

IDR Interviews | Shankar Singh (Part II)

Co-founder of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and RTI activist Shankar Singh talks about the role of music and theatre in driving social movements, and how to remain motivated amid adversity.

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(This document is a transcript of IDR's interview with Shankar Singh. Watch the full video [here](#).)

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How have mediums such as drama, stories, puppets, and songs featured in your work? What role do these play in social change?

I got the chance to see puppets at one place, the Literacy House in Lucknow, so I started following these people. I felt that I had to learn this and asked them to teach me how to use puppets. Whenever I got the chance, I'd go to them. There was a workshop there, after joining the nonprofit. I went to that workshop. But in the same campus there was a department of puppetry that did only this work. I showed a lot of curiosity in it. I thought that I definitely wanted to acquire this skill. Then I learned puppetry from there. I assimilated puppetry into my thought and then expressed myself through it.

I got the chance to meet Tripurari Sharma in Delhi, who is no more and who was a big theatre personality. She used to teach and was the director at National School of Drama. Aruna got me the opportunity to work with her. Aruna told her, "I have a person who is very interested in puppets and drama. So call him to one of your workshops." I attended that workshop. After that I felt that these mediums are very strong, be it drama, songs, stories, or puppetry. I completely assimilated these mediums while working with that nonprofit.

When there was a protest going on at Beawar, some women came and said, "Your cause is very good. We will sing bhajans and support you." And they only sing bhajans. It is a professional team. They sang a bhajan and it kept playing in my mind. I thought, this bhajan has many catchy lines. So their bhajan was "*Kanudo makhan khagyo re, koi to munde bulo*", meaning Kanha (Lord Krishna) has eaten the butter and no one is speaking up.

Then this got made into a song: "*Choriwado ghanon ho gayo re* (There has been a big theft), *koi to munde bolo. Arrey koi to munde bolo, koi to mundo kholo. Choriwado ghanon ho gayo re koi to munde bolo.*"

"And who all is involved in this choriwada (thieving)?"

"That sarpanch?"

“He has eaten up all the rupaiya.”

“Secretary *rupaiya - kha gayo* (stole it), JN *rupaiya - kha gayo*, BDO *rupaiya - kha gayo*, *pradhan* (head) *bhi rupaiya - kha gayo*.”

“*Prashasan bhedo bhal gayo re, koi tu munde bulo*.” (The whole administration is corrupt, will someone speak up?)

This Choriwada song pointed fingers at everyone, from anganwadi workers to politicians, doctors, masters (teachers), courts, police stations—this song was for everyone. And this song was loved by the people. It also bothers those whom it names. They feel like they’re being insulted openly through this song.

Many times we ask for tips at the *chauraha* (crossroads) after performing a play. Once, we’d finished singing this song and were asking for tips when we were approached by someone I did not know. I said, “Give whatever you please, INR 2, 5, 10.” He was very displeased. He said, “Not even my own wife knows my salary, and here you’re telling everyone about it at the *chauraha*.” He was a teacher. He said, “I don’t tell my wife how much I get and you’re doing this here. Why would I give you money?”

The play also has wit and humour in it. Like when Advani came out with the Rath Yatra, with this slogan that they would liberate people from ‘fear, hunger, and corruption’, and he roamed all over Rajasthan, we were not able to understand—we were staging a dharna in Jaipur at the time—how we could tackle it. Do we go around before he does and tell everyone that whatever he is saying is nonsense? We are demanding our right to information, and these people are talking about [getting rid of] fear, hunger, and corruption when they have formed the government and they are not doing anything. We thought that there would be police there and they would not let us go, so let him go and then we can do it. I wondered whether anyone would listen [to us] after that, so we decided to do something here.

We chose Jaipur as our base and made an announcement at our dharna. We thought about what we should do. We made a beautiful chariot out of a cart that we got from the vegetable market, placed big horses made of cloth in front of it, and wrote ‘Ghotala Rath Yatra’ on it. We put placards around an umbrella. These placards bore the names of all the ghotalas (scams) that had taken place. And a chair was placed on the cart for the leader to sit on. The chariot was covered with saffron decorations. We did all this behind the tent, and the police did not know that we were doing something. And I announced on the mike, “Tomorrow at 5 o’clock in the evening, a Rath Yatra will start from here. And the leader of our Rath, his name is Rajvani, he will come from Delhi. He will be riding on the chariot and there will be a Rath Yatra.” The policeman called the control room and said, “Tomorrow a big leader of theirs is coming from Delhi to do a Rath Yatra.” Things like this Rath Yatra whip them up into a frenzy. He was told, “Ask them what kind of help they need.”

The policeman came to me asking what would be the route of the Rath Yatra, so I told him the route. "What do you need? Police help?" I said, "Look, he is a national-level leader, so there should be proper police arrangement because anything can happen. If you can provide commandos, etc., it would be very good. And the security has to be tightened as he is a national-level leader." Then he asked me where the leader would be staying. We said, "He will come by flight. From the airport maybe we will go to Circuit House for some time, come to Khasa Kothi, and then come back."

He inquired everywhere, "Do you have anyone with you?" and then asked me, "Is there any booking at Circuit House?" I said, "What is the need for booking? He is a VIP and may come directly from the airport." He then gave in and decided to provide whatever arrangement was available.

The next day we took out the chariot from there. And I was on top of the cart as a leader. I was dressed such that all the parties were included. The Congress cap and saffron-coloured gamchha (scarf). And the leader sat on a chair on the stage. There was a ghotala umbrella, and on the front it said 'Ghotala Rath Yatra'. It also said Rajvani. And he came out. And there was also singing, "Ghotala raj ki jai jai bolo, jai-jai bolo, jai-jai bolo. Bhrashtachaar karo, hari hari bolo." (Praise the reign of scams. Do corruption and take the lord's name.) "Arey hawala ka halwa chaat chaat khaya." (We really enjoyed the black money pudding.)

Whatever scams happened like this, we kept talking about them in songs. When people hear [such sounds], they still think they're supposed to act respectful and defer, so they also do this (joins hands as if to pray). There are so many red-light vehicles passing, and I'm sitting on the chair. So every time I folded my hands, their instinctive response, without any thought, was to do the same. Later they would understand that it's a Ghotala Rath. The policemen would also do the same thing, or even salute. There were such big police arrangements. The SP must have asked what was going on. "It is going well, sir," the policeman told him. He did not say that this was a drama, otherwise the SP would have asked how he had got taken in by our drama. There was police running on both sides. After that our meetings were held at every chauraha. We decided that we will not stop this scam chariot until this law is passed.

08:36

On the one hand, there are people coming from the city with a desire to work in the social sector. On the other, there are locals who understand the root of grassroots issues. How can these people work together?

Friends from outside will come, they have their own energy, they have their own expertise. They will help a lot, because they are very good at technology.

Let me give you an example. When this person called Vineet came to us, he said that we can see the Jan Soochna Portal on this projector. But how do we show it in the village? For this, he took a projector. Placing his small projector on a white wall, he brought out the Jan Soochna Portal. Then he called over some children, who thought they were being shown a film. So first he played

a small film, some seven to 10 minutes long. He showed something related to RTI. The children saw it, enjoyed it. Then he asked one child to bring his ration card. He entered the ration card number in the portal. Vineet then displayed it on the wall, and when he did that the child could see a photo, which was of his father. He said, "Oye, this is my father's photo," and was quite amazed. Then Vineet said, look, I will show you all the times you took wheat. When he accessed the information on the portal, he said that the child's family had taken 80 kg last month.

The child ran home, called his father and brought him back, saying, "They're saying that you took 80 kg. The film in the projector is saying it." The father said, "It was not 80 kg, we got 40 kg." "But they're saying something else." The father came and asked to look. Then he saw that it said 80 kg. "Sir, it is not 80 kg. We took 40 kg." "But here it says 80 kg." "But I am telling you that I took 40 kg. We have never got 80 kg, we have got 40 kg every time. Every alternate month."

When asked why, he said, "[At the ration depot] he said that it hadn't arrived yet. 'We'll give it to you when it's here.' It has been like this for the whole year, we have only been given 40 kg every time. But every alternate month." We understood the story, that he is giving wheat every other month but not the 80 kg he is supposed to, just 40 kg. It's showing as 80 kg online but he is giving you 40 kg, and he is not giving you that slip. He said, "What should I do?" I told him to take a printout. Vineet also had a printer, so he gave him the printout. It showed that this person had got 80 kg of wheat six times in the last 12 months.

He went to the dealer, who is from the village, and said, "Look at this, I have got 80 kg on paper and you gave me only 40 kg." The dealer asked him where he had got this information from, and told him to take the rest of his wheat but not make any noise.

The dealer gave him 240 kg of wheat, and he could not carry 240 kg alone. So his entire family came, his wife, his children, all of them were leaving with kattas (gunny bags) on their heads. People in the village asked them what happened. "That wheat has arrived, all six months' worth, they're giving it now." "How?" "It was given once in two months, but now it has come, now it has come together, so they are giving it to everyone. I got mine so I'm bringing it." All the people from the village started going to the dealer, so he said, "You won't get it like this, I need the report." So people queued up before Vineet asking for their ration information, and Vineet kept giving them this information. There was a line outside the ration [shop]. Then people started queuing up outside the ration depot. None of us [from MKSS] were there. But people were fighting with the dealer, showing him their paper.

For those who were getting 40 kg, the papers said 80 kg; 60 kg for those getting 30 kg; and 40 kg for those getting 20 kg. He brought three trucks of wheat and got it distributed. And he had to pay out of pocket because he'd already misappropriated it. For seven days all this wheat kept coming there, kept getting finished, later he brought more. There is all this power... So the game that these friends play with technology is very useful.

We conduct jan sunwais (public hearings). How can we reach the people? What is there on paper, what is there inside, what is there in this machine; that which comes to us, how do we use it...then that is also very interesting.

14:47

Has there been any incident in your experiences that still disturbs you?

Work—whatever you have to do by going to poverty-stricken households—also gives you a lot of strength. Many times people say, “Friend, you are blessed for the good you do.” When I go to the village, there too people say this. They also say with great authority, “You have come after a long time, please come in between. I haven’t got my pension for two months. I have not received wheat rations.”

There is an old couple in the village, they don’t have children. They don’t even have a house; they live under this shed. So I have helped them in getting pension. Sometimes they’re not able to get the ration food, so there are fights with the dealer on why they have not been given it. Sometimes he gives it and sometimes he doesn’t. I could not go for two to three months. Vineet and I both could not go, so they reprimanded us with great authority, that you did not come. I just asked them how things were going. “Okay,” they said.

I lifted the lid of the drum, and saw that there was nothing in it. And there were no other things either. I asked, “Is there no atta (flour)?” “No, it has been five days. There has been nothing.” “There has been nothing for five days?” “No, he did not give wheat.” I said they should have borrowed it, we could’ve returned it later. They said, “How many times should I ask? I have asked all the neighbours.” “So you haven’t eaten for five days?”

I immediately ran to the dealer and told him that they had no wheat, and also scolded him.

Vineet went to bring her wheat and I was sitting near the old woman. She asked me to write down my mobile number on the wall somewhere. “I don’t have a phone but if someone comes I will tell them to talk to you.” I came [back] after writing [the number]. That day I felt very sad. And the next day I get a call that the old lady has passed away. We had brought that wheat. Even that wheat was of no use. The call I received was from her husband. Her husband said, “You should come. She is no more. Attend the cremation.” I said, “Don’t hurry, I am reaching.”

So we arrived and there were some very big things being said there. Spiritual conversations. At the crematorium someone was also talking about antardhyaan (a state of meditation). I mentioned that I have met this family, and said that this death happened due to hunger. It was a hunger death. Then this person asked how. I said I had visited them and there was no food in that house for five days. I said that I had bought the bag of wheat from the ration shop yesterday, and it was not even useful. This is a hunger death.

I called Nikhil and told him that I was very sad. He asked me to write something and send it, and he gave it to the media and they published it. After that he told the chief secretary that this had happened. The next day, the entire government started trying to prove that this was not a hunger death. [The old woman’s] ration card was [posthumously] filled, though we had the photocopy [of the original]. They filled it, and now she was getting everything in the house.

The pensioner brought the pension amount for eight months after her death. Her pension came from the post office, but she had died. What were you waiting for for eight months? So all this paperwork was completed. And then came the DYSP, SDM, thanedar, tehsildar, CEO, additional

collector, there was a whole convoy in that village, at that old couple's house. We were not there that day. All of them were saying that it was not a hunger death, it was illness, it was this, it was that.

When we said this in front of the media, they too were standing with cameras rolling, [saying] tell us, tell us about this death. They were putting so much pressure on that old man to say that his wife was ill and had not died of hunger.

We got it, the structure of the government, and this is not a matter of any party, be it Congress, BJP, SP, BSP, or whoever, they are not concerned about this. No, they just use them (people). One cannot forget these stories throughout one's life and one cannot get rid of them. They change your mind.

23:22

How do you maintain your passion for social change?

While doing this work, many times you feel tired and disappointed. It definitely happens. It happens in my mind too. Whenever I have felt that I am in a lot of conflict and trouble, or if I am not sure about what I am doing and feeling stuck, that day I go to some poor person's house. You sit there for an hour or two, you will understand their whole economics, and you will think, how can I stop? What is the condition of the family I have met? And what about me? I am much better off. I start thinking, personally, I don't have any problem at all. I would not be doing any good if I withdrew myself. One's enthusiasm doubles. And there is a lot of strength [in being around] a poor person, who has nothing but darkness all around, how will he survive in his life? Strength is found there. In this area, we know the houses, the families [that are struggling]. A friendship is formed whenever you go and talk to them. They also come to us, and together we try to find solutions. And then I don't feel any physical fatigue, and my enthusiasm comes back.