

## STREET THEATRE - THE THIRD THEATRE: AGENTS FOR SOCIAL ENGINEERING IN INDIA

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### ABSTRAK

*Teater Jalanan di India, atau 'Teater Ketiga' sebagai bentuk komunikasi sosial dan budaya, tertanam kuat dalam tradisi India. Banyak persoalan sosial yang rumit, baik yang terkait dengan gender, persalinan, penyebaran pengetahuan tentang HIV dan AIDS, pentingnya mendidik anak perempuan, sistem sosial dan politik, maupun politik kedinastian, dihidupkan melalui genre 'drama jalanan'. Ada 'diskusi panggung' melalui berbagai perspektif mengenai sejumlah karakter, yang membawa unsur keterlibatan langsung dan urgensi pada tema yang sedang dibahas. Dalam situasi seperti ini, penonton datang tanpa persiapan untuk menonton sebuah pertunjukan drama dan mungkin tidak memiliki banyak waktu. Oleh karena itu, dampak dari 'drama jalanan' itu langsung, dekat, intim, dan efektif. Dampaknya terasa 'seketika'. Strategi 'meyakinkan-mengubah' diterapkan ditemani oleh alat musik perkusi India yang disebut Dholak atau paduan suara untuk menarik penonton di perempatan atau di sudut jalan.*

**Kata kunci :** *Teater Jalanan, revolusioner, proscenium, persoalan sosial yang kompleks, diskusi panggung, revitalisasi teater menggunakan bhasha, instrumen untuk memperoleh dampak langsung*

### ABSTRACT

Street Theatre in India, referred to as the 'Third Theatre' as a form of social and cultural communication, is deeply rooted in the Indian tradition. Many complex social issues be it gender related, child labor, imparting knowledge about HIV and AIDS, the need to educate a girl child, social and political systems, dynastic politics, are all enacted through the genre of 'street plays'. There is a 'stage discussion' through varying perspectives of a number of characters, bringing an 'immediacy and urgency' to the theme under consideration. It is a situation, where the audience has not come prepared to watch a play, may not have time on hand, hence the impact of a 'street play' is direct, close, intimate and effective. The impact is 'immediate'. A 'convince-convert' strategy is employed accompanied by a 'Dholak' (Indian percussion musical instrument) or a 'choir' to attract the crowd at the cross roads or any street corner.

**Keywords:** Street Theatre, revolutionary, proscenium, complex social issues, stage discussion, revitalizing theatre using 'bhasha', instrument for immediate impact

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## INTRODUCTION

The story of Indian Theatre is extremely tortuous and more dramatic than that of any other genre. While poetry and prose writers in English did somehow cross the barrier, drama/plays found it hard to even make a start. Only Broadway and West End hits were staged in English in cities only. English plays in India suffered from various reasons like 'being dependent', dependent on actors, directors, theatres, but over and above these things, English drama in India faced the problem of language. It was felt that in order to draw the attention of the viewers towards social issues and an 'urgent need' to address them, there was a compulsion to use colloquial languages projecting different voices, representing region, class, caste, education. In order to 'speak' directly to the audience, nothing should come in between, most importantly, the language.

English plays in India could not draw 'comprehensible audience', as the Indian audience had to struggle with the foreign language's nuances and cultural ethos. But in the sixties and seventies of the last century Indian theatre in vernacular languages like Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Bengali, were being revolutionized with talented writers commenting on social, gender and political issues, gifted directors and actors and a rapidly growing enthusiastic audience, saw the dawn of a new era in the theatre firmament of India. This has been famously called as 'revitalizing theatre through the bhashas' (Vernacular Languages).

The performing art of theatre uses the stage as a medium for social change and also for moral action. While doing so it challenges the limits of creativity. Not only do the playwrights but also the social activists make innovative experimentations to reach common people with desired effects as the thoughts and actions of the time find their best expressions in the dramas. Since time immemorial, drama through various variants has been able to engage with contemporary issues striking a chord with audience: "Societies have always been shaped by the nature of the media

by which people communicate rather than the content of the communication" (Achuthanandan, 2009:02). Theatre performances can satisfy human urge to understand the ever changing society with constant innovations. Theatre all over the world is enthralling with newer and envisioned experiments and so is the Indian theatre scenario. "Our theatre scenario has become second to none" (Baby, 2009:3).

In a country with low literacy and high population, theatre especially street theatre provided a low cost and an immediate means of reaching the illiterate. In 1970s, 1980s and 1990s NGOs, social activists, theatre personalities and grass-root groups all over the country increasingly used street theatre as a means of social change. It is "a mobile medium of communication" (Nagar, 2011:59). It reflects the historical shift in the notion of theatrical development. The earlier agendas of people's struggle and nation-building are now joined by a focus on human and individual rights. Hence the theatre for development now covers subjects as diverse as sexual health, female infanticide and foeticide, political, gender and Dalit (under privileged class in India) concerns. Street theatres are dedicating themselves towards expressing the realities of oppression and resistance that are a part of day-to-day life.

Street theatre, in its modern form is popularized by the IPTA - Indian People's Theatre Association - the country's first organized political theatre movement that emerged in the 1940s. In India the legacy of street theatre can be traced back to long standing traditional folk performances. The distinction between street theatres from other dramatic performances is its political and militant overtones. The origin of street theatre in India can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century. This form was known as "Rahs" in Punjab. In Uttar Pradesh it is known as "Nautanki", in Bengal it is popular as "Jatra", in Karnataka as "Beedi Nataka", in Maharashtra as "Path Natya". In Hindi it is called "Path Natika". In street theatre performance the playing of Dholak attracts the people.

## A GENRE FOR SOCIAL ENGINEERING

The rise of street theatre which flourished since 1970s in different nooks and corners of the country coincided with the growth of women's movements and NGOs. According to Malini Bhattacharya, an Indian politician and feminist activist, street theatre aims not only to provide entertainment but to serve as a cultural intervention that can work directly at the level of people's consciousness. "This is not to negate the importance of change at the political and economic levels, but to assert that politicization of cultural forms is a slow and gradual process and can not be achieved nearly through generalized political directives" (quoted in Nagar, 2011:59).

Street theatre is the outcome of experimentation with the performance art. Group discussion is the base of its script. Current social and political events and real life experiences help the script writers to contextualize the issues and to effectively communicate with the audience for whom theatre has been used as a space for raising issues publicly. By resisting and critiquing the mainstream theatrical practices, street theatres employ folk songs, characters and also the popular tunes to provide entertainment as well as the knowledge of current pressing issues. In street theatres, there is no particular place called the stage. Hardly any props are used. The performers, who are primarily the social activists, go out in search of their audience and a suitable locale for enacting their plays. The emphasis is more on the performance of the actors and not on their costumes. Indian street theatre with its entire artistry has redefined the structure of Indian *Natya*. (form of dance/action) To reach the common people, it broke all the boundaries of traditional mainstream theatre with its furnished stage, music and songs, audience, galleries, etc. Unlike theatre in the proscenium, street theatre entails minimum use of lights, cosmetics, costumes and techniques. A character is established with a small but significant item of property. The actor achieves success with his/her voice, body language and eye-to-eye contact with the audience.

The main objective of the street theatre is to go closer to those who have been marginalized by society. It creates a new space for common people. The other objective of the street theatre is mainly to convey a particular idea through the direct but brief and effective means of dramaturgy. It endeavors to address the burning political, social and other communal issues of people thereby creating social awareness among the people of all strata while addressing all sorts of social and political ailments. Street theatre is people-friendly. Its unpolished performers give it power to reach people. Therefore it is not ticketed. The aim is not to earn money but to convey the message. The mobile nature of street theatre makes it possible to go to people in markets, villages, parks, slums, schools, residential areas and office complexes. Street theatre is often considered 'agitational propaganda' against status quo. It breaks the formal barriers and reaches people directly. This is a means of reaching people of all strata and creating an awareness of events around them calling them to change. It avoids hierarchy by its performers sitting at the same level as the audience which will always be new.

## GENESIS

It is said that street theatre started in 1940s in India. *Charge-sheet* (1949) was among the earliest street plays in Calcutta. A few plays like Utpal Dutt's '*Din Badaler Pala*' (Turn of Changing Times, 1967) were more elaborate stretching to three hours. The history of street theatre in India matches that of other parts of the world. The folk artists in India have been performing since ages but the tradition of street theatre with its revolutionary ideology started some time after national movement when the messages of patriotism and nationalism started spreading. IPTA, formed in 1943 was the first organized body to channelize progressive ideas. It became the pioneer of the people's street theatre movement in India. As the days passed by, the themes of street theatre went on changing from national consciousness to labor movement, AIDS awareness, globalization, capitalism, sexual

harassment, farmers, girl child, environment, dowry, communalism and female foeticide and infanticide.

“The street theatre of Safdar Hashmi, the third-theatre of Badal Sircar, the revolutionary Jatra theatre of Utpal Dutt and the Chattisgarhi folk theatre of Habib Tanvir are all major alternative forms of ‘Committed Theatre’” (Dharwadkar, 2006:367). Utpal Dutt and Habib Tanvir used street theatre as political catalyst during 1940s and 1950s. It was revived in the 1970s and now the movement has spread all over the country. Habib Tanvir who has worked with the IPTA emerged as a central figure whose “Theatre on Wheels” travelled on trucks in villages performing on them. In terms of form of street theatre, Badal Sircar’s work had great influence. Although he does not call himself as part of the street theatre movement, he abandoned mainstream drama and took up to open-air performances, communicating with the dissatisfied and uprooted urban working class in an intensely physical performing style. Many theatre groups have benefited from the workshops he held all over the country. It is he who traced the need for the development of this form of communication which is sometimes referred to as the “Third theatre” - the first two being the sophisticated urban theatre borrowed from the British and rooted in Western culture and values; the second being traditional rural theatre -. So there arose the need for a means of communication which would break barriers of stage and ticketed entry. He in his book *The Third Theatre* explains the fundamental differences between the street and proscenium performances. According to him proscenium theatre has only two types of relationships, one is among the actors; the second is between the actors and the audience. The proscenium keeps the audience in dark and expects them to be silent throughout the performance, whereas in street theatre the relationship develops between the audience and the actors. They can talk and react to the incidents that are taking place in the arena (Sircar, Badal: ‘The Third Theatre’: 1983-p- 4-7). He is one of the major playwrights and the makers of modern Indian

theatre. His third theatre is described by Rustom Bharucha as “the most rigorously non-commercial political theatre in India”. (Bharucha, 1993:127) Badal Sircar’s third theatre distinguishes his theatre from both the urban proscenium theatres and folk theatres and it communicates political messages in both cities and villages. He and his group *Shatabdi* (Century), regularly conduct workshops in various parts of the country.

Following Badal Sircar some individuals and organizations opted to experiment with theatre and its audience. Like Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* particularly the technique of “Forum theatre”, was adopted by workers in different parts of India. In forum theatre actors present problems and invite the audience to stage possible solutions. The performers in response resist their solution so that it can lead to further discussion and further exploration of the problem and all possible practical solutions. This sort of performance has two-fold goals – to look for all possible solutions and to encourage spectators to act. It is termed as ‘spect-actors’ by Boal to describe the dual role of those involved in the process where both spectators and actors observe and create dramatic meaning and action in any performance. It is their moving a step ahead towards becoming active participants in their own struggle.

While discussing street theatre, it becomes mandatory to talk of Safdar Hashmi and his theatre group *Jana Natya Manch* (People’s Theatre Front) known as “*Janam*” (*Birth*) which was formed in 1973. He has enacted many plays to create public awareness on various political and social issues creatively. Hashmi defined street theatre as, “a militant political theatre of protest whose function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organizations” (Lal, 2004:451). One of the most successful street plays produced by his *Janam* was *Aurat* (Woman) created in March 1979 during a break in the Conference of Women-workers of North India. This play has had more than 2500 performances and been translated into almost all Indian languages and was produced in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Nagar, 2011:64). Till 2002, *Janam* has notched up about 7000

performances of fifty-eight street plays. Many of these were later translated or adapted by many theatre groups across South Asia. Its plays, *Machine* (1978), *Aurat* (Woman, 1979) *Hulla Bol!* (Attack!, 1988) and *Aartnaad* (Screams, 1996) exemplify a popular political theatre that features direct confrontation as well as artistry. *Janam* dealt through *Aurat* openly with issues like bride burning, dowry and wife battering. It was exciting because it dared to venture to the public with such diverse representations and explanations of women that it created a new audience of women for street theatre. *Aartnaad*, brought out the sexual abuses of children. They are all shown as victims as well as vengeance seekers. And while seeming to replay the roles allotted to them by history, they struggle to redeem themselves in the end.

Safdar Hashmi along with his troupe performed the play "*Halla Bol!*" in Jhandapur, Sahibabad on the outskirts of Delhi. It supported the workers' demands led by CITU – Centre on Indian Trade Unions and was about the government's role in the suppression of the workers' organizations. During the show, Safdar Hashmi was attacked leading to his death, which gave birth to the *Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust* (SAHMAT) which works for productive values and raises voice against the social inequalities in India.

However 1989 marked a turning point for street theatre after Safdar Hashmi's shocking murder during a show. Thirty thousand performances paid tribute on his birthday - 12<sup>th</sup> April now observed across India as 'National Street Theatre Day'. Many of the theatre groups like *Praja Natya Mandli* (People's Theatre Group) in Andhra Pradesh, a southern state in India, took to street theatre as a direct response to Safdar Hashmi's death. In 1984 the shocking death of thousands after a poisonous gas leak from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal sparked off protest theatre at street corners in many towns, some groups mobilizing support and donations for survivors. During 1990s, the NGOs used street theatre to promote ecological consciousness, AIDS awareness and family planning.

## PAN INDIAN INFLUENCE

The movement has now spread to all states. Many of other street theatre organizations like *Praja Natya Mandali* in Hyderabad, *Natya Chetana* (*Theatre of Conscience*) in Orissa, *Nija Nataka Iyakkam* (True to Life Theatre) formed in 1978 in Madurai, *Kalai Kuzhu* formed in 1984 in Madras have retained the IPTA legacy of a leadership speaking to the oppressed, taking up their problems and providing solutions. The persons at these performance sites now also belong to the audience whose difficulties are being addressed. *Jana Sanskriti* (*Peoples Culture*) is based in rural West Bengal. This is specially innovative and successful in its practice of forum theatre, setting up over forty units across the state as well as elsewhere. They deal with movements such as anti alcoholism, anti-dowry and demand for health care. Collaborating with women's NGOs, the organization pays attention to gender in order to sensitize audience while simultaneously empowering women to come forward and seek their own answers through it.

*Aavhaan Natya Manch* (*Welcome Theatre*) is a pioneering street theatre group from Mumbai, (the financial capital of India) which initiated by middle-class students from local colleges, pledged its commitment to staging plays about Dalit culture. Among its first offering was a Hindi play '*Devadas*' (Servant of God)(Jalote, 2001:34). The group organized street theatres after the passage of the Preventive Detention Ordinance 125 by the University in the early 1980s. The reason for doing a play instead of putting out pamphlets and posters was to build a two-way communication.

Punjab, a Northern state of India also have had a taste for street theatre medium produced by Gurusharan Singh, Zulfiqar Khan, G.S.Chenni, Harleen Kohli and many others. In Chandigarh they produced plays like *Main Jala Di Jaungi*, *Hai Meri Poonch* for children, *Akh ki Dehliz* on communalism. Gurusharan Singh known as "Samrat of Nukkad Natak" (King of Street Plays) represented Punjab in Historical Street Theatre

Festival in Bhopal under the name of *Amritsar Natak Kala Kendra*. He persevered with street theatre advocating social change and civil rights for over two decades, through the years of militancy (1980s), braving threats to life and inspiring young theatre workers.

In Gujrat, a Western state in India the task was carried over by the groups *Samvedan (Empathy) Garage*, *Lok Kala Manch (Peoples Theatre)* and *Parivartan (Transformation)* by performing street plays. South India has some of the best examples starting with *Samudaya (Community)* and its many units in Karnataka.

### GENDER INITIATIVE

In the 1980s and 1990s a variety of groups ranging from religious reformers and mainstream politicians to factory workers and students adopted street plays to gain support for their agendas. The middle-class urban activists including women's organizations are the largest groups to practice street theatre. They believed that as privileged and educated people, they have responsibility to educate common people on critical social issues. Women's organizations throughout India have recognized and adopted street plays as a powerful medium to critique prevailing gender discrimination, to voice out their dissent and mobilize women around issues such as their education, marriage, domestic violence, atrocities against girl child and dowry. There are diverse practices that comprise women's theatre in India. Interestingly many of those involved in prestigious institutions such as the National School of Drama (NSD) simultaneously engaged themselves with the attempt to bring women's struggles to streets. Prominent among them are Anuradha Kapur - a founder member of women's collective *Vivadi*. In 1980 along with Rati Bartholomew and Maya Rao, she founded *Theatre Union* - a street theatre group, which made significant inroads and interventions in dowry related deaths, especially through its play *Om Swaha (Offering to Fire-1980)* - first performed in 1980. Nandi Bhatia explains the performance-related achievements of playwrights like Kusum Kumar and Tripurari Sharma who have successfully

made use of the alternative space of the streets in order to address other groups - Dalits and courtesans - who remain marginalized from the mainstream nationalist imagination (Bhatia, 2012:82). In 1982, Tripurari Sharma formed her group *Alarippu*. Other prominent organizations such as *Jagori (Awake) Stree Mukti Sangathan (Women's Liberation Movement)* - an NGO from Maharashtra, took on the work of protesting against discriminatory social practices. These organizations made an enormous contribution to the cause of women by bringing their stories about their struggles into the public domain of streets. To raise consciousness at a popular level, women playwrights and activists staged plays like *Om Swaha (Offering to fire,1980)* and *Dafa 180 (Legislation180-1997)* in colleges, parks, slums, middle-class neighborhoods soliciting feedback from spectators. These plays are presented by *Theatre Union*. *Om Swaha* dealt with dowry deaths and *Dafa 180* addressed the issue of rape. These street plays brought out into the public space what remained hidden in the private spaces of enclosed homes. Women's groups turned to street theatre as a "more direct method of communication with people" (Kumar, 1993:120). *Stree Mukti Sangathan* staged *Mulagi Jhali Ho! (The Girl is Born)* - a play about girl child was written and directed by Jyoti Mhapsekar and was performed in Maharashtra.

Some of the lesser known organizations are also doing remarkable work in bringing to the fore the issues that do not get coverage in the mainstream media. *Garib Dongari Sangathan* was organized by fifteen peasant women and two men under the direction of Hema Rairkar in 1991. Such community theatre groups give "the performers strength, self-awareness and self-confidence through the process of creating their own plays and performing them".

It is true that the age is witnessing tremendous development in the nature and ways of performance. It is pleasure to notice that great efforts are being made for culture in general and for the performing arts in particular. Indeed, Indian street theatre has developed as an art form to illustrate the feelings and anger of common people. It

germinated a whole new theatre-form which was then typically categorized as theatre by the people and theatre for the people. In these Indian street theatres common people with their day-to-day life and problems gained dimension.

## CONCLUSION

In a globalised world dominated by electronic media, where the profiles of satellite dishes emerge even in the middle of the desert, and where TV antennas can be counted by the thousands even in the poorest towns and slums, street theatre has not only survived but has an important role in developing the nation. Anywhere or rather everywhere in modern India, street theatre has become an eminent form of expression. Street theatre as a tool of participatory communication for social change has multiple advantages. The first and foremost is the entertainment factor. It enables the contents to be conveyed, channels the energies of the audience through surprise and through satire and laughter to the processes of comprehension and participation. Secondly, street theatre has cultural relevance especially when local troupes are in charge. Not only does it preserve but also strengthens the traditional values. Performance of street theatres in the local languages contributes to the process of community participation. Cost-effectiveness is the other advantage of these community or street theatres. The potential of immediately having an impact and appreciating this impact on the audience is the biggest advantage. Street theatre establishes a live dialogue that may derive in a learning process, both for the audience and the drama group, leading to social change. One of the most interesting aspects of this social change is capacity-building. It sensitizes masses to social issues, enrolls them in the process of social change and promotes peace and harmony.

Street plays in India, adopted a 'self critical mode' where many myths are upturned very casually with no attempt to solemnity, yet very effective. It went on adapting itself to times, responding to historical and social circumstances,

imbibing new influences, even the western influences, diverging into rural and urban issues, professional and amateur, traditional and experimental, so that most of the 'bhashas' went on to have a strongly established theatre during the last century, continuing even more vibrantly to this day.

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