

GIVING VOICES TO THE UNHEARD

N Madhoosudhan

Social activist N Madhoosudhan, is helping impoverished tribal communities of Andhra Pradesh, voice the problems plaguing them through theatre



Afrin Humayon

Numerous street plays have been performed in the city that highlight social issues — women's issues, food issues, pollution — you name it. But what sets the play, *'Bhutthali — Mother Earth'*, written and directed by social activist and theatre playwright N Madhoosudhan, apart, is the fact that all the performers in the play, except for three, come from small villages of Andhra Pradesh.

Madhoosudhan, who has been working closely with the tribes in the Telengana region since the past 20 years, says that it was an invitation to a food summit in the UK that inspired him to start this initiative in the state. "I had co-directed a play, *'Our Food'*. It was about the struggles of farmers in the UK, the quality of food delivered in supermarkets and the plight of the consumers. While working on that script, I realised that farmers in India too faced similar problems. That's when I thought of directing this play 'on the same lines,'" says the playwright, adding, "Thanks to the changing cropping patterns, commercialisation, mining and commodification by the MNCs, the relationship of these communities with Mother Earth has been affected. This is what I wanted to highlight through the play. For many of them, access to food itself has become a challenge."

When he shared the idea with the villagers, they readily agreed. "Kurma shepherds

from Medak district, farmers from Chittoor district, marginal farmers from Vizag, *adivasis* from East Godavari and *gonds* from Adilabad," came on board. "This is their story and each of them share their own experiences. The idea is to get the affected parties articulate their issues the best they can through this play," quips Madhoosudhan.

But wasn't it a tough job to teach them the nuances of theatre first? He laughs as he says, "Most of them come from a very rich cultural background. The *adivasis*, for instance, have their own performing arts — they have a deep rooted culture of song and dance. However, it was very rustic, so I did have to polish the way they spoke. They had to be taught to address the crowd loudly for bigger gatherings, and shorten their dialogues for

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theatre. But all the dialogues were theirs, just like their stories."

The play has successfully completed 10 shows and is also set to go to East Godavari, Medak, Vizag, Chittoor and Adilabad by the end of this year. Talking about the response to the play, he quips, "Towards the end of the play there is a scene in which the villagers face the audience and say, 'We are not going to leave our lands. What do you think?' At that point, 30-40% of the audience instantly replies 'We don't want to leave our lands either.' A lot of times,

audiences, have come to us seeking suggestions on how to fight back against the MNCs and lax government officials. We don't always have answers, but at least, this is a start. They are much more conscious now."

But his plan of setting up an amphi-theatre in Medak district is the closest to his heart, which he hopes to begin by the end of the year. The activist himself has donated half an acre of his land for the coliseum. "There are a number of traditional artists in the Telangana region. Each of the communities has its own traditional art that has been handed down to them since ages, which is almost on the verge of dying. I wanted to create a space for these local artists where they can preserve this art and culture. This may also serve as a bridge between the rural and the urban youth," signs off the maverick.

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A scene from the play, *Bhutthali — Mother Earth*

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