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## Crusader for women's rights



VOICING SILENCE: Mina Swaminathan.

KAUSALYA SANTHANAM

**FEMINISM** From literacy to infanticide, Mina Swaminathan has highlighted issues through theatre.

Theatre thus became a tool for self-expression and empowerment

Mina Swaminathan, along with A. Mangai, has put Tamil feminist theatre on the local and national map. They have been involved in many aspects of the Tamil theatre. Among the varied facets of their work are their efforts in propagating traditional theatre, helping women drama performers of Tamil Nadu, creating awareness on the condition of the transgendered (the Aravanis) and organising women's theatre festivals. "All my work with women and for women has been made possible because of my partnership with Mangai who has been the director of the plays presented by the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation," Mina emphasises. "Mangai and I have had a harmonious and rewarding working partnership for 15 years."

"I'm not even a theatre person," says Mina. "I'm an educator with a passion for the theatre. I came to Chennai from Delhi only in 1989. Early childhood education is what I'm known for." A school teacher who also worked in non-formal education, she began working with street children and those living in the slums in Delhi. When Gandhian Meera Mahadevan decided to open crèches for the children of construction workers, Mina threw herself heart and soul into the project. Adult literacy classes were conducted for the workers in the evenings. The staff soon formed a theatre unit. "This was my introduction to community theatre," says Mina.

"We performed plays on construction sites and in slums, addressing various issues the workers faced and educating them on health, hygiene, family welfare and sanitation. I led the creative group and I feel happy about the work I have done in developmental theatre. For instance "Rog Rani," interspersed with the folk and performing art forms of Rajasthan, Chattisgarh and Orissa, helped bring home the message of protection against infectious diseases. We also put up a play for women's rights as seen in the context of women construction workers." It dealt with three issues: the women work for as many long hours as the men but they have to do all the household chores and take care of the children; they earn the same but they have no right to spend; and the man thinks (and most often the women too) that he has the right to beat her.

When Mina relocated to Chennai with her eminent scientist husband Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, she was 55 and already had 30 years of work behind her. "Conservative Chennai was a great change from Delhi with its much more open atmosphere. I was also not very conversant with the nuances and various registers of the Tamil language," she says. But Mina got very interested in Theru-k-koothu, the performing art form special to Tamil Nadu, owing to her association with Hanne M. de Bruin who was doing research in this area. Later, Mina helped Hanne and her husband Rajagopal set up their Koothu sangam in Kanchipuram.

### On Koothu

So fascinated was Mina with Koothu that she travelled to various districts to see the work by numerous companies, each with variations in style. It angers Mina to see articles in newspapers on "the dying art of Theru-k-koothu!" "It is thriving, there are 1,500 companies!" she exclaims.

Meanwhile she met Mangai who put up the idea of the 'Voicing Silence' project in which theatre "was a module to help women speak out." Funded by the MSSRF, it helped develop a body of feminist theatre. "I created the platform and worked on the early stages, of laying the framework for the productions while Mangai wrote and directed most of them." They were all feminist plays — "Paccha Mannu" (on female infanticide), Manimekalai, Pani-t-thee (on courageous women from the epics) and "Avvai," among many others

Another facet of working for women came about through Mina's association with the women performers of the drama form in the rural areas, who face social stigma. The Isai Natakam or "drama" as they call it, differs in many ways from the traditional Koothu.

"For five years we worked with these women artists from Uthiramerur whom Rajagopal introduced to us. He trained them to do an all night show of an episode from the Mahabharata in Koothu form." she says. "It was the first time that women were performing in this traditionally all male form. We later conducted workshops for the women. And we created five plays with them during five years."

Aravanis were yet another group helped by Voicing Silence. "They formed themselves into the Kannadi Kalai Kuzhu and their first play 'Manasin Azhaippu' written and directed by Mangai was staged more than 100 times throughout Tamil Nadu. The second play we did with the group was 'Uraiaada Ninaivugal.' Theatre thus became a tool for self-expression and empowerment."

Mina is especially proud of 'Kulavai' the women's theatre festival organised by Voicing Silence from time to time, focussing on women directors, performers, women's groups and the issues they face. Mina has also facilitated the making of 20 short films on gender and issues concerning children.

"I'm still passionate about the theatre but now as a spectator," signs off Mina. But who can deny that Voicing Silence has made a substantial difference to women in the theatre and women's theatre in Tamil Nadu?

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