

Title: Street Theatre in India: Its Evolution Through Caste and Community Resistance

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ABSTRACT

Street theatre has served not only as a mode of entertainment but also as an important tool for social change. The emergence of street theatre in India can be traced back to India's struggle for freedom from British rule. Modern Indian theatre was a combination of both Indian classical theatre and proscenium theatre with primarily the objective of entertaining the audience. In Indian theatre, there has been a shift from proscenium theatre to street theatre which has given birth to a new theatre art form in India, known as 'Nukkad Naatak' or 'Street Theatre'. Though it initially emerged as a voice against imperialism, now in the contemporary scenario it has become a tool for socio-political change to raise voice against oppression, social hierarchies, and caste and community-based discrimination in Indian society. It has given the voice to the marginalized and oppressed section of society and challenged the social hierarchies. This paper primarily focuses on the evolution of street theatre in India through the lens of caste and community, analyzing how cultural performances became an act of political resistance and social awareness. It aims to examine how different communities, through street theatre or performances, have raised awareness, asserted rights, and contested oppression. To conduct the study, secondary sources have been utilized, such as books, newspaper articles, scholarly research articles, etc. The study also uses case studies such as Jana Natya Manch (JANAM), Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), etc., to trace the evolution of street theatre from proscenium to act of resistance.

KEYWORDS

Street Theatre, Community Resistance, Social Change, Indian People's Theatre Association, Jana Natya Manch.

INTRODUCTION

The genesis of street theatre existed during the French Revolution (1789-1799) in France. With its birth in Russia, it gradually spread to other parts of the world, such as the USA, Cuba, Sweden, Spain, Africa, and Latin America and its influence was over all parts of the world (De and Thakur 102). And during World War II, street plays played an important role as an instrument of anti-war movement. The concept of theatre in India dates back to ancient Indian classical theatre which basically focused on *Natya* (dance/drama) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which revolved around mythological and devotional stories. Later in the 1870s, the growth of vernacular theatre in languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and Kannada further diversified the theatrical landscape. It was finally in the 19th century with the advent of Mughal and British rulers that a new variation was observed in the Indian theatre. It had a major western influence on Indian theatre which is a combination of western proscenium theatre and Indian classical theatre.

In India, the emergence of street theatre was the result of ideology of the left-wing communist party to fight against imperialism and challenge the social hierarchy. It was at that time a major transformation occurred from proscenium theatre to the theatre of streets. Street theatre in India has taken a major shift from a tool of cultural expression to community resistance. Street theatre has been defined by various artist and historians from different perspectives. For instance, Simon Murray and John Keefe has defined street theatre “as a form of entertainment, integrating elements of physical theatre, performance arts, and illusions.” Jan Cohen-Cruz definition stands as “manifestation of revolutionary political and nationalist movements that serve as a vehicle for social change in addition to providing entertainment for their audiences.” On the other hand, Safdar Hashmi who is a theatre activist and founder of Jana Natya Manch has viewed street theatre “as a means of promoting political ideologies, particularly communism, and of drawing the masses of the people into the anti-colonial struggle” (Yadav 190-191)

In simple terms, practically the term ‘street theatre’ refers to a form of group drama performed by the actors in open public spaces and outdoors such as market, streets, bus station or train station, college or university campus, or a slum, which allows the actors

to interact directly with the audience. Its purpose is not only constrained to entertainment but to raise awareness, activism, and social change. The key aesthetic features of street plays are that it typically uses minimum props, costumes, and settings, rely on colloquial language, and incorporate elements like songs, dances, and folk art. Thus, is also referred as 'Third Theatre' coined by Badal Sircar. Street theatre differs from conventional theatre that is unlike conventional theatre that requires audience attendance and ticket purchase, street theatre bring performances directly to the public. Its short duration, community involvement, and interactive nature encourages post-performance discussions, creating a two-way communication process (Sinha 151). Though this the audience can connect with the message and become a major driver in social change.

The rise of nationalism and the radical movements of the 1940s in India led to the creation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1943 which basically empowered working class and gave power to Indian revolution. IPTA led to the origin of new theatre art form called as "Nukkad Naatak" or "Street Theatre" with the very objective of making theatre closer to the people (Syedain and Faisal 209). Thus, this paper aims to trace the historical evolution of street theatre in India through caste and community resistance, analyze the role of street theatre in India as a tool for socio-political change, political resistance, protest, awareness, social mobilization among the marginalized and oppressed communities. The research also focused on specific case studies or movements that exemplify community-based resistance through street theatre. The research holds great significance as street theatre has always been a mode of communication to people. This research shed lights on where the street theatre began and make people vigilant about the immense contribution of street theatre in India.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed in this study is purely qualitative in nature. The study has adopted exploratory, descriptive, and analytical research design to trace the origin and evolution of street theatre in India. By using these approaches, the study has documented the various narratives and lived experiences of the various communities.

Moreover, it has justified that street theatre is not solely a form of entertainment/art but a political act of resistance and social change. The study used secondary research methods, wherein various e-books, scholarly journal articles, web articles, etc. have been utilized for the research purpose. The procedure followed for the study was: review of literature, selection of case studies, data collection, data organization and analysis. The methodology adopted for the study helps in exploring the evolution of street theatre in India, which has transformed from being a cultural expression tool to a stage for dissent, resistance, socio-political change and voice for the marginalized and oppressed groups, exploring how performances have articulated issues of caste discrimination, social justice, and community mobilization.

RESULTS

Origin of Street Theatre in India

Before the emergence of street theatre in India as a dominant form of drama or stage of resistance, it was primarily associated with India's traditional folk theatre forms and the sole objective of folk theatre in India was it acted as a source of entertainment for the general public in the society. It has roots in the '*Natya Shastra*' which was used as a medium to spread local beliefs, ideas and social values. The origin of street theatre in India can be traced back to mid-nineteenth century wherein it was practiced in various parts of India and known by different names. Such as in Punjab it was known as "Rahs", "Nautanki" in Uttar Pradesh, "Jatra" in Bengal, "Beedi Nataka" in Karnataka, "Path Natya" in Maharashtra (Das & Rabb 169). Street theatre in India originated as a result of political unrest and turmoil of that period. It was at the time of India's fight for freedom struggle, the concept of street theatre evolved significantly and the purpose of street theatre was not merely the entertainment rather it is a form of drama which is conducted in outdoor settings to engage actively with the audiences for a dynamic interaction. Along with its aim to entertain it also fosters activism and critical thoughts in the minds of audience.

During British rule in India, street theatre became an important instrument to fight against imperialism, to raise feelings of patriotism and nationalism while making the

people aware of their rights and consciousness. This marked a shift from proscenium theatre to street theatre because of the efforts of left-wing ideology to fight against imperialism. In India street theatre emerged as a political instrument of the Communist Party, which aimed at mobilizing and uplifting the working class. Its primary objective was to integrate marginalized workers into the democratic process and to challenge the established socio-political order.

Street plays has always been a part of Indian traditional folk art and thus the legacy of street plays can be traced back to Indian traditional folk performances that evolved into modern street plays during the mid-20th century.

The Rise of Street Theatre in India

The rise of street theatre in India is associated with two popular theatre groups of India that is Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Jan Natya Manch (JANAM) used street theatre as a medium of communication to communicate socially relevant issues. Slowly, it started spreading in other parts of the country and groups like Nishant from Delhi, Lok Mela Manch and Samvedan from Gujrat, and Samudaya from Karnataka, effectively used this medium to advocate for social change (Swamy 4).

During the 1940's street theatre began to rise slowly in India because of the efforts of some well-known theatre directors and aficionados such as Bansi Kaul, M.K. Raina, and Prasanna in order to bring theatre closer to public (Yadav 192). The origin of the street theatre in India originated with the establishment IPTA and then it spread throughout the nation. The main themes of street plays were child health and education, economic liberation, women's empowerment (Sinha 150).

Street theatre in India has become a voice for the oppressed and marginalized communities to fight against the oppression and to assert their rights. And there are various popular associations or group that have given them a platform for social change and to raise awareness.

Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)

Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) became the pioneer of people's street theatre movement in India, established in the year 1943. It was launched during high political tension in India just when India had witnessed Gandhi's Quit India movement and a devastating famine in Bengal (Thakur 285). It played a significant role in the

development of progressive cultural movements in India. IPTA has given a platform to various artists and writers from across India to unite and helped them shape their creativity and inspired them to use art for social change, focusing on real-life issues and protest driven themes that promoted progressive ideas.

Though IPTA became the cultural wing of the Communist Party but it has made clear that it was the organization that belong to the people of the country. IPTA was established basically to fight against fascism, imperialism and colonialism. It became a platform for the masses to demand their rights and raise voices against colonialism. The first IPTA Bulletin in July 1943 also criticized the writers of the 19th century for failing to reflect the struggles and aspirations of the common masses and focused mostly on mythological and romantic themes. By the mid-20th century some changes were witnessed. There were an emergence of new creed of writers, dancers, musicians, actors, and artists redefined the art in contemporary times. There was replacement in the idea from “Art for art’s sake” to “Art for Life’s sake” emphasizing that art should serve life and society rather than just exist in isolation (Thakur 286). This shift led to the rise of progressive theatre in the 1940’s which voiced anti-fascist sentiments, national unity, and the conditions of peasants and workers.

IPTA expanded rapidly all over the nation and established various branches by forming Provincial Organizing Committees in regions such as Bengal, Punjab, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Malabar, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Some famous prominent theatre personalities who joined the organization are Balraj Sahni, Bijan Bhattacharya, Mulk Raj, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Anna Sathe, Mama Warekar, etc. (Thakur 287). IPTA has also included the prominent female members such as Anil de Silva, Rasheed Jahan, Rekha Jain, Dina Gandhi (Pathak), Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, etc. to represent women’s issues.

IPTA has been an inclusive organization which received support from diverse sections of society including writers, dancers, musicians, singers, artists, mill workers, farmers, and students. It also maintained close ties with Kisan Sabhas and Trade Unions which provided them audiences and sponsored their movements (Thakur 288).

IPTA with the use of traditional and folk art addressed various social and political issues which decolonized the Indian theatre in contrast to westernized urban theatre. The Marathi Troupe of IPTA for instance used Marathi folk songs such as ‘tamasha’ and

‘powada’. And a notable tamasha performance written by D.N. Gowankar, on black marketeering had a strong impact on the working-class of Maharashtra in Kamgar Maidan. Tamasha presented at the first conference of IPTA also broke the caste barriers which were here in India for centuries. That is only few communities or castes had the right to perform a particular form, for example in tamasha in Maharashtra was traditionally performed by lower castes. However, at IPTA’s first conference, a tamasha was written by Brahmin which broke the barrier by addressing everyday social issues rather than religious or mythological issues (Thakur 289).

Similarly, Andhra IPTA known as “Praja Natyamandali” which was mostly performed by beggars and village goondas, were now performed by artists like rural working-class youth. IPTA revitalized it by replacing their traditional religious themes with patriotic and social content.

Street Theatre in Pre-Independence Era

The period preceding India’s independence was monumental in shaping the conception of the street theatre movement. Street theatre which was initially developed as a tool by the Communist Party to bring developmental agendas into the realm of street politics, soon became an integral part of India’s freedom struggle. It evolved as a weapon against socio-political and economic exploitation, mobilizing the masses to fight for their rights and justice.

Prominent theatre activists such as Utpal Dutt effectively utilized street theatre as an instrument for political awareness and consciousness. And the origin of street theatre as described earlier can be traced to the establishment of IPTA.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) to fight against Japanese intervention announced a one-act play competition and guidelines emphasized on how a street play in its contemporary form should be which included that a play should be meant for common and marginalized people and it must address societal issues in creative format (Syedain and Faisal 211). Soon after IPTA was formed, the Bengal Famine of 1943 inspired the group to create its first street play under the banner of Indian People’s Theatre Association to protest against the exploitation of farmers by rich landowners. During this time, Theatre for Development (TFD) became an important tool to protect the rights of the farmers who were trapped in debt and suffering from hunger. One of IPTA’s

famous play was Nabanna (The Harvest Festival), written by Bijon Bhattacharya and co-produced by Shombhu Mitra. It was first performed in October 1944 and was staged in many parts of Bengal and Bombay, including farmers meetings and peasants' gatherings (Syedain and Faisal 211).

Street Theatre in Post-Independence Era

In the post-independence period IPTA witnessed a downfall due to ideological conflicts and soon it was banned forcing it to operate underground. IPTA's heavy involvement in left-wing political; and organizational structures ultimately contributed to its decline which forced many artists, writers to dissociate. However, later on it was revived as a cultural wing of the Communist Party of India CPI (M) (Syedain and Faisal 211). In post-independence India IPTA emerged as a medium to empower the working class. The cultural wing of IPTA in Andhra Pradesh known as 'Praja Natya Mandali' conducted various plays street plays for the working class and marginalized communities which showcased the day-to-day struggles of peasants of Telangana.

Utpal Datt and Habib Tanvir were prominent members to use street plays as political communication and advocacy in 1950s. Another important personality is Badal Sircar, he played an important role in the development of street theatre in India and introducing the idea of Third Theatre (Nukkad Natak). He established Shatabdi (Century) theatre group to use theatre for social purpose. He moved away from mainstream theatre and pioneered a form of open-air, minimalist performance that mostly used human body with limited props, no elaborated makeup, costumes, or sets. He developed the idea of 'Free Theatre' where 'free' stands for voluntary participation and free public access thus removing the barriers of conventional stages and ticketed entry. This gave rise to modern street theatre where his notable works such as Spartacus (1970), Procession (1972), Bhoma (1974), and State News (1979) reflect his principles and which contributed in shaping modern street theatre. And because of this he was recognized as the "Barefooted Indian Dramatist" (Syedain and Faisal 212). 1970s was a period when rise of street theatre flourished which coincided with the growth of women's movements and NGOs.

Jana Natya Manch (JANAM)

Jana Natya Manch (People's Theatre Front) also known as JANAM (Birth) is a radical street theatre group formed in 1973 during the emergency period in India by Safdar Hashmi. Safdar Hashmi is regarded as father of Indian street theatre and on 12th April, his birth anniversary is commemorated as National Street Theater Day. For him street theatre is “a militant political theatre of protest whose function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organization” (Syedain and Faisal 213). JANAM has made various street plays in support of marginalized sections and advocated social change. Street theatre has given voice to different communities such as labor, women, children, etc.

For instance, the first street play of JANAM that is “MACHINE” (1978) depicted the exploitative working conditions of labors and was performed before a gathering of over 2,00,000 trade unions members. This was followed by another street play, popularly known as “AURAT” (1979), which was staged during a conference of women worker in North India. Aurat is one of Hashmi's most influential plays, it addressed issues such as dowry, bride burning, domestic violence, and plight of women in the country.

Safdar Hashmi's Aurat (Woman) openly highlighted issue such as dowry, bride burning, and wife battering. It was not only limited to India but it was produced in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Not only this but this play has had more than 2500 performance sand was translated in almost all Indian languages (Das & Rabb 172). Also, JANAM's play 'Aartnaad 'brought about the sexual abuses of children.

In 1989, Hashmi and his group performed one more play called as “Halla Bol” which centered around workers demand, associated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) where he was assassinated. It showcased the government's role in suppressing such kind of organizations. His death marked a turning point, galvanizing a new wave of political resistance and reaffirming the transformative power of street theatre in India. Hashmi's death gave birth to Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) which raises voices against the social inequalities in India.

The Praja Natya Mandali, the Andhra Pradesh branch, staged several street plays condemning his brutal killing which sparked a wave of pan-India protests and performances. During this period, several regional theatre groups emerged or intensified their engagement with street theatre as a form of resistance. And the JANAM

troupe carry forwarded the Hashmi's style of theatre in round and thus developed the concept of periphery (theatre in round).

The movement was later spread in various states and led to creation of various organization which stood for the oppressed class such as Natya Chetna (Theatre of Conscience) in Orissa, Nija Nataka Iyakkam (True to Life Theatre) formed in 1978 in Madurai.

Later, numerous street theatre collectively across India expanded community-theatre movement, using performances as a tool for development and grassroots communication. There was establishment of various groups on the footsteps of JANAM, such as Jan Sanskriti (Peoples Culture) in rural West Bengal which addressed issues such as alcoholism, dowry, HIV/AIDS awareness and child abuse. In Mumbai, Aavahaan Natya Manch (Welcomes Trust) pioneered street theater group from Mumbai. It pioneered the active involvement of students in street theatre performances. It was initiated by middle-class students from local colleges with the objective to stage plays about Dalit culture and staged Devdasi (Servant of God). In Punjab, Gursharan Singh, widely celebrated as the Samrat (King) of Nukkad Natak used street theatre to encourage civil rights and social change.

In 2007, the group also performed a play on the Gujrat riots titled as Yeh Dil Maange More Guruji (The Heart Wants More, Sir), which expressed public anger over the killings and violence against Indian Muslims. Since its beginnings, street theatre has served as a powerful tool for political and social communication. The street has consistently been used as a platform to advocate for marginalized and unheard communities.

Street Theatre through Gender Perspective

In the 1980s and 1990s various groups such as religious reformers, factory workers adopted street play to gain support for their agendas and advocate social change. Street theatre has been also been used by women in India in order to critique gender discrimination, to voice out their dissent and mobilize women around issues such as marriage, dowry, education, domestic violence, atrocities against girl child, etc. Many of those involved in women theatre are associated with prestigious institutions like the

National School of Drama (NSD), simultaneously working to bring women's struggles to street.

Prominent members such as Anuradha Kapur and Rati Bartholomew Maya Rao founded a street theatre group called as "Theatre Union" in 1980. This group made significant interventions against dowry-related deaths, particularly through its play 'Om Swaha (Offering to Fire)'.

Playwrights such as Kusum Kumar and Tripurari Sharma made use of street to address marginalized communities like Dalits and courtesans. Tripuri Sharma's *Alarippu* group and other prominent organizations such as *Jagori (Awake)*, *Stree Mukti Sangathan (Women's Liberation Movement)*, is an NGO from Maharashtra protested against the discriminatory social practices through theatre. These groups played a vital role in bringing women's lived experiences and struggles into the public domain of streets.

Popular plays like *Om Swaha* (1980), which addressed dowry deaths and *Dafa 180* (Legislation 180, 1997) focused on rape were staged in college, slums and middle-class neighborhood to create awareness. Likewise, *Stree Mukti Sangathana* staged *Mulagi Jhali Ho!* (The Girl is Born), written and directed by Jyoti Mhapsekar, to address the discrimination against the girl child in Maharashtra (Das & Rabb 173).

Dalit artists both men and women in South India uses street theatre (*koothu*) to articulate resistance against caste and gender-based oppression (Venkateswaran 173). The young Dalit activists today make use of music and street theatre to change the oppressive social conditions. Women acting in *therukoothu* and other plays gives importance to issues such as transgender oppression, caste killings, and women leaders.

DISCUSSION

Street Theatre as a Form of Resistance to Caste and Community

Street theatre as an effective way of communication always represented the struggles of ordinary common people, focusing on their turmoil and pathetic economic conditions, especially during pre-independence period. It has moved beyond

entertainment and spoke about social, political and economic issues of that time. And after independence, it evolved into an intimate and powerful form of theatrical expression. In the later years, street theatre emerged as a strong voice for social causes, focusing on themes like liberation and development.

The findings of the study indicates that from its origin it has always functioned as a tool to fight against caste and community-based oppression and discrimination rather than mere entertainment. The origin of IPTA was stemmed from the need to utilize drama and storytelling as instruments to advocate for the rights of marginalized and suffering communities. IPTA was the first organization to reach out to the people with its socio-political agendas. It has contributed in introducing progressive street theatre in India with its statement “Art for art’s sake” to “Art for Life’s sake” which depicted that street theatre cannot be limited in isolated places but it has great potential to challenge the oppression faced by marginalized communities. Street theatre in India does not represent the interest of one community but it is diverse in nature as it has represented issues of various communities such as peasants, workers, women, farmers, labor, children, Dalits, Devdasis, Muslims, etc. Street theatre in India by staging various performances, especially through prominent organization like IPTA and JANAM which were centered around issues such as exploitation of farmers by rich landowners, struggles of peasants, workers exploitative conditions, sexual abuse of children, alcoholism, dowry, HIV/AIDS awareness, dowry, bride burning, domestic violence, wife battering and plight of women in the country.

It is also evident that street theatre played an important role in breaking the caste hegemony where in some roles in street theatre were restricted to some communities. Its shows shift from rigidity to a more flexible approach. Since its beginnings, street theatre has served as a powerful tool for political and social communication. The street has consistently been used as a platform to advocate for marginalized and unheard communities.

Street Theatre in Contemporary India

Asmita Theatre Group, founded by Arvind Gaur in 1993, represents an important example of contemporary street theatre in India. It was created to amplify youth voices and to create socially and politically aware actors.

Street theatre gradually expanded its scope from national consciousness to labor movement, AIDS awareness, capitalism, globalization women harassment, farmers, girl child, environment, dowry, communalism, female foeticide and infanticide. Street theatre has now adopted a diverse nature which covers various aspects such as sexual health, female infanticide, foeticide, political, gender, and Dalit concerns ((Das & Rabb 169).

In contemporary times, when there so many discriminations take place on the basis of caste and community street theatre can serve as a great medium to showcase this oppression and challenges faced by the marginalized communities. In a democratic political system, governed by a Indian constitution which protects the basic liberties and rights of the people. But most of the time in India it has been evident that people have to go through discrimination and oppression. Thus, in such a situation street theatre can act a medium for communication, political resistance and social change.

CONCLUSION

Street theatre in India has evolved from a performative cultural practice into a powerful medium of resistance against caste oppression, social inequality, and community marginalization. Rooted in folk traditions and strengthened by movements such as IPTA and JANAM, street theatre has consistently challenged dominant power structures by bringing issues of caste, class, gender, and injustice into public spaces. By transcending the limitations of proscenium theatre, it has democratized performance, enabling marginalized communities to assert their voices and lived experiences. As this study demonstrates, street theatre continues to function as an effective tool of socio-political awareness and collective mobilization, reaffirming its role as both an artistic expression and an enduring form of community-based resistance in India

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