

Phidabai.... One of Many

Portrait of an artist from the folk theatre.

Phidabai has won this year's Sangeet Naatak Akademi Award for acting.



PHIDABAI is "one of many" in her origins, her work, her struggle. But she is one of the very few women who are able to explore their potential and break out of stifling dependence, one of the few who get the opportunity to earn a living wage through their art and have control over it. For most women folk artists, it is a daily battle just to keep alive. Destitution, prostitution and lifelong humiliation are their reality. Phidabai got the opportunity and she took it, she struggled to hold on to it. – Editors

Dance, Drama, Music, as professions, particularly at the folk level, have consistently remained in the hands of the lowest castes – the rest of society has kept its distance and enjoyed them once in a while to relieve its sense of monotony and boredom. On the one hand we find these musicians and artists creating a social circuit with their own sense of values and on the other hand this very circuit and its relative freedom is looked down upon by the rest of society even though with a feeling of jealousy.

What is the reality that confronts a woman who was initiated into the profession of her caste by her father and has lived to become an 'artist' inspite of all 'trials and tribulations'? The folk dramatic form prevalent in Chattisgarh, M.P. – *Naacha*, in which she has worked, is filled with skits and comedies between which girls usually perform a dance-music number. The reality is however much worse – girls might have to do almost anything to earn a living. These days, even on the stage, the song-dance numbers have been reduced to cheap variations of filmy dance

and music. However we have been exposed over the last eight years to a series of amazing performances by the woman in question, not only in the *Naacha* plays such as '*Gaon Ka nam sasural*', but also in the great tragedy of '*Bahadur Kalarin*' in which we see her grow from an innocent young girl to a tragic mother whose son is in love with her; and in '*Mitti ki gadi*' playing the role of Vasantsena, a high class prostitute; and in '*Sajapur ki Shantibai*' (adapted from Brecht's 'Good Woman of Setzuan') playing the title role, we see her transform herself from a young prostitute into a hard hearted businessman; and in '*Duryodhan*' play the role of Gandhari his mother. These are only some of the plays in which we have seen her innate abilities as an actress. The experience of these years has certainly brought her a long way from the traditional song-dance acts she used to do and yet the source of her being what she is, her concerns and values reach back to those first 25 years of her life when she grew up as a young girl, mother and daughter-in-law of the dewar caste.

Phidabai has been working in Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre.* She is not only a truly remarkable actress but a human being worth knowing. Her innate ability to express emotion and her total directness and spontaneity in speech and gesture enable her to reach out to people and yet often enough they have also been the cause of a great deal of turmoil and upheaval in the course of her daily life. However, she is all there for you to see, a very real person without a touch of artificiality, therefore there is hardly any room for a value judgement-good or bad.

Her Story :

My father played the drum beautifully. As children my brother and I went with him to the *Naach gaana*. This is how the

* Habib Tanvir has consistently worked over the last 25 years with this troupe of actors and musicians in the 'Naacha' folk form of Chhattisgarh and also produced a number of other plays. He has continuously recognized and searched for the particular and characteristic elements of folk drama and has thereby established and enlarged the scope and content of its future development.

first eight or nine years of my life passed...going here and there with father... I used to love it. But as soon as my father brought home another woman, my real mother left our home with another man in a fit of jealousy. However my father at a very young age (having fathered only two children) contracted tuberculosis. By the time I was nine he was in a really bad state. Moreover, he owed his sister some money. Thereafter he began worrying about me. He thought: "Where will she stay?... What will become of her?" He went to his Kaki (a woman he called his sister) and left me with her. She paid him 450 rupees. In our dewar caste you always pay for a girl. When he was giving me away he told Kaki: "You can marry her to your son or keep her as a dancing daughter and live by what she earns." With the Rs. 450, my father repaid the loan he had taken from his real sister. After that he only lived another 15 days before he died. In the last few days Kaki and I were with him, as a message had been sent that he was in a very bad state. Two or three days after his death, when the eating and drinking was over and we had finished with the ashes, we began living just as we did before.

And so we went on...and on...and on...until two years passed away. At this stage my Bade Baap (father's elder brother) came as a guest to visit us. My father had seven brothers and three sisters (three brothers and two sisters by one wife, and four brothers and one sister by the second wife). One day when Bade Baap saw that I was alone he said to me, "I am your Bade Baap, my dear. Why do you live here all by yourself? Come daughter – come with me?" It was then that I ran away with him. I used to go with him too to the *Naach-gaana*. When we returned from a *Naach* one of his wives began coaxing me to marry her sister's son. I felt hurt. I told me Bade Baap's other wife: "he is an uncle for me – how can I marry him?"

Meanwhile Kaki had filed a law suit against my Bade Baap. She said in court: "This girl was born to me" (as she had not made me her daughter-in-law yet) "and her Bade Baap has run away with her. The girl

has been spoilt and has even given birth to a daughter." My Bade Baap was put behind bars and we all had to go to the town of Rajnandgaon. I had to undergo medical examination and they found that I had not even started my periods yet. My real mother also came to give evidence. All I remember being worried about there was the beating I would get if Kaki won the case. However Bade Baap won and I came back to live with him. But when his wife began pestering me to marry her sister's son once again, I told her straight: "I won't marry an uncle. I will live in the house my father sent me to... I will live there as a daughter-in-law." Then my Bade Baap's other wife sent her Kaki. Actually I had been happy living with Kaki from the very beginning. Bade Baap's house was very poor; Kaki had her own land... "*Aur vahan ki maya mujhe lag gayi thi*" (I was trapped by all the comforts of her place). When Kaki came to get me she paid another Rs. 650 to my Bade Baap. Then she married me to her son and brought me back to her home.

In the new year my first child, Murli, was born, then a year later, Manohar, and the next year, Bindu...In our community a *Dedhaulti* woman (one who bears a child every one and a half years) is thought well of. All through this I did not give up my *Naach*. I would dance to the last day and begin dancing again two or three days after the child was born. Sometimes it was Kaki who accompanied me to the *Naach* and sometimes my husband came along to play the harmonium, or he just sat there holding the child while I danced.

It went on and on like this until I became a mother of six. By now everything had changed with Kaki. She used to like me a lot earlier, but when I became a mother of two my husband got married a second time. This second wife stayed for a year, then she ran away. Then he got married once again. This wife also ran away after staying a year. Then he brought my father's sister's daughter over. But since the second marriage, "*ghar mein khatpat shuru ho gayi thi. Kaki ko meri har baat par kanta lagta.*" (there was trouble at

home. Every word of mine became a thorn in Kaki's flesh) and you know how a boy obeys his mother. Sometimes she would say something "*to mein chidhchadha jaoon*" (and it would drive me up the wall) and if I said something, "*to vah chidh jaye*" (it would drive her mad). We fought over every little thing. Sometimes if I asked: "Why did he have to go and get married again?", Kaki would say: "Why not, he is our only son. *Jitni bahu banana chahe banale.*" (He can have as many wives as he wants.) That's when we would fight.

But you know, the second wife was a nice person. Whenever my husband would beat me after a fight, she would feed everybody else in the house and then come to me. She would say: "I looked up to you as a sister when I came to this house...I did not know this man...come now, eat your food...I cannot bear to see you like this..." She would feed me first before eating herself and never let me do any housework. She would get everything I needed – the would get everything I needed – the soap, the oil or anything else. After a year, when she left us, I wept.

Even when all this fighting was going on in the house I kept up my *Naach*: "*Kabhie baith ke nahin khaya*" (I have never allowed myself to sit and eat). Among the dewars a man may sit and eat but never a woman; she will always go and earn a living even if she has to lift the ore in the iron ore mines. In our community, if a girl is born to a family, people consider it equal to five acres of land – that is how much a girl can earn. In those days I used to give everything I earned to Kaki. In any case all the food and tea was provided for us by the people in the village where we went to perform.

About this time, Habib Sahib saw my *Naach* one night. He sent one of the men from his party to call me. However that man took many of the other girls and left me out. My mother-in-law was always hungry for money; she bribed that man with Rs. 50 to get me in. Then for the first time in my life I went to the city of Raipur for a drama they were doing there. Before this, women never did any of the leading



parts in a *Naach* – they were done by one or two of the men in the group. At first, I just kept watching the rehearsals; then one day Habib Sahib asked me to get up and do the main role in ‘*Gaon ka naam sasural*.’ I did it just like that... then slowly I learnt how to do a role in a drama.

A month or so later my husband and mother-in-law came and watched one of the rehearsals. But when at one point in the play they saw me as the bride in a marriage scene, they were very angry and accused me of getting married to another man. In fact my husband dragged me out and beat me very badly. Sahib stopped him and somehow persuaded the mother and son to return home. After a few days the

drama was performed in Raipur – then there was a few days’ rest to visit our homes before going to Bhopal for some performances.

On my return home I was beaten with a stick...I’ve really taken a lot of beatings. Now if anyone beat me like that, I would die... but earlier I would lie down and take it as it came. Sometimes I would try and run in the hope that somebody would come to my rescue, but nobody could stop him – he would even beat his mother. Now when I think about it, it makes me boil with anger.

That’s how it was... after two or three days of beatings it was peaceful. After some days a man from the drama troupe

came to tell me to catch the train for Bhopal that very night. My mother-in-law told him: “We won’t let her go for this type of drama.” The man tried everything to persuade her – explaining, cajoling and threats. But that very night mother and son just put me in the room and locked me in.

Later that night a police inspector came with her men in a jeep. Everybody was sleeping outside; they got up. In our community they’re very frightened of the police. My mother-in-law kept putting them off for a long time with her lies. Then I heard the inspector say he was going to take them all away. At that point my father-in-law opened the door. The inspector asked me if I wanted to go or not – I said “yes.” They put me on the train with my father-in-law that very night. This was the first time that I traveled out of this part of the world. When I reached Bhopal, Sahib was very angry but when he saw me get into the role everything was all right.

After a few days we returned home – I was beaten up again. Then everybody kept an eye on me. My father-in-law would try and explain : “Don’t stay on here... You earn for us all and get beaten for it too. You’ve never seen any happiness... go away...I’ll look after your children.” He was a very good man – he used to go begging with his snake. But where could I go? My real mother was very poor and used to beg for a living. That is why when the idea of running away came I thought of my father’s second wife. She was very fond of me.

One day I went out of the house on the pretext of collecting some firewood – my husband was out at the time. I was only afraid that he would chase me as soon as he returned home. When I reached the main road I started running. After running for some time I took a lift in a truck. When I got off at my Badi Ma’s (father’s other wife) village I saw my husband come through a short cut on his bicycle. Then he came running after me... I began to run very fast... right through the main bazaar where everyone recognized me. I ran and ran until I reached Badi Ma’s home – he

began to beat me there and then. I clung to Badi Ma – I put my arms around her neck. She stopped him from beating me and said : “I’ve never seen her happy. Go, take the money for a divorce and leave her alone.” A meeting of the village elders decided the amount we had to pay for the divorce. We borrowed the amount from a moneylender and had to pay 25 paise on every rupee as interest. Then I began begging with Badi Ma.

One day we came to Rajnandgaon (where most of Habib Tanvir’s troupe lives). I went to meet Habib Sahib’s party and told them: “The marriage is broken, I’m all alone – give me some work!” They wrote to Habib Sahib in Delhi. Sahib called me to Delhi for the play ‘*Charan das Chor*.’ Since then I have been working with this troupe.

I wouldn’t wish even my enemies the hardships and suffering that I have been through.. it’s been one long lesson for me. You know, I’ve changed a lot working with this troupe. With the money I earned here I repaid the amount I owed for the divorce. I have earned myself respect for the work I have done here. I live by what I earn...I’ve now made myself a pucca two roomed house in the middle of Rajnandgaon. The children now come over and see me. I keep my daughter with me. The older boy, Murli, loves his father. He says : “He’s my father no matter what he does. What can we do about it?” The second boy, Manohar, does not accept this; he’s even beaten up his father two or three times and told him straight : “it’s you have thrown our mother out because of all that you did, otherwise we wouldn’t have had to grow up without a mother.” But, you know in his own way even the older one is an understanding fellow.

Now the children are all grown up, I have no more compulsion. I know many women – they leave one man and take up house with another – what do they get ? Now, someone else lives off what they earn. Look at Sheela, her second man does not even let her send some money for the

children she had earlier. Yes, one can always find somebody to relate to, but within our caste I haven’t found anyone who could relate without this element of greed.

My earnings are better than they were earlier – now I get a salary. Earlier, when we were called for a *Naach* they would tell us how much they would pay Rs. 20 to 25 for one show. If there was a mela or a bigger gathering then I would go on a contract for Rs. 100 or 150 and with all the offerings we would get during the show. I sometimes earned over Rs. 300 in a single night. But then sometimes you don’t get work for 15 or 20 days – you just sit and wait. Here, in a group, you’re earning all the time – when you’re at work and when you’re not – the salary is certain.

Phidabai has lived it all and not let herself go down. It seems she does not consider the greed that shows up in every relationship as a horrifying or lowly thing – she accepts it as common fact of life and lives up to the give and take expected of her. However, when the balance of give and take has tilted over too much against her, she has always sought to run from the break-up that follows. In the Naya Theatre, she found a place to rest for a while from all this running about, and a chance to develop her dramatic talent. But in spirit she remains the girl and woman we have seen through the story. She has run away from the Naya Theatre too, many a time when she could not stand something that happened within the group of 30 people, and lashed out with that fiery emotion that surfaces so easily. As she says : “I’m not afraid of living alone any more – in our community you can’t force a girl into something. If she wants to go with someone, no one can stop her and if she doesn’t want to, the whole village will help her beat up the man. Yes, I am only afraid of one thing – thieves and bandits. They might break into my house, thinking this woman goes out to earn, she must be very well off. I can take care of everyone else. (*Izzat ka dar nahin hai mujhe...koi aaye*

to sahi;... do char to kas ke laga doon). As for being personally attacked, I’m not afraid. Let anyone come if he dares I’ll give him a good knocking too...” □

Rai Bahadur Hira Lall and R.V. Russell in their book ‘Tribes and Castes of Central India’ tell us that the people of the dewar caste are mostly beggars or singers and musicians. Some of them also act as witch doctors or perform with monkeys, bears and leopards, and others sell cheap metal jewellery. The women are adept at tattooing and some even work on the land. However, most of them live a nomadic life. A boy of this caste wanting to be married must pay the bride price to the father or stay and work at the in-laws’ house for a period of time if he is not able to pay. The girls are earning members of their own families until then. If a girl returns to her parents’ home after living with another man she can still marry any other man who is ready to pay the bride price. In some cases among the dewars women have been given for a period of time in exchange for a loan that could not be repaid. A divorce can be granted by paying a fixed amount or giving a feast for the community. The dewars also maintain that they never take any cooked food from the house of a Brahmin whom they call a ‘*Kudnati Keeda*’ (worm) that tries to make all people be like him.

An activist from Mahasamund region reported thus on her own experience: “...most women have stopped going for performance because they are treated as prostitutes and they think this an insult to their traditional profession. Making instruments like drums has also gone out of their hands because new kinds of instruments have come into vogue. The tribe in our area has been settled there for 25 years. They have changed their profession to rag picking. They collect rubbish from the streets, sort it out and then sell it on the market at wholesale rates. They also rear pigs but only boys go out with the pigs.”