

## Theater of Deschooling: Safdar Hashmi's Conscientization Theater

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*Abstract: Safdar Hashmi's oppositional theater is aimed at dismantling the caste, class, and gender-ridden establishment. It explores a strategic way for the establishment of a society that is free of any biases. In this struggle, Hashmi, as a theater activist with a political purpose, uses theater as his weapon. A communist with an aesthetic bent of mind and an artist who took his theater to the masses, Safdar was the co-founder of the militant political theater of protest, Jana Natya Manch. His commitment to giving vent to the aspirations of the toiling masses gave his performance and writing a sense of urgency and the need to act purposefully. He proceeded with this fight for justice against exploitations and discriminations from a left leaning point of view. This paper explores Safdar Hashmi's use of theater to mobilize the public conscience.*

*Art is always anti-establishment. Art flourishes in the loopholes of the best society. All meaningful theater then is always on the left . . . If, for instance, a regime of the left-wing gets established, then art and literature must move further left of the left. (Tanvir, "Art")*

Even though all forms of art, knowingly or unknowingly, engage in proliferation of some ideologies, theater as a distinct form of art is more overtly preoccupied in such a political mission. The very attempt to dramatize something stems from the political urge to make some individual/collective perspectives social. Therefore, dramatization becomes an ideological journey from the realm of the private to the public sphere. The cultural practice of theater demands strong collectivism among its various departments to ensure its desired social consumption. It takes its origin from the communal life and ultimately infiltrates back into the collective psyche of the community. The dissociation between the social and the artistic concerns in this era of technologically manufactured cultural indices explains well the contemporary detachment of the masses from the theater. Among all forms of art, drama is the most sensitive index of any commune, despite temporal, spatial, and ideological distinctions. Being a live art, its impact would be deep and immeasurable to a certain extent, as it encodes the aspirations and objectives of divergent congregations based on various identity markers like gender, racial, class, caste, nationality so on and so forth.

Genealogically, agitprop theater exhibits an umbilical relationship with class identity. Therefore, it has to be, and it *is*, blatantly partisan towards class identity. This open affiliation of agitprop with a peculiar social grouping is its strength as well as its perceived weakness. Rather than 'enacting,' agitprop theater 'speaks out' the concerns and preoccupations of the working class, thereby providing an opportunity to comprehend the mindscape of the proletariat. Engrossed in the arguments of globalized capitalism, now it has become an intellectual fetish among the metropolitan

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intelligentsia to denounce agitprop theater as grossly biased. However, it is this biological bias that empowers agitprop performances to provoke the establishment and illuminate the discontented lot.

Highly charged class consciousness could be the prime indicator of any true agitprop performance. The sense of continuous exposure to exploitation and injustice converts these performances into something extremely inflammable. Unlike the hidden nature of capitalist ideological hegemony which operates in every conceivable sphere, agitprop ideology is plain and direct – it often proclaims openly that there is blood in the street. Most often agitprop format is a property-less theater, but it is a perspective-rich one. Rather than a mere performance, agitprop is more of a political pronouncement where the dramatic conclusion invariably invites vigorous political activism from the spectators.

Perhaps, theater could be a potent pedagogical tool which could be made use of in stirring up passion and morale of all sorts. Watching live plays and responding to the moral issues explored through character conflicts offers an alternative teaching and learning strategy by which to develop students' moral consciousness about the intricate contextual variables that often determine moral response not only on the stage, but often in real life (Basourakos 277). Theater experience is directly carried over to real life situations. Like in every aspect of our communal life, in theater too, apolitical claims in critical engagements are nothing but a conning concealment of the submission to the hegemonic ideology of the establishment. In the same way, being a dissent in a society means becoming a megaphone of the marginalized voices. Taking an oppositional posture is a way of questioning the dominant ideology of the time. Oppositional drama rigorously questions the exploitative class, caste, gender, race dynamics, which are taken for granted as a natural phenomenon.

Safdar Hashmi's oppositional theater aimed at dismantling the caste, class, and gender-ridden establishment, thereby exploring a way for the establishment of a society that is free of any biases. In this struggle, Hashmi, as a theater activist with a political purpose, uses theater as his weapon. A communist with an aesthetic bent of mind and an artist who took his theater to the masses, a 19-year-old Safdar co-founded the Jana Natya Manch, a militant political theater of protest, in 1973. According to Gopalakrishnan, "Through its rousing, visionary street plays, the group sought to address issues of class and gender and religious sectarianism. Against the bourgeois conception of art as an individualist aesthetic pursuit, he pitted his version of the people's collectivist view of art" (46). His commitment to giving vent to the aspirations of the toiling masses gave his performance and writing a sense of urgency and the need to act purposefully. He proceeded with this fight for justice against exploitations and discriminations from a left leaning point of view.

Safdar did not shy away from the fact that he was a partisan both in politics and in his artistic activism. His partnership did not in any way diminish the aesthetic excellence of his performance. "As in the case of Brecht, it is this commitment to revolutionary politics that gave the unequalled excellence of his performance its shining halo," says Pillai (31). It is this unwavering political commitment and determination, directly expressed through his plays that brought Safdar's early martyrdom at a young age of 34. He was fatally assaulted on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1989, at Jhandapur, in the industrial town of Shahibabad, 15 kilometres away from Delhi, while performing the street play *Hallabol* (Attack) in support of the striking factory workers.

Safdar, along with his actor-activist wife Moloyoshree, was a founder member of *Janam* (Jan Natya Manch) and the main driving force behind it. He was a brilliant theater theoretician and a practitioner of political theater, especially street theater. As a versatile personality, he was an actor, playwright, political activist, theater director, lyricist and an organizer. The inseparability of his artistic creativity and political ideology made his name synonymous with the progressive cultural movement in India and with street theater (Ganguly i). Hashmi started his artistic career proscenium theater with plays like, *Bharat Bhagya Vidhata* (The Makers of India's Fortune) in 1973, *Bakri* (Goat) in 1974, and *Ab Raja Ki Bari Hai* (Now It's the King's Turn) in 1978.

For Safdar Hashmi, theater was one of the many means of political struggle with the ultimate aim of liberating the down trodden from economic exploitation and caste class discrimination. In this struggle against exploitation and discrimination, he never tried to alienate the proscenium theater from the street theater. Instead he viewed both as powerful weapons, even though he largely practiced the street theater. As Tanvir puts it, "Safdar deliberately and assiduously practiced both the so called proscenium theater and the street theater and believed that they mutually supported each other" (2001: 3). In his attempt to combine both the theatrical forms, he contributed greatly to the growth of street theater movement in India as well as to the growth of a democratic culture. Safdar believed that whatever be the form, theater ultimately belonged to the people. According to him it is not the form but the content of theatrical performance that decides its ideological or political partisanship. Rejecting the misconception that street theater is basically a rebellion against the prosecution theater, Safdar had clarified:

In our view it is absurd to speak of a contradiction between proscenium and street theaters. Both belong equally to the people. Yes, there is a contradiction between the proscenium theater which has been appropriated by the escapists, the naturalists and the revivalists and the street theater which stands with the people. Just there is a contradiction between reactionary proscenium theater and progressive proscenium theater, or between democratic street theater and reformist and *sarkari* [governmental] street theater. (1989: 13-14)

According to Safdar whether drama is performed in squares or in rectangular or circular spaces, as long as it expresses the sentiments of the oppressed people, it is people's theater, whatever be the form. He believed that the themes of plays have to keep in close touch with popular mass movements, have to interrogate anti-people political policies of the establishment, they have to defend the right to protest, and should register the dissenting voices. But due to its innate weaknesses such as huge financial investment, comparative immobility and incapability to immediately respond to topical issues, the proscenium theatrical productions become unapproachable by the masses.

The amazing spontaneity of theatrical reaction to a topical event ensures street theater an emotional proximity with the people as the themes are related to their everyday lives. To achieve people's interest, Safdar says, street plays have to be bold, and direct. This aspect of urgency in execution, spatial mobility and monetary viability are both the limitation as well as the advantage of street theater. Street theater activists cannot afford a big time gap for a conceptualization of the topical event, and confine

their performance to specialized fully equipped auditoria or afford huge monetary investment. But the burning topical issues and people's discomfort at the misdeeds of the rulers necessitate the existence of street theater. In order to keep it alive and involved in the day to day people's movement it cannot afford to wait for relevant scripts to be written by professional and celebrated dramatists. Involvement of culture with peoples movements requires immediate analysis of the current political and socio-economic developments and preparing a new play on that within a day or two, if not in a couple of hours. This leaves no scope for professionals and celebrities to come into the picture (Hashmi 1989: 17).

The promptness of theatrical action and topicality of themes has brought into criticism that street theater is aesthetically inferior as well as thematically shallow. It is argued that the spontaneous theatrical intervention does not leave any scope for a deeper penetration of the issues and the themes handled therewith. But a reality check of this argument reveals that it sprang from a theatrical method of street theater, namely, the simplification of the plot. The intended audience in street theater is the general public who, largely, would be semi-literate or illiterate. This fact necessitates the presentations of the issues in a general comprehensive way without attempting complicated abstraction.

Safdar Hashmi, who was steeped in political awareness and deeply in love with theater, identified that the street theater is the most suitable form for his political expression (Tanvir 2001: 3). He discards the appropriation attempts of street theater by the developmental agencies and the political right wing. He is of the opinion that because of its inherent leftist political leanings, the appropriation exercises would be futile. Hashmi believed that by its very definition street theater has to be ideologically deep rooted and politically leftwing. Speaking on the politics of Safdar Hashmi's theater, the eminent theater director Habib Tanvir further explains:

Street theater is a theater of protest, which must always be on the left. It has to be always anti-establishment. All meaningful theater is always on the left. Why theater alone? All activities in art and literature have to be antiestablishment to gain contemporary relevance. If, for instance, a regime of the left wing gets established, then art and literature must move further left of the left. It must serve as a gadfly to society, always stimulating progress . . . So theater by birth a leftist movement can only align itself with the proscenium theater of the left, to the exclusion of the bourgeoisie theater. (2001: 2)

Safdar Hashmi's committed theater had no time for mere entertainment. It had to present aspects of reality imbued with humanistic values and to deal with disturbing or inconvenient socio-political questions. So Safdar took theater to the people, with the vision of a creative genius, endowed with the zeal, energy and determination of a farsighted organizer and theater visionary. His concept of theater had "a strange blend of Marxian and Gandhian Philosophies" (Tanvir, 2001: 3). He "was the embodiment of those communist values which shaped his craft – that if cultural activist and street theater artist"(Prashad). In his politics of liberation of the mass form exploitation he embraced Marxian ideology and in his deep humane concern he resembled the Gandhian thought.

Without any claims of political mentality, Safdar took his theater to the venues of trade union strikes, students' protest demonstrations and other places of mass

mobilizations. His political aim was to inform, educate and to help the mobilization the common man towards democratic movements. In other words, he told them the need for urgent political action and showed them the platforms of pro-people political organizations. Student convention against communism, authoritarianism and unemployment; a demonstration against cutting down labor ratio, a propaganda meeting for some working class rally; strikes and lockouts; literary seminars or even the victory celebrations of trade unions would be the right opportunity for a performance by *Janam* [Jana Natya Manch] (Hashmi, 1989: 169). With great artistic skill, Safdar Hashmi ensured that his plays left space for entertainment, but not at the risk of missing the sharpness of their political message.

Through the subversive presentation of reality, often going for exaggerations Safdar made people laugh throughout his plays. He believed that laughter is a weapon and laughing at political heavy weights becomes a political weapon. Rather than taking the edge off this political message, laughter made it more politically fatal. On the use of laughter as a political weapon in his plays Hashmi explained that "It helps to reinforce the people's revolution against the state structures and its upholders. Many people think that laughter is an indication of casual or non-serious involvement in the play. But I think that laughter is a weapon in the hands of the people with which they destroy an image which is hatred" (1989: 169).

On the aesthetics and aim of political street theater Safdar Hashmi had a clear perception in contrast with the approach prevalent among other street theater activists. Baring some exceptions, the general assumption on street theater was that if one could get the political message across to the audience, it was sufficient. Performance skills and other aesthetic enhancements were looked upon as unnecessary embellishments. Safdar resisted this approach and emphasized the need to have theatrical abilities in every departments of political street theater. He saw street theater as a significant theatrical form and strove to explore its dimensions and reach. This was typical of his attitude to whatever he took up. He was never superficial (Qamar Hashmi 269). In his excessively consistent efforts to develop a peculiar aesthetics for street theater, to give the forms its own individual competency, he never compromised on the subject of content.

For Safdar, providing some spectacular theatrical images alone would not serve the purpose. His fundamental disagreement with Badal Sircar's theater is related to this subject of form and content. Bluntly expressing his non-appreciation of Badal Sircar's excessive obsession with form, which sacrificed the content, Safdar opined that "[t]hey have made a kind of merit out of doing theater only with one's body as sole source. It is a mere display of technique. It's a spectacle and nothing more" (1989: 145).

Augusto Boal, the Brazilian theater activist, who conceptualized the "Theater of the oppressed" or "Forum Theater," gave the theater community the unique technique of drawing theater from the arena to the middle of the audience. His unique experimentation in involving the audience in the play was to explore various options for the issues raised through the performance. He transformed theater into a discussion forum converting the passive spectators into an aggressive 'spect-actors' who would actively watch the performance and 'unknowingly' 'act' in the performance by their critical interventions amidst the performance. His aim was to establish the consistent practice of dialogue between the rulers and the ruled. For him, the absence of dialogue itself is a form of oppression, and domination. He says that:

The idea of the Oppressed for me was exactly that moment when dialogue becomes a monologue. In dialogue two people talk. One talks, the other listens; then the other talks and the first listens. It is the same in all relations-between men and women, race and race, country and country. The ideal is dialogue. But in too many cases very soon one part begins to monologue and the other part is reduced to listener-only. One commands, the other obeys. (Boal in Schechner et al 90)

One of the major criticisms against Safdar Hashmi's street theater was its inability to involve the actors in the performance. Even though Safdar depicted the existential grievances of the working class, it is a fact that his audience remained outsiders around the performance circle, passionately watching and comprehending the dramatization of their real life problems. But Safdar had his own view on this. He was not for the emotional manipulation of the audience. Rather he believed that, during the performance a critical relation has to be established between the audience and actors. This critical relationship has to come from the rational understanding of the issues raised through theater, not through any emotional manipulations. For his audience he presented a problem and depicted it analytically, leaving them to react to the problems critically. For him theater was not for the cathartic effect, but for the analysis of the political issues from the perspective of the exploited. On the relation between audience and theater he was of the opinion that,

I am temperamentally opposed to any kind of theater, cinema or act that manipulates the consciousness of the people or which gives them an experience by proxy. It is like taking someone by his collar and shaking him until he accepts your viewpoint. In that sense I'm more a Brechtian. I would rather appeal to the people with reasonable arguments and make them reflect about what is going on. (1989: 147)

From these arguments it has to be presumed that he preferred presentation rather than didacticism in his theater. But definitely his theater was a conscientization effort, although not presented by any melodramatic or sensationalizing methods. In this aspect he always observed a high sense of propriety in achieving his political aims by rational arguments. At the same time he was always sensitive to the need for revolutionary political plays to attract audience by matching the caliber to other plays, in terms of theater craft, not by using frequent sensational methods. He believed that only then would revolutionary forms acquire the position and influence of art forms and sentimentalism and sentimentalism would turn theater into a shallow pool where the absence of thematic abyss would be conspicuous.

The tremendous revolutionary influence of Pablo Neruda and Bertolt Brecht was, in Safdar's view, based on their impeccable credentials as practitioners of their art with emotional and logical propriety (Qamar 257). Safdar assiduously observed this property of techniques in his plays. Even though he widely used music, songs, and linguistic manipulations of words in his plays, all those were done with a definite aim in mind, not just to spice up his performance. On the methodological peculiarities of *Janam's* street plays, Habib Tanvir comments:

*Janam's* creations were entirely dictated by the times, the late seventies. They were out to catch a fleeting crowd in the street. They would attract them by their drum or shouting in chorus above the street noise repeating and echoing single syllable words,

to draw their attention to the story about to begin. They developed the choreograph of the arena theater on their own without the benefits of arena theater examples, out of sheer necessity to be seen clearly by the audience sitting all round them. They used music, song and poetry not only for providing entertainment but also for furthering their theme in poetic form and riveting the onlookers. (5)

With his deep rooted ideological stability and inexhaustible physical energy Safdar undertook the socio-cultural mission of liberating the masses from ignorance and exploitation. This kind of commitment to the overall development of the working class prompted him to explore the possibility of achieving a *prolitcult* (proletarian culture) in our society. Ashok Mitra observed that,

The *prolitcult* Hashmi had in mind must render itself into agitprop. The entertainers of the mass culture assembled were committed to entertain but themselves. But as they entertain themselves, they also create further awareness about the class situation. Mass theater is a pulsating experience, but let there be no mistaking, it is a preparation for the inevitable class war. (19)

Ashok Mitra elaborates that the culture Safdar committed to propagate seeks to obliterate the distinctions between the leader and the led. Such is the purport of mass theater; the individual recedes into the background and the collective entity, constitutes the mass advances into the limelight. The mass culture Safdar was committed to is, of course, rooted in the assumption that activism today is creation tomorrow. Hashmi's total dedication to the cause of the working class meant that he had to endeavor to declass himself.

Safdar's aim was to organize a *mohalla* (street) based cultural uprising targeted to lift the consciousness of the exploited multitude through participatory programs. The raising of social awareness was to be harnessed to create the milieu for participatory entertainment, while the later was to be honed as weapons for class battle (Mitra 20). With this larger aim of creating a *prolitcult* Safdar built his dramatic structure with the basic ingredients of people's problems. In this process of mobilizing the culture of the masses in the cause of the masses, Safdar held the view that a neutral political positioning is out of the question. One has got to be thoroughly partisan in identifying the class enemy. It is this effort to mobilize society's down trodden through the modality of mass theater that brought him a martyr's death from the class enemy.

Safdar never tried to build up an individual aura around himself. This belief in the *prolitcult* and active participation in mass political movements taught him not to seek any individualistic gains. He was for a work style of collaboration and collectivism. Strictly speaking most of the plays now considered to be written by Safdar Hashmi are collaborative creations. But his contribution to these collaborations would be the greatest. As Tanvir comments, "Far from asserting his individuality, he tried to negate it completely while immersing himself in the pleasure of creating a good play" (qtd. in Qamar 253). On this culture of collaboration and collectivism in Janam, Safdar Hashmi's wife and co-actor Moloyoshree Hashmi recalled. "In our group even direction became a collective activity. From the creation of script for its performance, there was a feeling of shared responsibility and effort. Everyone was involved, although Safdar's creativity was of a high order and formed the basis on which our activity progressed at such a furious pace" (qtd. in Qamar 247).

Hashmi's political affiliation and ideological commitment were never a hindrance in his path of achieving artistic excellence while sticking to definite political aims. According to his mother, Qamar Hashmi (261), there were two dominant strands in his life – the commitment to the street theater movement, and the deepening relationship with the party. These preoccupations were gradually exhibiting not only their influence in fashioning Safdar's personality and his life, but also the significant impact of Safdar's contribution to the history and development of street theater movement. Political theater needs to analyze the reality to reveal the cause of the oppressive conditions – namely the oppressor. It has to counter the hegemonic myths of an essential and unchangeable reality and enable the spectators to dream of a different world beyond oppression. Finally, it needs to use the play to encourage the spectators to organize themselves to make the change possible (Ghosh 81). The activist in Hashmi discarded the 'traditionalization' or 'Indianization' of theater by adapting forms from folk theater traditions alone. He believed that this mere appropriation of folk theater forms, folk music, the *Ramlila* or *Raslila*, or the *Nautangi* theatrical forms alone would not help the contemporary Indian theater to achieve the so called 'Indianness.' For Safdar Hashmi acquiring Indianness lies only in the theater's deep concern with the contemporary lives of the people of India.

Studying the activist theaters of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Safdar Hashmi, Lopamudra Basu observed that, for Safdar theater was the primary terrain of artistic and activist expression who believed that the Indian mainstream theater was out of touch with the crucial issues confronting the masses. It was with a view towards expanding the range of his audience that he decided to take his plays to the streets of working class neighborhoods. Safdar took up cudgels on behalf of the marginalized sections of Indian society and the disposed, using his pen to write stirring prose that immediately made an impact on current consciousness. His success was due to his adaptation of the traditional sensibilities and folk songs, while introducing modern ideas and revolutionary thoughts that challenged the status quo. Basu further explains:

In examining Ngugi's and Safdar's careers in activist theater, it is interesting to note that both saw the similarities between present attempts at state censorship and colonial models ... In terms of their artistic choices, both playwrights infused their performances with songs, the diverse musical sources often representing a cultural syncretism defying religious and ethnic absolutisms. For both Ngugi and Hashmi, the end of their active involvement in theater marked a spatial reconfiguration of their original theater projects.

The rampant stark poverty; glaring social and economic disparities; the bureaucratic corruption; the feudal and industrial exploitation; the systematic communization of civil life, prevailing imperialistic attitude; dehumanizing working conditions in factories and fields etc. are the contemporary realities of India as far as Safdar was concerned. He believed that brushing all these social realities under concept and going for the glorification of the ancient myths and folk culture would not constitute Indianness. Mere adaptation of traditional devices, masks, songs and cultural rituals in theater would not make the theater Indian (1989: 90-91). True Indianness in theater can be achieved only when we take up the developmental and social issues for scrutiny, examination and analysis. The superficial ornaments could not be accepted for the nationalistic spirit in theater. Moreover, Safdar reiterated that, there is a lurking

danger in blind adaptation of traditional folk forms and rites in contemporary theater. This may prove to be disastrous rather than reformist. He elaborated on the risk of blind adaptation of traditional forms in contemporary theater as: "if you work with the traditional form along comes the traditional content also with superstition, backwardness, obscurantism and the promotion of feudal structures and sometimes, pre-feudal formations. You cannot perform a surgical operation on a traditional form and take out the content because the two are very much intermingled" (1989: 140).

Safdar Hashmi believed that in the attempt at adapting traditional theatrical forms in the contemporary theater "the Indian main stream theater was out of touch with the issues confronting the masses. It was with this view towards expanding the range of his audience, he took his plays to the streets of working class neighbourhoods" (Basu). Theatrical forms are evolved out of historical necessities. When the society moves on, the issues of theatrical performance would go on changing. The new content in a particular historical era may require a new form for artistic expression. New thematic concerns need not necessarily fit into an old form. So largely, Safdar believed that, it is the content that decides the form, not the other way around. He believed that the implements and devices of artistic expression are created by the dramatists' creative views of life, not the other way around. That was why he openly opined that, "the theater did not begin with the proscenium nor has its evolution reached the final stage with it" (1989: 15). This concept was affirmed by Habib Tanvir when he said that "Forms are often demanded by their times. Street theater form could not possibly have evolved during the forties, for the time demanded quite some other approaches to political campaign." (2001: 5)

*Janam's* plays were always based on burning topical issues. In 1978 there was a Hindu – Muslim riot in Aligarh. *Janam* prepared a play based on the report of an enquiry team that visited Aligarh soon after the riots. It was found by the fact-finding team that the reason behind the fresh rounds of riots had nothing to do with religions. It was instigated by the commercial interests of lock making factory owners. They wanted to create a schism between the Hindus and Muslims who were jointly involved in the traditional domestic lock making industry. *Janam* took the play *Killers* (1975) to Aligarh and showed the people the real reason for the riots. Another spontaneous theatrical intervention of *Janam* was seen in 1979 when the Delhi Transport Corporation doubled its fares conveniently just before three consecutive public holidays. Within hours, *Janam* went to the streets of Delhi with the play *DTC's Fraudulence* forcing the authorities to slash down the hiked fares to the minimum. *Aurat* (Woman) in 1979; *Teen Crore* (30 Million) on unemployment; *Price Hike* (1980) on inflation; and *Wake up! O, Brave* (1984) on the anti-Sikh pogrom were the other popular plays of *Janam*.

No theatrical or artistic form was taboo for him. The only contradiction he recognized and he did -not wish to resolve was between 'political' and non-political theater. He stood for political theater. All theater is communication. In the times in which we live the only meaningful communication is, to borrow Safdar's words from an article in *The Economic Times* in April 1986, that which "brings people closer to fighting organisations." Whatever helps that communication is valuable. That is why the debates on the 'art' of street-theater must have appeared to him an exercise in futility. If a given proscenium production helped that communication he would do that. If a street-play helped it, he would resort to it (Deshpande 4).

Rendering the intricacies of the political through the theatrical was the most conspicuous specificity of artistic-activism by Safdar Hashmi and *Janam* in post-independent India. In this process, his theater turned the public sphere of street as a potential pedagogical space for performing 'theater of the oppressed' for conscientization of the masses. Safdar Hashmi's oppositional theater was intended at dismantling the caste, class, and gender-ridden establishment, thereby exploring a way for the institutionalization of a society that is free of maximum prejudices and parochial interests. In this struggle, he wielded theater as his weapon. Safdar was a theater activist with a political purpose, a Marxist with an aesthetic bend of mind, an artist who took his theater to the street and an educator of the masses. Safdar held the ideological position that "[t]he belief in art for art's sake arises whenever the artists and people keenly interested in art are out of harmony with their social environment"(Plekhanov 21). His commitment for giving vent to the aspirations of the toiling masses gave his performance and writing a sense of urgency, a distinct pedagogical purpose and a focus to act purposefully. He understood that street-theater is primarily a form of politics. What is primarily political need not, however, be artless. Safdar and his JNM, through their praxis, resolved the contradiction between political-form and art-form (Deshpande 4). Whatever be the theatrical form, Safdar Hashmi believed that the themes of plays have to keep a close touch with popular mass movements; they have to interrogate anti-people political policies of the establishment, they have to defend the right to protest, and they should register the dissenting voices in the face of authorities. The thematic concerns and methodological devices that went into execution in the plays of Safdar are part of his attempts at politically educating the masses through the theater of the masses, i.e., political street theater.

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