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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Resistance in the Work of Safdar Hashmi and Jan Natya Manch**Dr. Ajay Kumar Yadav**

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Abstract

The topic of resistance in the work of Safdar Hashmi and the street theater ensemble Jan Natya Manch (Janam) is examined in this article. Safdar Hashmi, a trailblazer in political theater, used street plays, or nukkad natak, as a platform to protest against governmental tyranny, capitalism, communalism, and structural inequities. His view that art must inspire collective action and serve the people was informed by his intellectual devotion to Marxism. Plays by Janam, such as *Halla Bol!* and *Machine*, were effective political protest tools that reached Indian laborers, slum dwellers, students, and the general public. The notion that theater is a tool for resistance was furthered by Janam's continuous public performances after Hashmi's 1989 murder during a performance. In addition to engaging audiences, their collaborative, minimalist performances liberate public discourse from institutional and elite control. This article highlights the lasting significance of art as a means of protest and a voice for the oppressed, arguing that Janam's unwavering struggle against injustice carries on Safdar Hashmi's legacy.

Keywords: Safdar Hashmi, Jan Natya Manch, Street Theatre, Political Resistance, Nukkad Natak, Protest Art

Introduction

For a long time, art has been a potent tool for resistance, particularly when the voices of the underprivileged are not heard by mainstream institutions. Safdar Hashmi, a writer, theater activist, and the creator of the groundbreaking street theater troupe Jan Natya Manch (Janam), was one of the most significant individuals in India to utilize art as a tool for political

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engagement. Janam, which came into being at a period of severe political unrest, reinterpreted theater as a medium for raising public awareness and inspiring group mobilization. Hashmi and his colleagues performed their plays for the general public on factory floors, in town squares, and on street corners instead than for a select audience in enclosed auditoriums.

Safdar Hashmi's dedication to utilizing performance as a vehicle to reveal economic exploitation, social injustice, and authoritarianism was fueled by his conviction that "theatre is a weapon." His murder in 1989 while performing Halla Bol! serves as a sobering reminder of the dangers that confront anybody who dared to use art to subvert authority. However, Janam persisted and even strengthened its political voice, thus his passing did not signal the end of cultural resistance but rather its resurrection. This essay examines the ways in which Hashmi and Janam have continuously used street theater as a form of resistance, which is still very much relevant in the sociopolitical climate of today.

The Role of Street Theatre in Political Resistance

One of the most effective and widely accessible forms of political opposition has always been street theater, or nukkad natak as it is called in India. It is unvarnished, instantaneous, and intended to engage the audience directly rather than via official channels like the state-sponsored theater, the movie theater, or the media. Street theater is becoming more than just a cultural art form in India's geopolitical environment; it is a political instrument that calls for collective action, exposes inequalities, and challenges established power structures. Safdar Hashmi is one of its most famous practitioners; his groundbreaking ensemble Jan Natya Manch (Janam) turned the art form into a platform for ideological conflict and public mobilization.

Fundamentally, street theater is derived from a legacy of interactive performances that aim to raise political awareness in addition to providing entertainment. Street theater differs from traditional stage shows in that it employs portable scripts, few props, audience participation, and open, often tense settings, such as industrial gates, slums, university campuses, markets, and village squares. These locations are essential to the performance's idea and are not just accidental. For collectives like Janam, theater is a confrontation with reality rather than a means of escape.

Safdar Hashmi saw that conventional means of political communication could not successfully reach the public in a nation with high rates of economic inequality and illiteracy. He saw theater as a way to meet people where they were, both intellectually and geographically. Instead of avoiding complexity, his plays presented it in a manner that was understandable, sympathetic, and emotionally stirring. Janam's performances transformed commonplace issues like salaries, corruption, communalism, and sexism into pressing political issues via chants, slogans, humor, and rhythmic conversation.

Hashmi's Marxist beliefs influenced his view of theater as a method of resistance. He actually saw performance as a class act, a cultural art form that must benefit the working class. He was a member of the Marxist Communist Party of India and believed that revolutionary politics and art were inextricably linked. In his view, street theater was an active force rather

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than a passive expression. While Halla Bol! became a resounding cry for mass protest and solidarity among the downtrodden, plays like Machine revealed the dehumanizing impacts of capitalism by depicting workers as gears in a machine. These plays did more than just outline issues; they identified the adversary and proposed resistance as the only solution.

The accessibility of street theater is one of the reasons it continues to pose a challenge to the existing quo. There is no theater to enter, no ticket to purchase, and no censorship board to appease. The audience is incidental, natural, and unexpected rather than predetermined or passive. Because of this, the performance space is naturally democratic and flexible, often obfuscating the distinction between performer and audience. According to Janam's custom, viewers are welcome to react, inquire, applaud, or even participate. Watching itself turns into a political act in which one participates.

Street theater is naturally resistive because to the street's vulnerability as a performance venue. There is always a chance of political retaliation, police meddling, or even physical violence, as was unfortunately the case with Safdar Hashmi, who was beaten and killed after a 1989 performance. However, this risk also gives the performance intensity and believability. In addition to being an act of resistance, Janam's decision to return to the same location one day after Hashmi's passing in order to finish the interrupted play Halla Bol! was a statement that art cannot be suppressed via coercion.

Janam continued the resistance movement even after Hashmi's death. Their plays changed with the times, tackling contemporary oppressions such gender-based violence, neoliberal economic changes, and community politics. However, the group's dedication to posing difficult questions and promoting political discourse was constant. For example, Sundar Behti Nadiyon Ke Teer addressed environmental destruction and displacement brought on by development projects, while plays like Mat Banto Desh Ko ("Don't Divide the Nation") explicitly addressed the rise of communalism and hate speech. The street served as a stage and a protest location for each of these performances.

Street theater's political purpose is closely related to its artistic form. Janam's use of physicality, chorus, repetition, and minimalism is reminiscent of Brechtian strategies that aim to "alienate" the audience from passive consumption and encourage critical thought instead. In Indian nukkad natak, Brecht's concept of "epic theatre" finds a useful ally, since the aim is to expose power structures rather than hide them via illusion. Janam used this strategy to challenge mainstream media and official propaganda narratives by presenting opposing viewpoints based on the experiences of the oppressed.

The form of street theater itself defies commercialization, in addition to its political message. Unlike popular entertainment, it is not readily packed, marketed, or eaten. It cannot be archived in the traditional sense since it is ephemeral, existing only during the performance. It has a subversive force because of its own transience. It is a dynamic conversation that may be tailored to regional concerns, dialects, and situations. In this sense, Janam's street theater approach opposes corporate plunder, cultural homogenization, and political tyranny.

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Furthermore, the individuality that is sometimes praised in classical arts is challenged by the social aspect of street theater. No one actor in Janam is a star. Each performance shares credit and is equally important. The political message of unity and democratic engagement is strengthened by this shared ethos. It reflects the society that Janam aspires to, one in which all voices are valued and power is distributed fairly.

As shown by Safdar Hashmi and Jan Natya Manch, street theater plays a significant and persistent role in political opposition. It challenges viewers to do more than observe; it challenges them to take action at the nexus of art, activism, and daily life. Street theater continues to be a source of radical optimism in a society characterized by rising inequality, authoritarianism, and censorship. Only the bravery to speak and the willingness to listen are needed for this kind of opposition, which doesn't need institutional endorsement, financing, or permission. Janam's legacy serves as a reminder that theater may be one of the most effective tools for bringing about political change when used purposefully.

Safdar Hashmi: The Artist as a Political Agent

Safdar Hashmi was a political activist who purposefully selected art as his battleground; he was more than just a writer or actor. His conception of theater was inextricably linked to his political beliefs, especially his support for Marxism. Hashmi believed that art should educate, agitate, and mobilize people rather than only amuse. He believed that silence in the face of injustice is involvement in and of itself, and that artists have a duty to the society in which they live.

During a time of significant political upheaval in India in 1973, Hashmi co-founded Jan Natya Manch (Janam). The national scene included community conflicts, labor strikes, the Emergency (1975–77), and rising inequality. Hashmi saw theater in this light as a direct involvement in public life. His plays, especially *Machine* and *Halla Bol!*, captured the hardships of urban poor people, slum dwellers, and manufacturing workers. His stories emphasized their agency and capacity for resistance rather than depicting them as victims.

His performances were protests against economic exploitation and the indifference of the state. Hashmi saw the audience as political subjects—people who could identify their oppression and fight against it—rather than as passive observers. He often incorporated political education into an approachable performance style by using sarcasm, repetition, and slogans to emphasize his arguments. His work was both well-liked and risky since it combined philosophy with artistic expression.

Tragically, Hashmi's murder on January 1, 1989, while performing in Sahibabad, serves as a potent reminder of the dangers politically aware musicians endure. However, his vision continued beyond his death. Janam transformed sadness into resistance the very next day when she went back to the same location and finished the halted performance *Halla Bol!*. This performance turned into a pivotal point in Indian political theater history.

Hashmi's life and death serve as a testament to the great potential—and danger—of art when used as a weapon of truth. He reinterpreted the artist's function as an active participant

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in the fight for justice rather than as an impartial spectator. Safdar Hashmi's painting continues to serve as a timeless reminder that art can and should challenge authority.

Jan Natya Manch After Safdar

Safdar Hashmi's untimely death in 1989 had the potential to put an end to a movement. Rather, it sparked a more powerful surge of cultural opposition. Next his murder, Jan Natya Manch (Janam) took a risky move that would later become a landmark in Indian political theater: they went back to the Sahibabad assault site and finished the performance *Halla Bol!* the next day. In addition to honoring Hashmi's legacy, this action made it clear that violence will not silence dissenting voices.

Janam did not back down after Safdar. Instead, it developed into a more vibrant and determined collective that resolutely carried out his agenda. In order to confront modern sociopolitical concerns including growing communalism, caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, labor deregulation, and environmental degradation, the ensemble broadened their repertory. Its plays, like *Sundar Behti Nadiyon Ke Teer*, *Shakti Mein Hai Jaanki* ("The Power Lies with Jaanki"), and *Mat Banto Desh Ko* ("Don't Divide the Nation"), persisted in challenging established power systems and elevating the voices of the disadvantaged.

Janam's approach stuck to its origins by giving performances in public spaces, labor camps, colleges, streets, and villages. In order to reject commercialization and remain in close proximity to the general public, they persisted in avoiding commercial theaters. Their approach kept Hashmi's signature elements: audience participation, rhythmic mantras, group performances, and sparse props. The political message, conveyed with clarity and intensity, was at the heart of each piece.

Crucially, Janam adjusted to an evolving India as well. Janam's work mirrored the concerns of employment instability, farmer suicides, corporate land grabs, and community polarization as neoliberal policies altered the nation's economic and social structure in the 1990s and beyond. To make sure their performances were rooted in actual reality, they worked with student bodies, trade unions, grassroots organizations, and human rights organizations.

Furthermore, democratic principles were still upheld by Janam's internal organization. Instead of being a star-driven ensemble, it functioned as a collective. Each member helped with the directing, performance, and scriptwriting, reinforcing the idea that revolutionary art ought to be owned and produced jointly.

All things considered, Janam after Safdar is still a living example of his legacy—a cultural movement founded on defiance, tenacity, and the unwavering belief that theater has the power to transform the world.

Resistance Beyond Words: Performance as Protest

Under Jan Natya Manch's direction, street theater goes beyond simple narrative and takes on the form of a defiance engraved into public space and an act of civil disobedience. In and of itself, the decision to perform on streets, industrial gates, and slum areas—beyond institutional boundaries—is a radical act. It claims that culture belongs to everyone, in the open,

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and without boundaries, not only in prestigious auditoriums or on commercial circuits. In this sense, Janam's art conducts resistance via its mere existence as well as its substance.

Every Janam performance serves as a physical and intellectual reclamation of space. Putting up a stage on the street becomes a symbolic act of protest at a time when public areas are being monitored, regulated, or commercialized more and more. The notion that protest requires authorization is called into question by the act of simply congregating, speaking, and expressing disapproval in public. Free speech in public areas is what democracy is all about.

The power dynamics of street theater are also altered by the interactions between the actors and the audience. Audiences are active actors rather than passive consumers. They ask questions, interrupt, and sometimes even join the performance. Because of this participatory component, political ideas are not only presented but also co-produced, transforming each performance into a communal experience of resistance.

The intensity and style of Janam's performances clearly demonstrate their dissent. Plays are designed to be portable, easy to put up, and context-neutral. The rhetoric is snappy, slogan-like, and memorable, while the outfits are simple and meaningful. These components guarantee that the message endures beyond the immediate moment and reverberates in chants, recollections, and subsequent discussions. In this sense, resistance persists even after the symbolic curtain has fallen.

Furthermore, Janam's persistent presence in tense environments—such as caste war zones, sectarian strife, and labor unrest—highlights its bravery in facing danger head-on. The act of performance turns into a declaration that dissenting voices will not be suppressed, whether it is in a neighborhood ravaged by rioting or a university under siege.

In the end, Janam's street theater defies amnesia and repression. It reignites their right to speak, reclaims their space, and reminds audiences of their power. Janam's performances resound loudly in a society that is becoming more and more subdued: protest is not only about words or slogans; it's also about involvement, presence, and performance.

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