

UPSTAGING CENSORSHIP: AN INTERVIEW WITH MADEEHA GAUHAR

By Meeran Karim for Himal magazine

Pakistani theatre group Ajoka has entertained audiences across South Asia for the last 28 years, while its fight for social justice and a secular Pakistan has been internationally recognised. *Himal* caught up with the woman behind Ajoka, Madeeha Gauhar, while she was in Kathmandu for the 4th Annual Conference of the South Asia Women's Network (SWAN).

Himal: How did the idea of establishing a theatre company come to you?

Madeeha: I was already involved in the performing arts scene in Pakistan before Ajoka came along. I was acting in Pakistani television serials and was an active member of Lahore's dramatics society in Government College University, where I was pursuing my Master's degree at the time. The prime catalyst for Ajoka, however, came under the dictatorship of General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq in 1977. When Zia introduced media censorship, limiting freedom of speech, performing arts in Pakistan received a severe blow. I distinctly remember Pakistani kathak dancer Naheed Siddiqi's famous weekly TV show *Payal* being taken off air in 1978. Everyone was affected by Zia's 'Islamisation' policies. As an actress, it became difficult for me to play the roles of women who accepted his retrogressive interpretation of the Quran. Along with some actor friends, I then set about to establish a theatre company which would also act as a vehicle for dissent. That's how it all started, and today Ajoka continues to tackle controversial issues in both Pakistan and across the region.

Did you face challenges in your earlier years? Yes, because I was also involved in the women's movement in Pakistan, which was opposing the discriminatory laws and anti-women legislation brought in by Zia ul-Haq. I was involved in demonstrations and protest meetings, and was arrested twice and jailed along with other women activists in 1983. As I was also a lecturer of English at a government girls' college in Lahore, my involvement in such initiatives angered administrative authorities. An inquiry was held, and at the end of the 'investigations', I was asked to either apologise for my anti-government activities or resign from my post altogether. Of course, I didn't apologise and consequently my job at the college was terminated. That's when I devoted myself entirely to Ajoka.

Ajoka just recently marked its 28th anniversary, and I couldn't be happier. The theatre group is not only challenging dogmatic thinking in Pakistan, it is also contributing to good theatre via plays which balance both the content and form. As various governments had failed to promote arts in Pakistan, the theatre landscape in Pakistan was rather barren. When we first arrived as a

theatre group, there were only amateur and school productions. Ajoka in many ways introduced theatre as a serious art form to Pakistan.

In 2007 Ajoka staged a satirical play, entitled 'Burqavaganza', on the veil worn by many Muslim women in both Pakistan and across the Islamic world. Can you elaborate on this production and the reception it received in Pakistan? When we staged that play, we thought about using the burqa as a symbol for religious extremism in Pakistan, but it wasn't just about the rising 'Talibanisation' of Pakistan post-9/11. We were interested in the larger historical narrative, such as the flawed idea of an exclusive Muslim state, which lies at the root of our problems today. Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan has been hijacked by extremist elements, both at home and abroad. Not only women, but large sections of Pakistani society have been negatively impacted. 'Burqavaganza', through its dialogue and imagery, commented on that aspect of Pakistani identity. The play shows a young Pakistani couple trying to keep their relationship alive – a love story in the time of jihad. Everyone in the play, both the female and male actors, wears a burqa, mocking the sheer hypocrisy in a hidden society.

And the Ministry of Culture banned it from being staged in Pakistan? Yes, and that too without having seen the play. A female member of the National Assembly (MNA) belonging to the Jamat-e-Islami party asked the government to ban the play and to arrest all of us under the draconian Blasphemy Law. While we weren't arrested, the Ministry of Culture forbade us from staging the play in Pakistan.

This must have come as a surprise to Ajoka, as the ban came under the rule of General Pervez Musharraf, a passionate advocate for 'enlightened moderation' and the driving force behind Pakistan's media boom in the mid-2000s. It did come as a shock. Here we had a president, a strong ally of America's 'war on terror', who was interested in presenting a softer image of Pakistan to the international community, while simultaneously appeasing conservative elements within the Pakistani state and society. Yet, when we restaged the play 'Burqavaganza' three years later in 2009 under the supposedly secular Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government, our stage license was revoked. I was asked to present myself to the standing committee on culture and apologise for my irresponsibility – once again on baseless grounds, as no one in the committee had seen the play. It showed us that even relatively progressive elements in Pakistan wouldn't come to our aide, and I realised that Pakistan had been radicalised from within, and the space for people with a secular vision was no longer there.

Have you performed 'Burqavaganza' for international audiences since then? We performed for Indian audiences in Mumbai, Kerala, Delhi and Amritsar. Most recently, a South Asian theatre group in San Francisco, USA, staged an English adaptation of the play. Ajoka welcomes such initiatives, as they demonstrate an interest in Pakistan and its peoples. Whereas 'Burqavaganza' is not playing in Pakistani theatre halls, our latest play called '*Amrika Chalo*' (Destination USA) is generating much controversy in the country. Set outside the US embassy in Islamabad, it also features, amongst many other visa applicants, an Islamic cleric who wishes to sell square-shaped samosas in America. Shahid Nadeem, the writer and director of the play, got his inspiration from a fatwa passed in Somalia, which banned the sale of triangular-shaped samosas as they resembled

the holy trinity. A trivial issue, but it nevertheless demonstrates the lunacy of this recent wave of religious fundamentalism.

As the first Pakistani theatre group to perform in India and host of the Panj Pani ('Five waters') Indo-Pak theatre festival, Ajoka is committed to cross-border cooperation. What impact has Ajoka had on the ongoing peace process between the two countries? Unfortunately the Indo-Pak theatre festival has not been held for the last few years because of the security situation in Pakistan. Nonetheless, Ajoka has been lucky, in that it has been able to carry its message across the border. We have performed for audiences as large as 20,000 people in Amritsar, India. From Srinagar to Kanyakumari, Ajoka has performed its plays for the Indian public at large. The peace process has benefited; our Indian audiences are now aware of elements in Pakistani society which stand for peace and mutual respect and partnership in all areas imaginable. Ajoka has also contributed to strengthening a South Asian identity. When we performed our play on the Punjabi Sufi saint Bulleh Shah in Kerala, most of the 3000 members in the audience did not speak Punjabi, or even Hindi for that matter, yet they felt an overwhelming sense of familiarity. There is such a thing as a South Asian identity, and Ajoka hopes to amplify that voice.

Donor aid, pouring in from North America and Europe, is flooding Pakistan's non-profit sector, to support initiatives such as schools, documentaries, and theatre groups. Has Ajoka been approached by any donors, and will it consider donor aid? Currently Ajoka has no donor funding. We have a strong artistic and political vision, which will not be compromised, no matter how lucrative the offer might be. Of course that means we will continue to face financial difficulties, because for the Government of Pakistan, culture is the lowest priority; unlike in India or other South Asian countries, there is no support for performing arts.

What is in pipeline for Ajoka? Any plays to look forward to? This year, we are celebrating legendary Pakistani writer Sadat Hasan Manto's 100th birth anniversary in Pakistan and India. Plans are currently underway to restart the Indo-Pak Panj Pani festival – as Pakistan's poor security situation derailed plans to host it last year – and dedicate it to Manto's legacy. We have invited groups from Mumbai, Calcutta, Amritsar and New Delhi to perform in Pakistan, as there is a lot of interest in Manto's work across India. Apart from that, we are planning to stage plays for SWAN's LEELA festival in New Delhi in the coming year. The focus will be on female voices, the secular and the sacred in South Asia. Of particular interest to me is the 19th century Punjabi Sufi Bhakti poet, Peero Preman. Not much is known of her work – Ajoka hopes to change that.

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