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Merging boundaries through 'Theatre of transformation'

Rasheed Kappan, Bengaluru, Dec 3, 2016, DHNS:

Weaving testimonies



Trapped deep in the despair of the merciless Syrian war, she turned a volunteer setting up field hospitals as bombs flew past.

A nuclear physicist in post-war Munich, he stood up against the N-bomb as a weapon of deterrence. As Jagadishan, he resigned a high-profile job to join a campaign against GM cotton.

Poet, performer and peace-builder of repute, Rama Mani donned these roles on stage with finesse, weaving together powerful testimonies of resistance, protest and a yearning to shape a humane, shared future.

Lines of reality and hope, talk and performance blurred as Mani had the audience in rapt attention. She was delivering in her own characteristic style, the 17th Kappan memorial lecture here on Friday.

It was Mani's 'Theatre of Transformation,' a dramatised recollection of memories from her 25 years' experience in peace-building in war-torn countries. In one moment, she was a 28-year-old Syrian, propped by a cap and gown as costumes.

"Soldiers started firing at us, bombing us. But we had people to save, we took a course in first aid, set up field hospitals. For the West, we were extremists. We had a shared dream, a goal of freedom."

In a split second, she had to be the nuclear physicist, beckoned by the post-war machinery to fashion the N-bomb. But the pacifist had balked at the suggestion, declaring emphatically in Mani's voice: "A bomb can never prevent war, it can only be an excuse to a war." The physicist eventually petitioned the government to close down the Ministry of Defence, starting in its place a Ministry for peace-building.

For decades, Mani had dabbled hard in global strategic leadership, governance, policy and security. But her realisation of the power of art and theatre did not instantly spell a divorce from politics and policy. She married the two, harnessing the transformational energy of dramatised testimonies and poetry.

So, when Mani turned Hashmina, a Nepalese democracy activist, she was essentially echoing her own journey. "We came down onto the streets, people of all religions, castes, dancing, singing and brought down a monarch and planted the seeds of democracy."

A Senior Research Associate at the University of Oxford's Centre for International Studies, Rama Mani is on the Jury of the 'Alternative Nobel Prize,' the Right Livelihood Award. She was awarded the Peter Becker Peace Prize in Germany in 2013 for the combined impact of her scholarship and activism.