



## NOW AND THEN OF STREET PERFORMANCES IN INDIA

Mrs.Seetha P.N.

**Abstract:** The oppressed or minority doesn't have a space of their own to showcase their talent. They found open space, streets and slums as their platform. But after colonial intervention, in the modern India they vanished from streets and open spaces. These performances doesn't have in it socio – economic or political injustice they go through but it acted as a solace for the oppressed. The paper will examine how the aesthetic space of the street projects certain kinds of subalternities in performance and also how this performance of subalternity has layered the idea of the subaltern at different times.

**Index terms:** subalternity, street performance,

### INTRODUCTION

India being the land of different ethnic groups is rich in diverse art forms. Each ethnic group has its own art forms and literature. Most of the marginalized people in the society found open space for their performances. The subalterns don't have a space of their own to showcase their talent. They found open space, streets, and slums as their platform as the performances were meant for other marginalized who couldn't afford to go to a proscenium theatre or were not allowed in the temple premises. The folk-art forms were an inextricable part of their life. It is sometimes a part of the religious ceremony, and entertainment, sometimes to disseminate stories of legend and warriors. The significance of these art forms is that, it contains human emotions and feelings and it uses the language of common people. These performances don't have in them the socio-economic or political injustice they go through but they acted as a solace for the oppressed.

The performers wore a traditional costume that could easily seek stage attention. They seek the attention of the audience before the performance using some traditional musical instruments. The audience too were eager to watch their performances. They were the sole entertainment that people had. They were sustained by society. In turn, they sustained the vitality of our street.

### ANALYSIS OF THE MAJOR STREET PERFORMANCES IN INDIA

We had a myriad of street performers in India now vanished from the street. They all can be considered as subalterns.

Our art is community-centric...We feed off the energy of our audience and tailor our stories in mid-performance based on this. We perform in temple spaces at various rites of passage in rural India -- our context, therefore, determines our content.... without context, the meaning of our performance vanishes (qtd.in.Kishan)

These folk artforms are known by different names in different states of India. Kakkarithi in Kerala, Terukoothu in Tamil Nadu, Veedhinadakam in Andhra, 'Tamasha' in Maharashtra, Jatra in Orissa and Bengal, 'Nautanki' in Uttar Pradesh etc are some of folk theatrical performance that enlivened streets of India. All these folk theatres focussed on mythology, episodes from Indian epics, and Puranas. In most of these performances a 'vidhushaka' or comedian is present, which will interact with the audience and making the

performance lively and interesting. Heavy make-up, colourful masks, loud expressions and music, dance, and songs are the major characteristics of Indian folk theatre.

Traditional Indian theatre used the Sanskrit language and it strictly adhered to the dramaturgy of Bharata Muni. *Natya Shastra*, the first-ever treatise on drama, was composed in India by Bharata Muni in Sanskrit. *Natya Shastra* postulates the rules of a drama in 6000 sutras (a rule or aphorism) in 36 chapters. It is a manual on Dramatic art and performance. Earlier it was assumed that only that theatrical performance which adhered to the doctrine of *Natya Shastra* is classical. These performances were composed in Sanskrit language. Folk theatre is a term used to distinguish the non-Sanskrit traditions from classical.

Jaibir Singh Hooda, in the forward to *Folk Theatres of North India: Contestation, Amalgamation, and Transference* opine that a "high amount of homogeneity" can be found in "the performing arts of the elite culture" because it adhered to *Natya Shastra*. However, folk art performances were heterogeneous because it was untouched by this Sanskrit text. This privilege of folk art liberated it from "brahminical control and the caste hierarchy".

Folk theatre emerged as an alternative to Sanskrit theatre which was not understood by the uneducated and marginalized in the society. Folk theatre used regional language though the story they acted in the street was from *Puranas*. "The classical theatre was based on *Natya Shastra* and urban-oriented which is very much sophisticated and classy. On the contrary, the traditional theatre evolved out of rural roots and was more simple, immediate and closer to the rural milieu" (Sheelita Das 4). In the beginning, they were part of the Bhakti movement in India. Later the folk theatre adopted stories of legends and even later they took a secular premise.

In all these folk art forms what is common is they all are performed in the public place and the subalterns or the marginalized were the majority of the audience. They were used for spreading the legendary stories in Indian epics, as part of a religious ritual and they were the sole entertainment for the villagers long ago. According to Karan Singh,

The origin of folk theatre lies in a human impulse for pleasurable imitations, which associates folk theatrical performances with contiguous folk expressive arts. Therein, the genesis of folk theatres lies in the day-to-day life of common people, particularly the low castes and their agricultural activities. (singh)

After colonization, these folk theatres were adopted by intellectuals of India for spreading the ideals of freedom. Unfortunately, historians gave less importance to the contribution of folk theatre or the theatre of the subalterns in the independence movement except for Sumit Sarkar who proposed to "examine the oral cultural forms" of the nation while creating "the history from below".

But after independence also government understood the importance of traditional media in reaching rural India. The government as well as NGO's adopted the traditional folk theatre to disseminate social awareness. Gradually the folk theatre became more secular in content. Durgadas Mukherjee in *Folk Arts and Social Communication* tells how *Jatra* was adopted for "social reform and political protest. As a result, a distinct form of *Jatra* known as the Swadeshi *Jatra* came into existence in Bengal...theme of *Jatras* were Gandhi's Non-cooperation movement and the removal of untouchability"(Mukherjee)

Thus the folk theatre that once served a ritualistic purpose, which was a sole entertainment for the marginalized has started to speak for the marginalized. At the same time, the folk theatre performers were also pushed into the margins of society. The reason Jaibir Singh Hooda in his forward to *Folk Theatres of North India: Contestation, Amalgamation, and Transference* tell that the advent of new technologies in agriculture has brought about a change in the ritualistic festival related to harvest. He also adds that the advent of radio, television and other multimedia has adversely affected folk performances and pushed the artists to the margins.

Another marginalized group who utilize the street for entertaining the mass and for their sustainment include snake charmers, madaaris, jaathukar, juggler, and many more traditional street performers. They were people with subaltern identity creating space of their own in the street.

Madaaris are street performers who train young animals like monkeys, bears, or cobra. People used to gather around them and watch the tricks. The performance always started with a drum. They were people

with traditional knowledge of animals and forest herbs. But unfortunately, these kinds of street performances using animals are banned in India by the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960 without regarding their inherited knowledge about animals and plants. As *Manushi, professor, CSDS, Delhi* has rightly pointed out in an article she wrote on the website of *Indian Express*,

Today among the most marginalised and brutalised social groups in India. Those who tried keeping alive their inherited art are sent to jail and have their animals or reptiles confiscated.... But when Madaris and Saperas were banned from practising their traditional arts, not a voice of protest rose in their defence, not a teardrop has been shed for their plight, because the ban impacted only the poorest of the poor (*The selective outrage over bans*).

Jaadugars or magicians, who once widened our eyes with his trick is performing his old trick in an unattended street in front of a mocking mob. Nats or acrobats as the word means were dancers who once stunned the street with their mesmerizing performance. Sometimes they mount on a rope or a long stick accompanied with *dholak* rhythm and present a breathtaking performance. They were street performers found in Bihar, Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh. At present they are the landless nomadic group that is extremely marginalized. They belong to a category that couldn't get any attention from the government. , baazigars or jugglers are a Punjabi community similar to nat.

For a long time till colonization, all street performances were categorized as folklore. But after the colonial intervention, in modern India, they vanished from streets and open spaces. To be more precise they have been wiped out of the street. The modernization has changed the kind of audience they had and they haven't got enough tools to cater to this new audience. In the street, they have become awkward in their old traditional dress. As Bhatt, a previous recipient of the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award rightly points out,

Privileged artists who can access technology and bandwidth made a seamless transition -- they can perform shows and conduct workshops with ease... But people like us do not have the luxury of soundproof spaces and live streaming. Most of us are illiterate and don't even have a smartphone. We cannot bridge that gap... We need to focus on finding the right tools to adapt to these changes. (qtd. in Kishan)

Swat Janu in her article *Where have all the snake-charmers and street magicians gone? A Raj-era law might be to blame* blames the colonizers for suppressing indigenous artforms. After Independence, such folk artists were given a place to live by the government not considering the effect on their art. Kathputli colony in west Delhi is an example. Those places were not ideal for them to perform their art. Some have abandoned their art and educated their children and never taught them their traditional art and culture for a better future. Some have migrated to towns and cities performing their art as a means of deriving alms. Modern society has marginalized them. A resident of the kathputli colony and Ishamuddin Khan says,

Since Independence in 1947, even the independent government has marginalised us completely. Today, we do not have any officially recognised platform, any package from non-government organisations, as performing artists who have been entertaining the masses for hundreds of years... the society does not care and the government does not even feel like including us in their plans or packages (qtd. in "one India one people")

The socio-political situation has given a new outlook and aims for street performances. In the twentieth century with the Independence movement, arts and literature were used by intellectuals for spreading the paradigms of freedom struggle. Of all the art movements in India that have arisen in the twentieth century none effusively encapsulate the problems of the oppressed more than street theatre. Drawing from the culture of each city as well as from the marginalized group, street theatre tries to give voice to the muted in the society.

According to Sadhana Naithani,

During the freedom struggle, folk performers and their arts once again became a symbol of culture and civilization. They were 'ours', unadulterated by the coloniser's culture and education, and thus attracted the attention, interest, and passion of educated, nationalist, and communist Indians. And this time folk performers and their arts became part of the real movement of history. Freedom fighters were performing, writing, and speaking in folk forms. (*Performers and their Art* 84)

As a result, in 1876 British Raj implemented the Dramatic Performance act abolishing the usage of public performance as a protest against colonizers. But the censorship continued even after independence. It was not easy to wipe out these revolutionary performers clad in folklore aiming radical movement. It doesn't mean modern street theatre has evolved from these folk performances. According to Safdar Hashmi "*Contemporary Indian street theatre has been drawing in equal measure from our folk and classical drama as well as from western drama*" (qtd. in Deshpande) The only thing that connects the earliest folk artforms and street theatre of the 20th century is that the space it uses is common space or open street and both are meant for and done by marginalized in the society.

Some critics trace the origin of modern street theatre in India to the workers' movement in the west. The trade unions in the Soviet Union, Germany, and Britain popularized street theatre as a medium for expressing their problems and needs. The influence of Bertold Brecht on theatre practice was immense. Brecht, questioned the the relationships between stage and audience. He aimed at a radical revision of "bourgeois theatre". Brecht redefined the audience involvement. He considered audience as an agent of production revolutionized the theatre practice. It has also resulted in a radical change in performing area.

They were short performances with an issue concerning the majority of mass in the street. They not only target the audience in the street, but they are also seeking the attention of authority or the oppressor. Most of the performances end with an exhortation to raise and protest. In India, there are many theatre groups arouse to address the problem of the marginalized. The history of such an agitprop theatre began with Indian Peoples Theatre Association in 1943. KSSP in Kerala, Samudaya in Andra, JANAM in Delhi, etc are other street theatre groups in India that followed IPTA. All these groups dealt with the issue of marginalized in the society.

Modern street theatre in India emerged as a theatre of protest. Indian people's theatre was the first of its kind to adopt street performance as a means of protest for marginalized against their oppressor. They were a group of artist-activist with a nonprofit organization that stood for the marginalized in society. They have turned the street and street performances once charmed by marginalized street artists to raise the problem of marginalized in the society. The consequences were immense. "[I]n Kerala, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh Street theatre was banned; performers like Prabir Dutta, Rajan, and Safdar Hashmi were killed while performing. In the mid '80s at Basti in Uttar Pradesh, a woman street theatre activist was picked up by the police from the midst of a performance and raped in order to teach her a lesson. In most of the cases, state repression was let loose in the name of combating Naxalism" (Shamsul Islam qtd. in Krishner)

The origin of India Street Theatre is often considered as a result of political upheavals in pre independent India. Revolutionary political theatres were formed in Kolkata in forties. It was Marxist-inspired. The one constant is that there is a deep connection with the left; many groups are associated explicitly with the Communist Party of India. In 1930s Marxist thinkers of India used folk theatre to raise consciousness and communicate with the general mass. They as a result politicized Indian folk theatrical performance. It was driven to the street because the authorities often interrupt and arrest the actors of political plays dealing with real events and atrocities of the ruling party. Popular language of common people and minimal or no props were used by the political theatre groups in the street.

Bengal famine triggered such theatrical activity for the first time in India. One of the founders of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), Bijon Bhattacharya thus composed the first ever street performance with a political theme. It was in 1944, The play named "Nabanna", staged presenting the pathetic condition of peasants in Bengal. The play was set in the backdrop of Bengal famine. It depicts the real picture of exploitation of peasants by Bengali landowners.

IPTA is thus, the first theatre group that popularized street plays in India. The contribution of IPTA during Bandhimuk Antholan is immense. The assassination Safdar Hashmi, an activist of IPTA, during a street performance on January 1, 1989, in Delhi led to the form being recognized as a powerful form of protest and got wide media coverage all over the nation. It was Badal Sircar who identified the capability of street theatre in social change. He argued for a theatre of commitment. He was influenced by Grotowski's poor theatre and thus created a "theatre of commitment". Sircar in his works emphasized body language, audience involvement, and dialogues which could create a rapport eith the audience.

The motto of IPTA is "People 's Theatre Stars the People". The logo of IPTA is a street drummer which symbolically refers to the oldest medium of communication. The association came into being after the first

Progressive Writer's Conference of 1936. The postcolonial thinker and writer Homi J. Bhabha suggested the name 'People's Theatre'. On May 25, 1943 IPTA was established as a nationwide politico-theatre group. In 1993 on the occasion of IPTA's Golden Jubilee, the Government of India issued a commemorative stamp. IPTA'S cultural movement in the country and its contribution to the independence movement is immense.

Inspired by the theatre activism of IPTA various theatre groups and cultural activists came forward and took initiative for the formation of IPTA in their region. In 1940 a Youth Cultural Institute was formed in Calcutta. IPTA inspired Anil De Silva to set up People's Theatre in Bangalore. He assisted in the formation of IPTA in Bombay in 1942. In the north IPTA is called by the name Bhartiya Jan Natya Sangh. Bhartiya Gana Natya Sangh (GanaSanskriti Sangh) of West Bengal and Assam, Praja Natya Mandali of Andhra Pradesh, KSSP of Kerala are the offshoots of IPTA in different parts of the nation.

JANAM is a theatre group that started performing socio-political plays in Delhi in 1973. It owes its origin to IPTA. IPTA which had a leftist lineage spread communist ideologies all over the nation. But during the emergency, IPTA became inactive resulting in the formation of *Jan Natya Manch* under the leadership of IPTA activist Safdar Hashmi.

With the emergence of street theatre groups in India, they also emerged the question of creativity and aesthetical values which obviously lacked in street theatre. The reason for the immense popularity of street theatre in India compared to proscenium theatre is defined by Safdar Hashmi; Firstly, in our cities with one or two exceptions, there is no tradition of theatre-going. The masses of our urban population have never been to a theatre. Our theatre... has remained mostly confined to a very select group of theatre-goers. The theatre, on its part, has also not been addressing itself to the common, working people. If our urban theatre had been a major cultural force – a living and popular art form reflecting the hopes, aspirations, and struggle of the people – then perhaps our street theatre too would have remained only a propaganda device, surfacing every now and then to focus attention on burning issues. But since our mainstream theatre is by and large out of tune and touch with the majority of our people, the need remains for a fully developed people's theatre, a theatre which is available to the masses... since conditions have continued to be unfavourable for a mass expansion of proscenium theatre, they have been seriously seeking to develop street theatre itself..."

The street plays have become dear to the common man. Because it is culturally specific and employs local folk theatre forms, local songs, and dances, and the local dialect. Sahiar, a women's group in Baroda fashioned their street plays based on Gujarati folk forms, in Andhra Pradesh the Jan Natya Mandali used the local form *oger Ratha* to perform street plays of contemporary relevance.

Women groups also emerged to voice the problems of women in a patriarchic society. They used street theatre to raise issues like dowry, sex discrimination in wages, right to education, domestic violence, and discriminatory laws of inheritance and divorce. Street plays were also used to spread awareness. In Kerala, the Kerala Shashtra Sahitya Parishat (KSSP) has adopted street plays to spread science and literacy

In a modern materialistic world, this art form has become a tool for promoting corporate, their ideas, and their products. It's a new trend to advertise through street plays. Global products find a market in the local through the advertisement using folk art forms and street plays. Because one of the most interesting points about modern street theatre is its unique socio-political place. Street theatre performers creatively mould their concerns and frustrations about their society. They try to make people think of the happenings around them. They do this with no pros, lights, costumes, and sets by simply transforming the ordinary crowded spaces into something extraordinary and noticeable. They choose the public space to reach a wide range of audiences.

More than any NGO or theatre group, it's the colleges that are most involved in street plays. It is an indicator of the swelling will in the youth to amend the erroneous and build a better future. There is always the danger of being detained by police, sometimes the audience may intervene and attack the performers for breaching their sentiments. The audience the street performers address is a heterogeneous group containing both communist and bourgeoisie, lower caste and upper-caste, Hindu and Muslim, and so on. With all its limitations street theatre is both creative and doable and accessible and has a far-reaching effect on a wide range of audiences. It serves both as entertainment and has a far-reaching social impact. It is a way of putting thoughts into action. Some lessons are better taught through demonstration.

## CONCLUSION

Today the street theatre is the best medium to connect with the common mass especially marginalized in the society. Street theatre is much intimate, short, and addresses socio-political messages. By using songs, short scripts, humor, and apt voice modulation they easily invite the attention of the people in the street. These plays can be used for creating awareness and stir up thoughts in youth. This lively form of drama persuades the audience to think and act.

The media power of street plays to reform and renovate the political and cultural sense of people to revolutionize them is now acclaimed. Habibi Thanvir, Badal Sircar, G. Sangarapillai, Prasanna, and Safdar Hashmi have bestowed their contributions to street plays. April 12<sup>th</sup> is celebrated as national street theatre day. It is generally told that a street play chooses a street part as its performing stage and deals with the issues of society by using street languages. According to Bertold Brecht, "We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself" (*Proposals for an Epic Theatre*).

In this globalised world, this art form now becomes a way of promoting companies, their ideas, and their products, which in turn resulted in the emergence of 'corporate street plays'. It's a new fashion to advertise through street plays. One of the most interesting points about modern street theatre is its unique socio-political place. Street theatre performers creatively mould their concerns and frustrations about their society. They try to make people think of the happenings around them. They do this with no pros, lights, costumes, and sets by simply transforming the ordinary crowded spaces into something extraordinary and noticeable. They choose the public space to reach a wide range of audiences.

More than any NGO or theatre group, it's the colleges that are most involved in street plays. It indicates the increasing will of the youth to stop the erroneous and build a better world. There are always the threats of being charged by policemen, facing the wrath of the audience itself in case something in the play offends their sentiments or bearing the enmity of political groups or the Government itself.

In recent years the street theatre has picked up the pace and has acquired an image of a more moral nature. Today the street theatre is perhaps the best way to connect with the common man and the youth. These are much intimate, brief, and direct and address the social/political message head-on with the help of drama. The catchy phrases and songs, crisp script, humor, and loudness help in making a long-lasting and powerful effect on viewers. These plays if targeted towards youth can stir up emotions, create awareness and lead the way towards positive change. This colloquial form of drama connects with the youth instantly.

The thesis will examine how the aesthetic space of the street theatre projects certain kinds of subalternities in performance and also how this performance of subalternity has layered the idea of the subaltern at different times. By analyzing the selected street plays, the proposed study intends to prove that subalterns or oppressed created a space of their own by transforming the public space using the available props and sounds and thus trying to find a space in the society. And the study also tries to prove the effectiveness of street plays in the creation of a particular subaltern image at that particular time. The thesis also looks at the global significance of these performances.

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