

DEVI

Praja Natya Mandali

Thank you for inviting me before I go into my thing I want to make two announcements. First, English is not my language so there will be economy of words, second thing is , if you want me explanations you can talk to me later and I can explain in my mother tongue Telugu or Hindi. Then one more thing, I am very weak in theory. So don't pull me into it. Thirteen or fourteen years ago when PNM was launching a huge campaign on --- where women were participating in large numbers we found that women who were performing for praja natya mandali they came up with different kind of exploitation as agricultural labourers. One woman goes to work in a farm, she has to come back to the landlord's home and she is not paid anything, she has to do household work, just because she is a woman. Many examples, she has to do it because she is dalit also. Being a dalit, being a woman, being in a village without land makes her all the difference. So then we started saying that there is something more than the wage struggle to be added to the exploitation the forms of exploitation that is the social aspect of it. Then there was a survey, all over most of the Andhra Pradesh some 33 forms of caste discrimination were identified, whatever Pralayan said about spaces and everything – entry performance spaces, everything. Then we thought along with the anti-caste organization KVPS formed at that time we thought we must take up a campaign because we have so many people because we have a duty to do it, just to do it. Sometimes you can be in an organization and you can be blind also. We have so many song writers, beautiful writers came up from the villages. Almost all of our teams are from villages. So when we said that we are having a writers' workshop on caste discrimination, I was amazed to see the kind of enthusiasm that was generated among these writers who had earlier writing on wages and other things, but this is an entirely different expression they came up with. So then we said ok, then we are into the right thing. But when talking about this identity this and that and who has universalization and all that, let me tell you one thing, the most hit song written I remember, the pallavi of the song is TELUGU LINES RECITED that is in Telugu it says, "Rise (Raise?) your head, Beat your thigh , Challenge the whole world, Because you are manipulated and you are discriminated" This is written by a non-dalit poet who attended the workshop, It was taken over all over Andhra Pradesh wherever the anti-caste discrimination campaign was taken up by Praja Natya Mandali. Then we had so many plays done by dalits and non-dalits together. But when it comes to assertions I will tell you, Anantpur is one of the worst draught hit areas, the most poverty stricken parts of Andhra Pradesh, four... five years ago there was an incident in April, boys who were attending SC hostels wanted to make an STD call home, one upper caste fellow a Reddy wants to make a call and because these boys are sitting on the bench outside the booth , they were beaten up, the place the STD booth is located in the area of dalits. But they were beaten up and this became a very big event and the whole community was attacked by upper caste Reddys in the same village in front of the collector on Ambedkar Jayanti. April 14th. So when we got the information we got there and talked to them the whole village very tense See, there are two sub-castes in the same locality, middle is the upper caste locality and on one side is one sub-caste Mala and the people attacked were Maliga. First time in the place history they came together to fight these fellows. Because they are divided in the middle, they are afraid that attacks will be on the basis of this division so they have to come together to fight this Reddy. They wanted to fight it because the Reddy community is mobilizing the Reddys of other villages, the upper caste in the surrounding villages. They said we want to do a play, sing something to mobilize our own community to get our protection from the

community. . So we went to the collector and the police was called to give us the protection. The collector at that time was fortunately a dalit and very sympathetic and said you do He made... they made a play actually performed widely but never allowed to perform in the upper caste area of any village in that particular area. Then there was no attack and there were media and all that . The play continued as an incident to assert themselves by mobilizing other villages and all people liked the play very much. There are other incidents, other plays, other songs, other art forms that are practiced by the sc community throughout Andhra Pradesh that are re-made to be used in this camp I can give hundreds of examples. How they asserted themselves in various areas. It's like Pralayan was talking about performing space in Ranga—district, in the same campaign, the fellows went to a village and they said they are performing in the --- in the middle of the village. Naturally they refused so they said no no, we want to perform here only. The upper caste gave them choice of performing here and there but they said we want to perform here only. Police came and they wanted to make a compromise but the team is not ready to make a compromise. So they gave the performance with police protection, the whole upper caste community boycotted the play after, as soon as the team left the village, haldi ke water se they washed and purified the dias. This is happening. Everywhere, you may talk about whatever laws and justice you have but it is practiced in nooks and corners of Andhra Pradesh and I feel it is practiced everywhere in India. And then I come to the question of the second point I wanted to make about women's issue. We have this,--- you know the Anti-Arrcak movement of Andhra Pradesh. And now they are starting to rise but in ...on this issue there is an interesting play made by Praja Natya Mandali again on this Arrack and violence, domestic violence. Incident of arrack drunken husband beating his wife. In that our teams gave a different solution. The son and the mother they unite their forces to beat the father. you know, this was very much liked by the audience women and even one or two of our artists have done the same thing in their homes and they told me not to tell anybody. So don't tell anybody. So they these are some of the examples I am giving how they can do it, the --- coming into focus? Then we have these child marriages. we had a small play of twenty five minute which is performed just like a game, has very big impact and we know girls after seeing and after performing even our own girls of Praja Natya Mandali, refusing to get married before the age of eighteen. That I feel some people ... government.. They are going to study for the impact. One more thing hitting hard in Andhra Pradesh is seventeen districts of Andhra Pradesh now are active in child traffic. Very badly it is going on there are no statistics how many girls are being trafficked every year. This we took up because recording dance is the first step in trafficking. So when we were unfortunately dragged in to it. Unfortunately dragged into it. Because in one area where these recording dancers are performing, in ShivRatri Jatras, the police arrested the dancers. They said you can't arrest us, you arrest the organizers also. So as Praja Natya Mandali we have to intervene saying yes you should arrest the organizers also. Because they are the main culprits who organize that. Then this point came up we started working with the girls of that area, girls of that one particular area --- district, there are 2500 girls are into this recording dancing which is a platform for traffickers. Now three teams in that area performed and it is interesting to see these girls either ignored or said you are spoiling when you talk about this trafficking and all, it's a shame and it is not happening.. The village community wanted to push it under the carpet but the girls are not allowing it. Also there are so many aspects of it but it is one area where girls are trying to assert, by themselves and making groups for not getting into that kind of thing. For women these were the points I wanted to make and then coming to the most important part is about the STs (Scheduled Tribes). The tribal community. We have large number of groups in tribal community

so there is the question of submerging in the KOL... dam nearly two lacs of tribal people are habilitated or not rehabilitated, then our teams took up that theme. Our teams means our actors who reside AND ARE PART OF THE AREA of the tribal community and also non-tribal community who are part of that area. So that was an experience to see the odd mixture of tribal and non-tribal thing and working against cultural forms, mixing together and working against the construction of the dam. Or changing the plan of the dam which was widely performed and the thing and Dapu and other forms like dolku is used and re-emerged during this struggle as an expression of protest. Then I will come to one more part where the area N...guda which is near the plane area There, like any other part in India, The tribals are being pushed back into the hills and the land is being occupied by non-tribals Tribals are fighting against this invasion. So they made two plays talking of the land act 1070 act done by the government in '70. So you know police attacked these tribal girls and boys who are doing the play along with the non-tribals. But they never gone back you know there are nearly two hundred cases booked against these people. Now I come to the latest issue of our Vishakha agency area where Jindal Company like in orissa, is going to do mining in the hills of Araku which is one of the beautiful parts of Andhra Pradesh, which has the largest population of tribals. From Vishakha when you go 60 kms. On a ghat road, you will be entering a heaven kind of beautiful climate and you will see the worst poverty primitive tribes living there. You know what primitive tribe is. They are even afraid of to talk to you if you go to a village. So we were doing the task of... you know they were fighting against this boxite mining. We went there it was a very exciting and...humbling experience for us because when we went we thought we will ask them ... all theatre people to do. We went there with all our silks and dresses, ornaments saying 'ok, we are going to make a play for you. and they said what play? Then we came to the ground saying 'no no no we will do something to propogate this bauxite We want to know what are your arguments your side of arguments against this bauxite mine. They are saying that this mine is very good for your tribal area this and that. They gave their arguments when I started asking what are the counter arguments against the bauxite, one of the fellows he said why should we present the counter arguments, what is the need? Now usually that is done, this side that side is presented and they said no need we want to stay. Do you who live in the planes do you ever explain , do you ever give arguments when you do your real estate, our IT and all sorts of things, do you explain yourself? Why should we explain our side for not mining this area? I said ok then argument against the mining is removed; only one official who is representing this bauxite mining Jindal company is kept in the play. You know when the play was performed some --- are performing the play for the last two and a half years it is not possible for anybody who wrote the script would be able to identify the script because they will do the script , do the argument or the kind of presentation they think it is the way to be done. . Nothing else. The play was forty minutes now the play is one and a half hour or I don't know what time. And it is performed widely in the faires where it is very important for tribal community to come together and also in the villages but you know the various forms inserted into it. I have not seen...it is amazing to see when they perform, you will see Dhimsa dance which is famous, and when they do it as part of the performance, the whole community will join in. You can't help it. It goes on. You can't say no no no it is not time, it is not what I directed...No. Go to hell. They will do. And then, again coming to the script part of it, this fellow poor fellow- Jindal company fellow -he is to be protected in every village. For you it's a theatre, for you it is some acting, for them it is not. The fellow who represented the government and the Jindal company is to be thrown out of the community. That's it. Because it is against the interest of the community. How can they tolerate him even in the play. So I don't know now

what to do with these two characters. So this is how it is happening. This is happening. I do not know. Then coming to the language campaign three years ago we launched a campaign to protect Telugu because it is in danger. But er thought it was for middle class. Ya. One minute I will finish. Then what happened was, after the huge campaign, Telugu Bhasha Samiti was formed in every town of Andhra Pradesh., but the most interesting part is that now our plays on language and culture are part of the temple Jatras and festivals at the villagelevel and it has gone so well with rural audiences than urban, contrary to our expectations. That's what I want to say. The theory part is ok to say that it is with people who do not speak English are the protectors of Telugu, but you see it on the ground that the farms are owned by the village community. Then finally, the mainstream theatre which is happily male dominated upper class anti-dalit is going on very well . In January I was watching Asian plays from eighteen koi memories aye, Mangalore se kafee saree cheejen judi hui hai South India se. countries at the Nandi Festival conducted by the government where there is only one single play on dalit issue and that is about reservations . Nothing else. So you can see how they are sensitive to dalit. But what I want in my observation what I see is, in the name of modernization and civilization and whatever we call it the people who are at the bottom of this pyramid as the time goes on, as the technicality and modernization or ultra modernization –whatever it is-it grows the voice is becoming weak. The services which were provided even in seventeenth eighteenth nineteenth centuries various folk art forms like in Jambpurana like in ---in coastal area like the mark of the pundit—the space was given for dalit is no more given to them. We are indifferent in the name of ---ayyayyo poor dalit, no it is not happening now. I don't believe it By this kind of jargon we are killing their voice in modern days by talking about civilization and all. The more organized they are getting, the less space they are getting. Dalit, and particularly the tribes. Thank you. (Applause)