

Baghdad Burning Anjan Ghosh

It is always difficult to represent violence in everyday life on a mega scale over a sustained period of time. Spectacularisation of violence while alluring in the short run, de-sensitise people to its effects. An immured public can be apathetic to people's suffering. In such grim situations of war, insurgency or situations of mass violence incongruities of self expression and minimalist representation can perhaps restore a semblance of sanity.

These remarks are occasioned by a performance of *Baghdad Burning* by 'Aaranjan', a theatre group from Delhi led by Kirti Jain, at Minerva Theatre on November 2, 2009. The play evolved from a blog of a young Iraqi woman calling herself Riverbend and was written by Supriya Shukla. The blog started by Riverbend to comment on the violence inflicted on the Iraqi people during the second invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a chronicle of suffering, injustice, empire and also survival. The invasion by USA and its allies not only wrecked the country, crushed the dignity of its people, robbed it of its oil wealth, created sectarian divisions, reducing this rich civilization into rubble and all in the name of freedom and democracy ! The uncertainty of life for the civilians, the constant surveillance and intrusion of the US forces, torture of people taken under custody, lack of civic amenities including provision for drinking water made Baghdad into an inferno.

Minerva Theatre authorities had invited 'Aaranjan' to perform as part of its programme to disseminate national and international theatre among the city's audiences. Yet the lack of advanced publicity did not deter a decent crowd from witnessing the play. Performed in ensemble style with many of the actors performing multiple roles, helping out with the props on stage and walking in and out of the audience, the play poignantly brought home the plight of the ordinary Iraqis through the story of an Iraqi family.

The play chronicles their valiant efforts to survive under siege, bereft of the basic necessities of life. Constant aerial bombardment as well as the raids by the US forces represents the predatoriness of the occupying army. Parody and dark humour is used to telling effect in the play as the children try to identify the kind of bombs dropped from the sound of the explosion. The menacing external world is constantly present and intrudes consistently into the domestic space as when Nabila's husband is arrested or in the 'disappearance' of Basheer.

However, the US aggression is not unilaterally held responsible for Iraq's plight. The mullahs with their limited outlook are also engaged in thwarting women's employment and professional advancement. Between the violent pincers of the US forces and the mullah's rulings, ordinary Iraqis remain dispensable as canon fodder. In the process the people remain victims with little volition of their own.

It is through incongruous dialogue that the enormity of the violence is represented. As the woman in the bomb shelter 'cheerily' explains the design of the craters, she embellishes her account with her stories of how her family members were flung to their death by the explosions leaving traces of human flesh as intricate designs on the walls and craters.

The acting, choreography, lighting and music remain professional though uneven. Nutan Surya's performance as Mama and the woman at the bomb shelter was outstanding. Anomalies like the universal support for Saddam Hussain among the Iraqis, notwithstanding, Aaranjan's production was remarkable for its economy of action. □ *29.12.2009*

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