to work within the groups. All the women interviewees expressed that they receive a great support and respect from their male colleagues. Secondly, when organizing rehearsals in the evening, special efforts are made that women have to spend less time and finish their rehearsals before dark. Thirdly, some groups pay more honorariums to women as an incentive to attract and keep them in theater groups (personal interview with Ajmer Aulakh, April 7, 2000).

Sikh Militancy and Fundamentalism against TSC

During the period of Sikh militancy in the 1980s and early 1990s, the TSC practitioners had to face pressure, threats and attacks from the Sikh militants and fundamentalists who did not like the ideas and messages presented in TSC's plays. The Sikh militants and fundamentalists openly said that they would not allow TSC's performances in the villages of Punjab. They intimidated organizers in villages and asked them not to organize theater programs. They issued life threats against theater practitioners. In order to stop people from attending the theater programs, the militants issued warnings that they would fire upon the gatherings of people watching theater programs. Finally, at one occasion during a theater performance in village Sewewall, seven militants came and opened fire on the stage and into the gathering. As a result, 18 people were killed and 40 people were injured (personal interview with Suman Lata, March 7, 2000).

All these actions of Sikh militants created an environment of terror surrounding TSC's activities in Punjab. The number of village level organizations to sponsor TSC programs reduced. Consequently, the number of theater programs went down. However, the militants were not successful in completely shutting down the TSC activities. Various theater practitioners and organizers continued their theater at the risk of their lives (personal interview with Tirlochan Singh, April 22, 2000). They took numerous steps to counter militants' challenges. First of all, they did most of their theater programs during the days. Secondly, they made their own security arrangements to protect themselves as well as the audience. This means that usually, a number of armed volunteers watched over each theater program. Thirdly, the *Punjab Lok Sabhyacharak Manch* itself organized some programs in order to compensate the lack of sponsoring organizations. Some theater groups employed different style and practice of theater to carry on their activities. Harkesh Choudhary (personal interview, February 28, 2000) of the *Lok Kala Manch Mulan Pur* explained that his theater group performed street plays during this period. The members of the group used to go to a busy intersection or bus stop in a small town or a city; beat *the nagara* or the kettle-drum to grab the attention of people and perform a short play. At the end of the play, they would collect donations from people and leave for the next place of performance. The street play method helped the *Lok Kala Manch Mulan Pur* to counter the negative

impact of Sikh militants' actions in following ways. First, this method eliminated the need of an organization to sponsor the plays. Secondly, there was no need to announce the time and place of their theater programs in advance. As a result, the Sikh militants could not know about their theater activities before hand and could not stop or attack their performance. Another strategy employed by various theater groups to circumvent Sikh militants' threats was to perform their plays at schools. The members of *the Lok Kala Manch Mulan Pur*, the *Navchintal Kala Manch Beas* and the *Kala Sangam Phagwara* worked with schools in their areas during this time. While working in schools, they got access to a captive audience of students. On number of occasions, the *Navchintan Kala Manch Beas* and the *Kala Sangam Phagwara* involved students in their plays instead of using their own team members. In this way, they trained students in theatrical skills. In addition, they were able to recruit some students as theater practitioners for their future productions (personal interviews with Hansa Singh, March 24, 2000; Suman Lata, March 7, 2000; and Harkesh Choudhary, February 28, 2000).

The Sikh militancy in Punjab ended in early 1990s. However, the conflict between the TSC and Sikh religious leaders continued under the surface. In November 1997, it again came to the forefront and became a hotly debated issue in the press. The issue began on 30th November 1997 during the Punjab University youth festival being held at the Khalsa

College in Garshankar in Punjab. To participate in the theater competition at this festival, a theater team from one college performed Gursharan Singh's play *Ik Kursi, Ik Morcha ate Hawa Vich Latkde Lok*. Gurcharan Singh Tohra, the president of the *Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee*, the supreme body of the Sikhs in the world, and a number of his associates and supporters were in the audience as guests. At that time the Punjab was ruled by the government of the *Akali* party, that represents mostly the Sikhs in Punjab. Although, Mr. Tohra himself was not a part of this government, he was a senior leader of the *Akali* party and he exerted a great influence in government. One of the key messages of the play, *Ik Kursi Ik Morcha ate Hawa Vich Latkde Lok*, is that electoral political parties in Punjab do not care about the issues and concerns of ordinary people and are only concerned in gaining and maintaining political power. Mr. Gurcharan Singh Tohara and his associates and supporters did not like the message presented in the play. During the performance, they climbed up the stage and stopped the performance of the play. They pressured the judges at the competition to disqualify the play out of the competition. Their main allegation against the play was that the play was an attack on Sikh religion and misleads the youth of Punjab. Then Mr. Tohra declared that in future he would not allow performance of such plays in any Sikh educational institution in Punjab. A number of Sikh intellectuals and Sikh student organizations issued statements in favor of Mr. Tohra's position. To challenge Mr.

Tohra and his supporters a massive mobilization took place among democratic groups, left organizations and political parties, student unions, trade unions, cultural groups and intellectuals. All these groups saw Mr. Tohra's action as an act against the freedom of expression of Punjabi people and in the coming months organized numerous meetings, rallies, seminars and demonstrations to denounce this action. In a direct challenge to Mr. Tohra, a number of TSC groups performed this play again and again after this incident and dared Mr. Tohra and his supporters to come and stop their performances (T. Singh, 1998; The Punjabi Guardian, 1997; The Indo-Canadian Times (a), 1997; and The Indo-Canadian Times (b), 1997).

Conclusion

Clearly, the TSC in Punjab has successfully adopted its practice according to the material conditions in Punjab. TSC meets its needs from resources available within society. It has close links with people and their organizations, which play a crucial role in its functioning. While responding to various challenges confronting them, TSC practitioners take a two-prong approach. First, they are developing their theater practice in a way so that these challenges could cause minimum constraints and limits on TSC. Second, they are working with their constituency to change the conditions that give rise to these challenges.

For example, in order to overcome limits and constraints resulting from lack of theater facilities in Punjab, TSC's practitioners in Punjab have adopted a minimalist style and technique of theater. They need only that amount of lighting, sound, music and props, which are easily available in the villages of Punjab. According to Gursharan Singh, where and in whatever amount the technical facilities are available, TSC's practitioners should make use of them. However, they should not become dependent upon or prisoners of technical facilities ("Baba Bolda Hai", Manchan 25). In order to supplement the minimal use of lighting, sound, and props, the TSC's practitioners in Punjab put more emphasis on content, script, language and acting in their plays (personal interviews with Gursharan Singh, April 18, 2000; with Ajmer Aulakh, April 7, 2000; and Harkesh Choudhary, February 28, 2000). In an interview with Ahuja (1994), Gursharan Singh notes, "A relevant theme, an interesting story and forceful language, that is all that I needed, and that is all that I continue to depend upon". While developing such style and technique of their theater, TSC's practitioners have borrowed a great deal from Punjabi folk theater. For centuries, the folk theater in Punjab has been performed in common spaces in the open-air with minimal props and costumes and actors mostly relied on dialogues to establish setting of a scenes in audiences' imagination (B. Singh, 1987).

Moreover, the TSC practitioners are educating village level organizations about the minimum requirement of facilities to present a

good and successful theater program. For example, the Art Center Samrala has prepared a fact sheet that talks about Center's minimum needs in regard to size of the stage, dressing room, separate dressing room for women, sound equipment, lights, meals and accommodation for actors and seating space for the audience. The Art Center Samrala sends this fact sheet to every organization, which invites them for a theater program and then requests the organizers to do as much as they can to better the theater facilities. Sometimes, the organizers don't understand the instructions given in the fact sheet or they don't know how to do certain things listed in the sheet. In such case, members of the Art Center Samrala offer explanation, or sometimes go early on the day of the program and help the organizers in person to set up the stage and other equipment. This whole exercise helps organizing people to learn about the various aspects of theater as well as to improve the available theater facilities in the villages (personal interview with Tirlochan Singh, April 22, 2000).

Finally, through its content and practice, TSC is attempting to change those social, cultural and political conditions that creates barriers for TSC. For example, as discussed in chapter 3, the subject matter of a number of plays questions the subordinate position of women in Punjab. In practice, by getting involved in TSC, the women theater practitioners are breaking barriers against their participation in theater as well as they are becoming a role model and are setting new precedents

for other women. Gradually, the women in TSC are gaining acceptance and respect from their families and communities. All of this encourages more women to join theater.

Thus, the practice of TSC has a dialectical relationship with the material conditions in Punjab. On one hand, the practice is being shaped by these conditions and on the other hand, the practice is changing these conditions. As a result of this relationship, the TSC in Punjab has become a sustainable project and an effective tool for social change.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In conclusion, a key question needs to be addressed: how effective is the role-played by the TSC in the process of social change in Punjab? While addressing this question, I will examine the role of Punjab's TSC as a communicative and mobilizing tool and its effect on people and members of the theater groups. Finally, I will make some suggestions to better the effectiveness of TSC in Punjab. In the process of my examination, I will reiterate or expand on some of the points already discussed in the preceding chapters, as well as provide additional observation and analysis.

Communicative and mobilizing tool

For a number of reasons, the TSC in Punjab has become an effective communicative tool in the process of social change. First, it has an ability to reach wider audiences. As mentioned earlier, on average TSC's plays are performed in front of close to one million people in Punjab annually. The style and technique of TSC are such that it can be performed at any place in anywhere in Punjab. It does not matter if the place of performance is a small village or big city, or if there are 10,000 people in the audience or fifty. Secondly, the TSC in Punjab is accessible to its audiences. In addition to being performed at places where

audiences are, TSC in Punjab breaks barriers of illiteracy. As discussed in chapter 2, more than 40 per cent of Punjabis are illiterate. Further, the rate of illiteracy is higher among the certain oppressed groups. For example, half of Punjabi women and close to sixty per cent of *dalits* are illiterate. As an oral medium of communication, TSC is accessible to all these people. In addition to being educational and informative, the TSC's plays are entertaining. This characteristic makes TSC's plays appealing to a large number of people. Moreover, there is no fee or ticket to watch TSC's plays in Punjab. As a result, every member of Punjabi society has an equal access to it. Thirdly, TSC's practitioners are easily approachable to the audiences. In most of cases, it is easy for audience members to talk to the practitioners and make comments and suggestions. The practitioners give careful and serious considerations to audience feedback and on various occasions, make changes to the content and presentation of their plays.

Finally, TSC is an effective communicative tool as it facilitates the expression of different ideas and perspectives to bring about social change in society. For example, some plays suggest individual action and others suggest collective action to fight oppression. At one stage of its existence, TSC in Punjab saw religion as a positive and inspiring force, and now most of TSC practitioners see religion as a divisive force or an obstacle to social change. Furthermore, during the period of the *Khalistan* movement in Punjab, TSC plays condemned the use of violence

by both parties in the conflict; that is the police, para-military and military forces of the State on one side, and the *Khalistanis* on the other side. At the same time, there are a number of TSC plays, which advocate the use of violence to counter oppression. Clearly, there are tensions, contradictions in the proposals and prescriptions for social change in the subject matter of TSC. These tensions and contradictions are clear indication of the diversity of opinions in TSC's subject matter in Punjab. As different theater practitioners look at society's problems from different perspectives, it is clear that they would and do suggest different solutions for these problems.

The TSC in Punjab plays a significant role in people's mobilization for social change. By bringing people together for a performance, TSC activities create and maintain a sense of community and belonging among people. This sense of community and belonging is very important because it breaks people's isolation, and encourages and empowers them to articulate collective actions against oppression. Furthermore, TSC activities help sponsoring organizations to develop links with the people. According to Balwinder Singh of the *Lok Sangram Manch* (personal interview with Balwinder Singh, March 26, 2000), TSC's activities are a good vehicle to reach people. During the process of promotion and follow up, the activists belonging to social change organizations get a chance to talk to people about current issues, problems being faced by people, possible solutions about these problems and content of the plays. In

addition, the social change organizations get an opportunity to inform people about themselves. Balwinder Singh gives a great significance to this opportunity:

After a theater program, we go to villages and ask people how do they like the plays. In response, people share with us their positive and negative views about the plays. We carry on our work in the villages continuously. We link it (theater) with our work in the villages to organize people.... Our aim is to establish workers' and peasants' organizations at village levels... At present, when we don't have such organizations, it is very important for us to bring people together around cultural activities and have discussions with them (personal interview with Balwinder Singh, March 26, 2000).

Effect on audience members and participants

How do the TSC activities in Punjab affect people? At what level do these activities educate people about their oppressive reality? How much is the influence of TSC activities on people participating in the actions to bring social change in Punjab? These are very important questions to measure the effectiveness of TSC in Punjab. At the same time, it is very difficult to answer these questions. Only the people can tell how these activities are influencing their awareness and actions. Due to time constraints and limited resources, I have not interviewed any audience members. However, from the point of view of theater practitioners interviewed, there is the strongest sense that theater activities have decisive impact on people. Harkesh Choudhary (personal interview, February 28, 2000) of the *Lok Kala Manch Mullanpur* feels that their

theater affects people profoundly and makes them aware of existing and problematic conditions in society. Hardev Singh Sandhu (personal interview, March 4, 2000) of the *Kirti Kisan Union* argues that, “theater affects people in the same way as the other cultural products, such as TV, affect people. People think that theater talks about their problems and issues and suggests solutions for these problems. This creates its own unique effect.” According to the members of the *Navchintan Kala Manch Beas* (group interview, March 11, 2000), the plays bring people’s issues into public discourse. When a play is performed in a village, people discuss and think about it for many days. Other TSC practitioners assert that in number of villages people invite TSC groups to do plays, year after year. Obviously, audiences in these villages see considerable value in TSC.

Harkesh Choudhary tells of a specific incident to illustrate TSC’s effect on people. Once his theater group performed a play depicting the exploitation of farm workers by a landlord, in a village. Within a few days after the performance, the farm workers of that village organized themselves and went on strike for better wages and working conditions. Tirlochan Singh of the Art Centre Samrala (personal interview, April 22, 2000) says that during the years of the *Khalistan’s* conflict in Punjab, the Sikh and the Hindu fundamentalists made various unsuccessful efforts to incite clashes between Sikhs and Hindus. One of the reasons for their failure was the work done by TSC groups to maintain harmony and unity

between the Hindus and the Sikhs in Punjab. He feels that Punjabis listened to the messages conveyed through TSC plays that the Sikhs and Hindus in Punjab share a centuries old common heritage and have no reasons to fight among themselves.

A number of testimonials from theater practitioners clearly demonstrate that their participation in TSC has greatly influenced their lives. Their participation has provided them with a positive way to channel their energies, enhanced their personal development, and provided them with awareness and courage to stand against social injustices pertaining to their own lives as well as to the lives of other people. For example, one male member¹⁵ of a theater group said that before joining TSC, "I used to abuse alcohol and get involved in fights. During my years in school and college, I was infamous for gang fights. Since I joined my theater group, my involvement in such activities has stopped." Another male member from a different theater group tells a similar story. He noted that, "When I was in college, I was kind of a loafer. I belonged to a group of 20-25 *goondas* or hooligans. We always used to get involved in fights. I also used to do drugs." He claims that his participation in TSC activities have reformed him. Many members of TSC groups stated in their interviews that their involvement in TSC activities

¹⁵ Due to the personal nature of these stories, I have decided to keep the names of individuals and theater groups confidential.

exposed them to the world beyond their villages and widened their horizons. They say that due to their theater activities they got an opportunity to travel, to meet different people, and to participate in seminars and discussion about social issues.

TSC has dramatically affected the lives of women participants. A number of them say that their involvement in TSC helped them to be aware of various aspects of women oppression and gave them confidence and courage to stand against it. For example, one woman participant commented that women are being mistreated, and in some cases burnt alive in Punjab because they did not bring adequate dowries at the time of their marriage. These women feel helpless about their situation and suffer quietly. However, she feels differently about the situation. She pointed out that, “by participating in TSC, I have gained confidence and if tomorrow, my mother in-law would mistreat me (due to lack of dowry), then I will be able to answer her back.” Another woman participant says that her parents did not want her to study beyond grade eight and wanted her to get married at a young age, as was the case of her two elder sisters. However, as a result of her involvement in theater activities during her school days, she felt empowered to say no to her parents’ plans. She convinced them to let her study beyond grade eight. She also convinced them that they would plan for her marriage only when she is ready and willing, and they would give her greater say in choosing her

husband. She feels that her participation in TSC has greatly influenced her and as a result, she has been able to exert control over her own life.

Enhancing effectiveness

In the last 3 or 4 decades, the TSC has faced numerous challenges in Punjab. In order to address these challenges, the TSC practitioners have actively looked for new ways to do theater and have made many changes in style and practice of TSC. As a result, the TSC in Punjab has successfully established itself as a viable and durable tool for social change. However, it does not mean that there is no need for further changes to enhance the effectiveness of TSC in Punjab.

First of all, there is a need to develop stronger links and ties among various TSC teams working in Punjab. There are some teams or their members who are not fully aware about the work of other teams. In their interviews, a number of theater practitioners expressed a concern that unhealthy competition exists among various theater groups. Instead of complementing and building on each other's work, a fierce competition prevails. The development of stronger relationships among various groups will help address these and other problems of such nature and provide an atmosphere in which theater practitioners can share their experiences and learn from each other's successes and failures. In addition, there are a number of tasks facing TSC practitioners in Punjab, which cannot be completed by individual groups. Included in these tasks

are the training and education of theater practitioners in theater skills and about social issues. There is also a need to improve financial support for TSC's practitioners. These kinds of tasks can only be tackled by collective efforts of TSC groups in Punjab.

The *Punjab Lok Sabhyacharak Manch* was formed in 1982 to consolidate the efforts of various theater groups in Punjab and to carry on those tasks that cannot be performed by individual groups, as well as to address issues similar to the issues raised above. It seems that after two decades of its formation, the *Manch* has not been fully successful in accomplishing its goals. The key reasons for its failure are that structurally it is a very weak organization of loosely affiliated groups and it has no funding base. There is a need to review the structure and functioning of the *Manch* and to take appropriate steps to strengthen this body.

Secondly, there is a need to facilitate increased involvement of women in all aspects of TSC. Presently, women constitute less than a quarter of total number of theater practitioners and most of them participate as performers. The role of women in script writing and directing is very minimal. Only one or two TSC teams are led by women. With regard to the sponsoring organizations, the situation is worse. During my field research, I observed sixteen performances and I saw no women among the organizers of these events. Usually, the TSC programs consist of songs, speeches and plays. Out of the almost sixteen

performances I observed, there was only one performance where women participated as speakers. In my view, the negligible participation of women in various aspects of TSC sends negative messages about women to the audiences and re-enforces the subordinate position of women in Punjabi society. All the stakeholders of TSC have to address this issue and take steps to increase the participation of women in TSC activities. The increased participation of women in TSC activities will facilitate women's expression about various social issues, and it will add substantially to the creative process of plays. Furthermore, it will project the image of women as leaders and decision-makers in front of the audiences.

Finally, there is a need to have formal and direct discussion and dialogue between the theater groups and the organizations, which sponsor theater activities. As discussed earlier, sponsoring organizations play a key role in the organizing of the theater activities. The continuous existence of TSC in Punjab is not possible without the support of these organizations. Theater activities constitute a substantial part of sponsoring organizations work; however, most of the sponsoring organizations do not have clear policy about the use of theater for social change. For example, as noted above, Balwinder Singh of the *Lok Sangram Manch* gives a great significance to the role of theater in the work of his organization. However, when he was asked during an informal discussion if his organization has a well-defined cultural policy

about theater, he responded no. This may be the reason that when discussions take place about the problems and issues facing TSC in Punjab, it is mostly the theater practitioners that take part in these discussions. As significant stakeholders in TSC, the sponsoring organizations have to actively participate in these discussions. The TSC groups and sponsoring organizations should jointly evaluate the effectiveness of TSC on a regular basis, discuss the challenges faced by TSC, and develop and implement strategies to meet these challenges. These joint efforts will help to strengthen the TSC and its impact and influence throughout Punjab.

Clearly, the TSC has been playing a key role in advancing the struggle of social change in Punjab. It has shown an enormous capacity to communicate with its audiences and bring them together as a community. It has empowered audience members and theater practitioners to stand against oppression. It has been helping social activists immensely to develop links and work with people to organize political actions. Consequently, the TSC in the Punjab State of India has been a desirable and powerful tool in the hands of the oppressed to bring about social change.

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