

Bhaaji was symbol of a movement

—*Neelam Man Singh*

Nothing was over. Nothing is ever over. The phase kept rolling in my mind and heart at the funeral of iconic stalwart of Punjab theatre agitprop Gursharan Singh (1929-2011). The idea that nothing is ever over gained momentum at Bhajee's funeral. Like for his plays, there was a huge gathering of people that included his theatre acolytes, his proteges, his family, admirers, and legion of friends, who had come to bid their final adieu to their most beloved and cherished father figure.

Flags were flying, petals were being strewn, his portrait was being brandished on giant poles and loud cries of "Lal Salam" rent the atmosphere. Tropes that could have descended into bathos but seemed appropriate for the grand man of theatre. If there was one thing to celebrate in this hour of grief, it was the realisation that how many lives he had touched and changed through his work.

His plays were performed in rural Punjab on trucks, on carts, on trestles or on hurriedly assembled platforms. His theatre of protest made him a pop star of rural theatre. One may quibble about the quality of the aesthetics or perhaps his slightly exaggerated rhetoric. But his passion and his reason for doing theatre were motivated by a completely different catalysis.

He was not only a theatre director, but had become a symbol of a movement. A movement against narrow parochial thinking, a movement that confronted political chicanery, a movement that

awakened the masses-cajoling them not to be passive participants in their destiny, but to be active harbingers of change. Through his work, he empowered the downtrodden, he uplifted the marginalised and his clarion call was clear and strident.

In 1983, when I was living in Bhopal and working in Bharat Bhavan, a huge Nukker Natak festival was being organised. Troupes from all over India had been invited - from Terukkutu to Satdar Hashmi. Being a Punjabi, I was excited about Gursharan Singh's presence at the festival. His play "Kursi Wala Te Manji Wala" got him a standing ovation.

Suddenly for me, my Punjabi identity that had been torn asunder by the brutality of the 80s was reasserted by his magnificent and impassioned diatribe against the mindless terror that had been unleashed in Punjabi during that period.

Today, standing silently at his funeral and meeting his warm and affectionate wife, my memory traveled to the first time I saw Gursharan Singh perform in a maidan in Amritsar. Sitting under the starlit night on a wintry evening, I could sense the electrical alertness that pulsed amongst the audience when he stridently raised his fists and passionately extolled the people to challenge the establishment - it was fascinating, subversive and nocturnal. I am sure that the seeds of my love for theatre were sown on that wonderful night when I was all of fourteen.