

Tehrik-e-Niswan Theater Group: Alternative theater for women's development

by Khalid Ahmad



Tehrik-e-Niswan is a theater group which stages plays that highlight and underscore the plight of women. In the last 10 years Tehrik-e-Niswan had more than 90 performances of 20 different productions. It became the cultural wing of the women's movement in Pakistan.

Tehrik-e-Niswan felt that the first step in the attainment of women's rights must be the comprehension and understanding of their problems and bringing about an awareness of these rights. We found theater the most effective medium for spreading our message. In a society which is largely illiterate and where access to formal education is extremely restricted, theater can reach a wider audience.

Tehrik-e-Niswan sets out to do consciousness raising plays with an emphasis on women's problems with two specific audiences: middle class women through proscenium theater and low income women through mobile theater.

In our society, middle class women are forced to stay at home; there are taboos against women working and their education is discouraged. They are denied any kind of independence. Given the conservatism of attitude towards women in middle class areas, our plays attempt to question these attitudes.

The second kind of work we do is in the low-income areas, mainly in and around Karachi, and occasionally in rural areas. Here the

audience is largely drawn either from the industrial workers or those in various service sectors. This is a largely illiterate audience. The performances are free and of shorter duration. They draw their material from the problems faced by people in these areas. The productions are simple and do not require elaborate sets, lighting or costumes.

In order to introduce theater as a tool for community work and promote its use for development purposes, we have recently

held some workshops for rural and urban community workers. The main purpose of these workshops is to show community workers how they could develop plays drawn from their own lives and communities.

We believe that only through meaningful cultural work can a people be truly transformed, educated and made aware and self reliant.

About the author: Khalid Ahmad is an actor, director and writer for Tehrik-e-Niswan. The article was based on the paper presented during the "Seminar on Alternative Media" in Singapore from 16-19 March 1993 sponsored by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center and the World Association for Christian Communication.