

A cry from the heart

A play depicting fisherwomen's lives is evoking widespread appreciation in both fishing villages and cities throughout India

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The fish seller's cry echoes throughout the world. It cuts across man-made barriers of language, region, religion and country. It is a cry of livelihood and sustenance, a cry of the marginalized as they are ousted out of existence by the hands that seize power.

The woes of the fishing community have been the subject of many a creative work throughout history, all over the world—in literature, films and theatre, in various forms and genres. In India, the state of Kerala is home to both the celebrated novel, *Chemmeen* of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, and its celluloid version which created clichéd images of fisherfolk that continue to be reflected in many later films.

However, the lives of the children of the sea have not found much representation in Kerala's theatre, historically a powerful tool of social emancipation and spreading awareness in the State. The history of using theatre in Kerala as a tool for creating awareness on social maladies and spreading positive messages goes back to the early decades of the 20th century. During those days of radical transformation of the social and political fabric, theatre lent itself easily to the hands of social reformers and political activists as

waves of nationalism and anti-colonial sentiment swept throughout the country.

Matsyagandhi ("The One Who Smells of Fish"), is a one-act solo play on the travails of women from fishing communities. Penned and performed by Sajitha Madathil, a well-known theatre personality from Kerala, the play was the outcome of an international collaborative theatre project, the Theatre for Africa project, that Sajitha was invited to participate in. This was a part of the Earth Summit 2002 held in South Africa and focused on sustainable development in fishing communities. Six actors, including Sajitha, from six continents were invited to be a part of the project. During the nearly six-month duration of the project, the actors first performed for a month the solo performances that each had developed, in the towns of Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town.

After that, the six actors knitted together their solo performances into another play "Guardians of the Deep", which was again performed continuously for three months. "Altogether, it was a very exciting and rewarding theatre project that helped me immensely as an actor," recalls Sajitha, who is currently the Deputy Secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama), New Delhi.

Sajitha herself has performed *Matsyagandhi* only five times in India—thrice in Delhi and twice in Kerala. Interestingly, although the play won a lot of appreciation abroad, it did not make many headlines in Kerala when it was first performed.

Recently, however, the script has witnessed a revival, with at least two versions staged in Kerala during the past one year. Last year, Shylaja P Ambu, a Thiruvananthapuram-based performer, presented a series of performances of *Matsyagandhi* in the fishing villages of Kerala's Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam districts, drawing wide appreciation, especially from women who were seeing their own lives being represented on stage for the first time. Shylaja recalls how women would come to her after the performance and tell her that they felt the play mirrored their own experiences down to the last detail, including the lack of toilet facilities that put them through untold miseries during their daily grind.

Matsyagandhi is replete with images related to the sea, culled from the everyday lives of fisherfolk. Small wonder since Sajitha evolved the script through a series of conversations

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Sajitha Madathil during the performance of *Matsyagandhi*, (The One Who Smells of Fish), a one-act solo play on the travails of women from fishing communities

with women from the fishing community. The stench of fish is another recurring image that connects the text to the myth of *Matsyagandhi*, also known as Satyavati, the fishing woman in India's great mythological narrative, the Mahabharata, who was gifted the fragrance of *kasturi* (musk) by the sage who lusted after her.

In fact, Sajitha connects the myth of *Matsyagandhi* with a real-life incident which had acted as the major inspiration for the script—the rape of a woman in a fish market in broad daylight. “When I heard about this incident, I knew I wanted to do a play about her,” recalls Sajitha.

The text touches upon, and brings out, the pathos of the fishing community, being smothered by the growing tentacles of corporate bodies slowly swallowing up our shores for commercial exploitation. The protagonist, a middle-aged woman fishmonger, talks of how the slower and quieter life of days gone by had more grace and abundance despite the poverty and the ever-present threat of losing fishermen to the raging sea. But today it is no longer the sea that swallows up the fisherman; rather, it is the mechanized trawler, laments the woman who lost her own husband to a speeding trawler.

The taut and smooth-flowing narrative touches upon almost all the issues that the community faces in contemporary times.

The stench of fish is a recurring motif of the play until the very end when the actress, in the final scene, walks into the audience with a lamp and a vessel of fish, rebuking the viewers for their aversion to the smell of fish even as they eagerly await their fish curry.

The play also shows how the lives of fishers are being decimated by sea-walls and boundaries that cut them off from the sea, which they regard as their mother and is their primary source of livelihood.

No wonder the play has found an echo far and wide. After Shylaja P Ambu's performance that toured India's coastal districts and was featured at the International Theatre Festival of Kerala, there was another production in the city of Kochi, directed by Ajayan and performed by Mary Grace.

The play has also been performed in other Indian languages too: Hindi, Marathi and Bengali. Often, Sajitha is not even informed about a performance although some directors do seek her prior permission. “I came to hear that a production of *Matsyagandhi* was performed in Chennai but I don't know in what language!” says Sajitha. The play has been included as part of the course curriculum for undergraduate English course in MG University, Kerala. It has also been included in a collection of contemporary Malayalam language plays. ❏