

ANALYZING THE INFLUENCE OF STREET THEATRE ON SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Early in the 20th century, street theatre developed as a means of emancipating the working class and bolstering the revolt against established authority. Its journey in India started with left-wing theatre activists leading the anti-colonial movement. Although street theatre and folk theatre are closely related, street theatre is more of a participatory social communication process than a straightforward artistic medium. With an emphasis on the "Halla Bol" movement, this intellectual examines the function and possibilities of street theatre as a vehicle for community development intended to bring about social change. Safdar Hashmi and the Jana Natya Manch theatrical company spearhead the "Halla Bol" movement, marking a turning point in the history of Indian street theatre. Hashmi's work best demonstrated the use of theatre for social transformation and political activity. His terrible martyrdom during a rendition of "Halla Bol" highlighted the dangers that musicians who question the status quo confront. The audience responded strongly to Halla Bol's themes of labor rights, gender equality, caste prejudice, and governmental corruption, which democratized theatre and inspired activists of later generations. The Indian People's Theatre Association's tenets influenced Jana Natya Manch, a pioneer of contemporary Indian street theatre in this succinct case study. It examines the effects of street plays in contrast to traditional proscenium theatre, as well as their future potential. The participatory style of street theatre, as well as Halla Bol's legacy, demonstrates its transformational potential and ongoing importance in promoting social justice.

Keywords: *Street Theatre, Halla Bol, Safdar Hashmi, Jana Natya Manch, Political Activism.*

Introduction

After 66 years of independence, a nation that is home to almost one-third of the world's poorest people (Nelson, 2013) and is still striving to achieve the global average education rate to ensure literacy for all (UNESCO, 2013) can scarcely imagine utilising print media or technological advancements for mass communication. However, for inclusive social development, it is crucial to clearly express community tales, debate facts that impact or potentially influence them in public, share information, and prioritize communication above all. As a unique kind of performing art, street theatre uses visual form, emotive representation, simple reception, and creates space for interactive communication to help with social change. Because historians and artists see the genre from diverse angles, they have defined "street theatre" in different ways. Simon Murray and John Keefe (2007) examined street plays as a form of entertainment, integrating elements of physical theatre, performance arts, and illusions. Jan Cohen-Cruz (1998), on the other hand, defined street theatre as a manifestation of revolutionary political and nationalist movements that serve as a vehicle for social change in addition to providing entertainment for their audiences. Theatre activist and Jana Natya Manch founder Safdar Hashmi also saw street theatre as a means of promoting political ideologies, particularly communism, and of "drawing the masses of

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people into the anti-colonial struggle" (Deshpande, 2007). But since the 19th century, there has been a long-standing amity between politics and street performances. During the Industrial Revolution, laborers and party workers throughout Europe wrote and performed plays on the streets. In the next century, women began actively creating and performing in street plays during the London Suffragette Movement. During the Russian Revolution, what began as a way to voice political beliefs and ideas eventually evolved into a tool for teaching the rural populace. When World War II began, street theatre became a voice for the anti-war movement. Various parts of America and England adopted this attitude of liberal socio-political transformation, producing street plays against the Vietnam War, for women's liberation, against racial discrimination, and for the students' movement. India was also not far behind in experimenting with performing freely for the general public on the streets. Even though folk theatre and other artistic forms have existed for aeons in isolated places, mostly for amusement purposes, street theatre really began to take shape during the independence struggle as a means of igniting a nationalist movement and encouraging patriotism. In order to spread their liberal ideologies and inform the public about imperialism and its repercussions, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) organised India's first street theatre in 1943. IPTA launched the street theatre movement in India, and it subsequently expanded across the country, crossing national borders and cultural divides. The main concerns of street plays have always been women, children's health and education, communism, and economic emancipation. Organisations such as Jana Natya Manch, Pravah, Alarippu, Action India, Swatantra Theatre, and Bihar Art Theatre are well-known for staging street plays in various states to challenge the conventions that impede liberation and shout out loud about topics that are relevant today (Kang, 2002). The theatre of the street, which began as a means of inspiring Indians to fight for their own liberation, has expanded its reach from isolated villages to major cities, all the while maintaining its efficacy as a popular mass medium in the face of competition from electronic media. Street theatre has emerged as one of the most popular platforms for social communicators to spread their views, with supporters ranging from social activists and non-governmental organisations to artists, business professionals, and student unions.

Street Theatre: A Tool for Social Communication

According to Downing (2011), street theatre shares a close relationship with indigenous folk theatres in India, such as Terukkuttu in Tamil Nadu and VeedhiNatakam in Andhra Pradesh. However, unlike these theatres, street theatre does not primarily aim to entertain the public. In practical terms, street theatre refers to a type of group drama performed outdoors, typically on a street, in a market, a train station, a college or university campus, or a slum. This allows the artists to engage directly with a wide range of audiences, with the aim of inspiring activism as well as amusement. Although street plays must adhere to certain aesthetic standards, much like other popular theatre, their main purpose is to spread ideas of political change, social liberation, and development—often as part of a larger social and nationalist movement. The main aesthetic elements of street plays are the incorporation of vernacular languages with music, dance, and folk arts; little use of costumes or props; and no theatrical set-up. We set the tone energetically, using an experimental approach, and make every effort to keep the shape devoid of any exaggeration or flush. According to Downing, the works of Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, Utpal Dutt, and Badal Sircar have greatly influenced Indian street theatre, apart from the classical arts and drama. The form's fluidity is what has recently contributed to its popularity. In contrast to conventional theatres, street play audiences do not have to wait to purchase tickets, nor do performers have to wait in the lobby for their audiences to arrive. In street theatre, the audience comes to the theatre, not the other way around. In contrast to the typical style of communication, which either eliminates the opportunity for response or utilizes an intermediary between the communicator and the recipient, street plays are generally community-based, brief, and allow for the possibility of dialogue with the audience after they conclude. In this regard, McHale (2004) draws a comparison between street and guerrilla theatre and argues in favor of its usefulness in advocacy communication, saying that "advocates have access to nonconventional communicative forms like street theatre." Joan, an advocate who often took part in this kind of theatre, said that the format was excellent at spreading advocacy messages: "I think it is extremely effective." For example, since we employ street theatre as a guerrilla strategy, we refer to it as guerrilla theatre. We wouldn't provide notice of our concerts in advance. What's a guerrilla strategy? You keep it a secret. Anyone would be able to halt such activity if they so desired. One other benefit of performing theatre as guerrilla theatre is that it maximizes wall disturbance. Everyone has these barriers around them, and it's extremely easy to ignore them. However, you may not anticipate the unexpected impact of witnessing theatre or poetry performed in a public setting. It may be more effective at penetrating people's barriers (McGhale, 2004).

Batra (2010) asserts that street theatre retains its significance even after the lifting of repression. This is true, even though it often originated as a necessity for rebellion against oppressive political circumstances and to escape tyranny. These include Jana Natya Manch in India and Ajoka in Pakistan. Even when the domestic political situation improved, their street theatre drew spectators and maintained the same power. Batra said that street theatre in Asia is a kind of "social theatre" that primarily generates awareness and debate for social transformation and universal education, citing the magazine Theatre and Drama Review.

"Working class, feminist-oriented, and university-affiliated theatre groups operating in urban metropolitan locations in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and other parts of South Asia are among the contributors' definitions of social theatre, but they are not the only ones" (Batra, 2010).

Emergence of Indian Street Theatre

In order to bring theatre closer to the general public, some well-known theatre directors and aficionados started thinking outside of the box throughout the 1940s. They travelled to the outlying areas to provide performances away from the limelight. Leading figures in the project were theatre professionals like Bansi Kaul, M.K. Raina, and Prasanna (Rubin, Pong, Chaturvedi, Majumdar, Tanokura, & Brisbane, 1998). Street theatre, in contrast to traditional theatre, arose with a distinct aesthetic and became an instrument of social change. It was written by and for the regular people. The street theatre depicted the political unrest and the state of the economy in pre-independence India. Indian street theatre emerged as a distinctive art form and quickly gained popularity as a means of public communication. Street theatre evolved from the abundance of entertainment for the affluent to discuss pressing social, political, cultural, and economic concerns without the need for an orchestra or large stage. Street theatre gained popularity as a quick and personal form of theatrical expression after independence. India's street theatre movement was born out of a clear socio-political goal and fiercely focused on development and emancipation. Among the well-known filmmakers who contributed to it was Utpal Dutt.

Since its start and early years of growth, street theatre has drawn sizable crowds of people since the shows told their tales in their own tongue and didn't collect admission fees. "Chargesheet," one of the first street theatre plays, was presented for an audience of around a thousand labourers on Calcutta's streets and then travelled to several locations in West Bengal (Anonymous, 2012). The rise in political turmoil throughout the volatile 1970s had an impact on street theatre as well. Artist activists staged many of these shows in India's streets. One of these significant figures from the era, Badal Sircar, abandoned traditional theatre in favour of outdoor shows as a means of reaching out to his audience directly and intensely. The movement gained momentum primarily due to the increasing prominence of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Jana Natya Manch (JANAM), two organisations that used street theatre as a means of message dissemination. Street theatre spread across the country as plays evolved into a popular medium of communication. Groups calling for socio-political reform, such as Nishant from Delhi, Lok Mela Manch, and Samvedan from Gujarat, among others, used the media.

Jana Natya Mancha

When delving further into the history of street theatre in India, it is impossible to overlook the form's experimentation with communism. A portion of folk theatre gave way to street plays during the country's Marxist movement, which had its start in the 1930s and was primarily intended to "raise consciousness and mobilise communities" (Downing, 2011). As a consequence, the Communist Party of India's Indian People's Theatre Association was established in 1942. Despite being run as an indoor theatre at first, IPTA began staging plays outside when the CPI and the organisation were outlawed by the government that was in power at the time. According to renowned actor and theatre personality Utpal Dutt, India's experimentation with street theatre began in 1951 when the group performed a play called "Chargesheet", directed by Panu Pal, about communist leaders imprisoned without trial (Downing, 2011). The street theatre movement was quiet during the Emergency, but it sprang back up again in the 1980s with the emergence of many new organisations, most notably Jana Natya Manch, or JANAM. Born "out of the founder members' involvement with the Students Federation of India, the student wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), as well as from an attempt to revive the Indian People's Theatre Association in Delhi," JANAM was first a theatre group based in Delhi that formed in 1973 (Bhatia, 2012). Beginning with Mrityur Atit, their inaugural production, which was presented in Bengal during the Durga Puja season, JANAM gained widespread recognition in both the general public and the academic community. They were credited with invigorating the IPTA-initiated trend towards toned-down theatre as well as creating plays that were accessible to the working class and did not have to be performed within city walls. The purpose of this page is to provide an overview of JANAM's journey and its role in the Indian street theatre movement.

The Period of Emergence

Street theatre originated in Russia and then extended to the USA, Cuba, Sweden, Spain, Africa, and all of Latin America. Similarly, political unrest at home gave rise to street theatre in India. The initial purpose of IPTA was to garner public support for the anti-colonial movement, which, upon independence, shifted its focus to bringing about social and economic change for the people of the new India. Despite having its beginnings as a proscenium theatre, JANAM quickly gained recognition for its quick street skits with improvised staging and poignant dialogue. Millions of people have seen their plays since they debuted, in over 140 cities, towns, and suburban regions (Dutta, 2011). Even though the government was furious with them for their anti-establishment views, particularly during the Emergency, JANAM managed to weather the storm largely because of the support their plays and protest songs garnered from their audiences. The group started composing the tales themselves and performing small street plays at this time, which subsequently proved vital to their public image due to the government's crackdown on huge gatherings for theatrical productions (Bhatia, 2012). Without any kind of financial support, the company was founded by a group of extreme amateur communist theatre enthusiasts who shared a same worldview. Instead of taking financial aid from businesses, the government, or non-governmental organisations, JANAM established a strategy to solicit contributions from its audiences after each performance in order to exist. They have written plays on a variety of topics, including globalisation, trade union rights, women's rights, education, communism, price increases, unemployment, and the conditions of labourers. Aartanaad, Rahul Boxer, Nahin Qabul, Voh Bol Uthi, Hatyare, Samrath, Aurat, Raja ka Baja, Apaharan Bhaichare Ka, Halla Bol, Mat BantolInsaan Ko, Sangharsh Kareng Jitenge, Andhera Aaftaab Mangega, and Jinhe Yakeen Nahin Tha are a few of the most well-known plays that JANAM has produced (Janam, 2011).

The Theatre of Protest and Political Alliance

Street theatre requires deeply ingrained ideologies by definition. Additionally, it must be left-wing politically. (Deshpande, (2007). First and foremost, street theatre was always a political branch of the communist party. The fundamental goals of street theatre, or more specifically JANAM, were to uplift the working class, bring them into the mainstream of democracy, and challenge the status quo. But in the short years of its existence, what began as a political endeavour permeated theatrical aesthetics, became well-liked by the general public, and drew the attention of social welfare and educational institutions. As a consequence, it sometimes received backing from right-wing political groups as well. That did not, however, significantly persuade the organisation to abandon its philosophy. Leading JANAM members, like Habib Tanvir, are more eager to support street plays than elaborate proscenium theatre productions because they feel that the latter don't adhere to the ideals that shaped their theatrical journey. Tanvir categorically believed that street theatre was a more potent form than proscenium plays, in contrast to Hashmi, who insisted on using both types of theatrical presentations. He claims that street theatres are not only simpler to work on because of the low cost of production, but they also last longer than other forms because of the support from the general population. The advantages of these shows include the close closeness of the players to the public and the informal format of the plays. However, since proscenium theatres are far more costly, they rely mostly on sponsorships and government funding. These theatres cater more to a certain demographic, namely theatre fans, rather than the working class and downtrodden, who, in Tanvir's words, "need theatre the most, but can't afford it." (Deshpande, (2007)

JANAM was created as a result of the pressure communist authorities put on them to bring about socio-political change. As a result, even while their plays provided a lot of information for the general public in urban and impoverished regions, the main focus has always been politics. Beginning as an anti-establishment instrument, JANAM sought to enable its people to take the lead in social reform via participatory theatre that echoed their voices. This marked the beginning of street theatre in India.

Thus, street theatre is a kind of protest theatre that is inherently leftist. It must always be hostile to the establishment. The majority of the establishment in our nation is right-wing, representing a capitalist system. We have always got it right from the beginning, to varied degrees. Thus, in terms of government, right-wing forces rule the nation. Since these forces control the majority of the nation's wealth and have financial power of their own, you cannot engage in protest theatre, which is what street theatre is all about. (Deshpande, 2007).

Nevertheless, the development of JANAM has also been a little slow in recent years due to the "Left's lack of political vibrancy." Arjun Ghosh claims that in order for the group to play in various places, Left-wing groups must endorse them. The party's ability to stage a performance is limited if they have

little or no presence in the area. A number of attempts to establish new theatre troupes have failed as a result of the party's collapsing standing, and the political art form is severely lacking in resources. Ghosh went on to say that JANAM's ability to endure for such a long time without interference from businesses or the government was largely down to the communist party's backing, and that the party's partnership provided them with the majority of their audience base (Gupta, 2012).

Conclusion

The goal of JANAM's art movement is to bring about a social change in the lives of the oppressed, or the common mass, even if the movement's and its journey's core has always been left-centric. It is essential to integrate the "progressive community development" approach with "popular education" in order to achieve it. Street plays, as a popular theatre genre, seek to provide an interactive experience that is sensitive to the "cultural forms" of the intended audience. Street plays are where players connect their professional and creative interests with their political and social convictions, as opposed to proscenium theatre. However, the theatrical process should be combined with long-term developmental planning in order to fully realise its potential and have an influence on society. In order to do this, street theatre has to be aware of its local community, recognise pressing concerns, blend entertainment with community expression, encourage audience engagement, and make a call to action.

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