



## ROLE OF STREET THEATRE IN COMMUNICATING SOCIALLY RELEVANT ISSUES

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### **Abstract**

Street theatre has evolved in the early twentieth century as an important tool to empower the working class and foster the revolution against the established power. In India Street theatre made its appearance during the freedom struggle, primarily by the left wing theatre activists. Though street theatre bears close affinity to the folk theatre, it is more of a participatory process in its approach. In that sense it is people centred art rather than a mere performance oriented art form. This paper makes an attempt to analyze the role of street theatre as a tool in initiating social change. By evaluating important case studies an attempt will also be made to explore the impact of street plays in comparison to proscenium theatre.

**Keywords:** Street theater, Indian People's Theatre Association, Jana Natya Manch, Samudaya, Proscenium theater, folk theatre, anti-colonial struggle, participatory communication, Theatre for the oppressed.

### **INTRODUCTION**

India which is still struggling to meet the world average education rate even after 69 years of its independence, cannot dream of using mass media to communicate with its people. But the stories about the communities, issues that affect them need to be discussed and told to the larger masses. Communication should be considered as an important factor in inclusive social development. Street theatre, which is an intimate form of communication, plays an important role of a facilitator by employing techniques like visual and expressive presentation. It is a distinctive form of performing art which also paves the way for participatory communication. Various scholars and artists have defined the term 'street theatre' in many perspectives. Simon Murray and John Keefe (2007) considers street play as part of street entertainment, whereas Jan Cohen-Cruz (1998) defines street theatre as an expression of revolutionary movement. The founder of Jana Natya Manch and theatre activist Safdar Hashmi believed that street theatre belonged to the political ideology of the masses (Deshpande, 2007). During the time of industrial revolution in Europe, party workers and labourers started writing and performing plays on the street. During the Second World War street plays were used as tools of anti-war movement.

Even in India, experiments started to take place on the streets aimed at the masses. Although folk theatre always existed in different parts of the country, their focus remained on providing entertainment to the people. But during the freedom struggle street theatre took altogether a different shape. It started promoting patriotism and nationalism among the general

masses. As early as 1943, Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) started organizing street theatre in India for the purpose of conveying their views on liberalism and educating the people about imperialism and its negative impact on them. So it could be said that the history of street theatre movement started with IPTA and later spread to the various parts of the country. Major issues like health and education of children, economic liberation, women empowerment and the like were the central topics of street plays. Groups like Jana Natya Manch, Pravah, Alarippu, Action India, Swatantra Theater and Bihar Art Theater are prominently carrying out street plays in different states to scream aloud about issues that are timely and question the protocols that are restrictive to emancipation (Kang, 2002). Street theatre which started basically as a tool to sensitize Indians to fight for their independence has been able to retain its effectiveness despite the popularity of electronic and digital media. Now it has expanded its wings from remote villages to metro cities. Street theatre has become one of the most sought after media to communicate with the people for social activists, student unions, artists and even corporate professionals.

### **STREET THEATRE AS A TOOL OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM**

Though street theatre has close affinity with native folk theatres forms of India, the form is not meant for entertaining the masses unlike others. Practically the term street theatre denotes a group drama played out in the outdoor; in which group of actors can also interact with the members of the audience directly. Unlike other folk theatre forms the purpose of street theatre is not only to entertain but also to trigger activism. Aesthetic parameters are just as important as the objective of disseminating messages of development and broader social and democratic values. Minimum use of properties or costumes and set up and use of colloquial languages peppered with songs and dance and other folk art forms are the important aesthetic features of street plays. The idea is to keep the form as simple as possible free of any hyperbole.

According to Downing (2011), Indian street theatre has also been inspired to a great extent by the works of Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar, apart from classical Indian arts and drama. One of the key advantages of street theatre is its mobility. Unlike traditional theatre forms, street theatre performers are not required to wait for the audiences nor does the audience buy tickets to watch the performance. Street theatre comes to the audience. Even the street plays are short in length and community oriented. It will also have scope of conversation with the audience after it gets over. So the process of communication is circular unlike traditional art forms which hardly provide emphasis on feed back.

Kanika Batra (2010) notes that street theatre doesn't lose its relevance even after it sort of achieves its primary objective of revolting against the unjust political condition carried out by tyrannical and repressive regime. India's Jan Natya Manch and Pakistan's Ajoka are the prime examples of this. Their street plays continued to attract the audiences even after the political conditions were improved in these respective countries. She asserts that street theatre as a form of social communication predominantly brings up discussions and opinion on building awareness and social reforms in Asia. "Social theatre, includes, but is not confined to, working class, feminist-oriented and university affiliated theater groups working in urban metropolitan locations in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other parts of South-Asia (Batra, 2010)."

In India Street theatre was born as a political wing of the communist party with the objectives of the upliftment of the working class, bringing them into the mainstream of democracy and shake up the establishment. Theatre personality like Habib Tanvir, who was also associated with Jana Natya Manch (JANAM), was keener to promote street plays than large-

scale production of proscenium theatre. Unlike Safdar Hashmi, the founder of JANAM who insisted on utilizing both the forms of theatrical productions, Habib Tanvir considered street theater as a more powerful medium than that of proscenium plays. He believed that street theatres are easier to work due to the affordable cost of production and its colloquial structure lends itself to be in proximity with the audiences and hence more faithful. (Deshpande, 2007).

### **THEATRE FOR THE OPPRESSED**

Folk theatre experts have agreed upon the fact that street theatre has its roots in folk performances. Street theatre has taken its origin in a unique milieu In India. In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that street theatre has been responsible in disseminating radical messages to the common folks thereby creating awareness among them. Theatre experts believe that street theatre has been striving to create critical awareness through literature and performances. In this context street theatre could be termed as the theatre for the oppressed. Augusto Boal, essentially influenced by the work of Paulo Freire titled as Pedagogy of the Oppressed, comes out with the concept of 'Theatre for the Oppressed.' "No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption" (Freire, 1970).

By affirming that true knowledge need not be imposed upon people, because it already exist in them, Freire believed that the world cannot be changed by inserting information into the minds of the oppressed, but only through critical thinking and conscientization- a process of attaining critical awareness. Freire strongly believed that education is part of the persuasive political thinking. In one way or the other the children are taught infused with some sort of political agenda. Therefore the aim of education, as Freire believed, is the liberation of the oppressed. Inspired by Freire's thinking Boal, globally acknowledged theatre practitioner and activist from Brazil, developed the very influential Theatre for the Oppressed. It was first played in Brazil, and then gradually spread in Europe and Asia. Like Freire, Boal also believed that audiences of his plays are not mere spectators, but are participants. Theatre of the oppressed made it a great tool of social communication by engaging the audiences in dialogic process and critical thinking.

### **EMERGENCE OF INDIAN STREET THEATER**

During the 1940s number of well known theatre personalities and enthusiasts started thinking beyond traditional venues and brought the theatre closer to the common men. Theatre personalities like Prasanna, Bansi Kaul, M K Raina went to remote place to perform without being under any kind of spotlight. Unlike the conventional form of theatre, street theatre emerged with its own set of aesthetics and transformed itself into a powerful medium of transformation. Street theatre represented the issues of ordinary people and reflected their turmoil and portrayed their pathetic economic conditions, especially during pre independence. As a result street theatre very soon became a popular mode of communication among the masses. Street theatre moved beyond the big stage and orchestra and spoke about the burning social, political and economical issues of the time. Post independence street theatre evolved into a popular form of intimate theatrical expression. In the ensuing times, street theatre became a champion of social causes by vehemently focusing on issues of liberation and development.

Since the time of its inception and through the days of development, street theater used to attract large number of audiences, since the plays spoke their stories, in their language and

charged no cost for being a part of the experience. One of the earliest street theater productions was 'Chargesheet', which was being played in the street of Calcutta for the audience of nearly a thousand workers and later performed at various parts of West Bengal. Street theatre was also subject to the growing intensity of political unrest of the 1970s. A number of productions focusing on burning political issues were performed in the streets by artists-activists. Badal Sircar, was one such prominent theatre personality the time who discarded the mainstream theatre and introduced open-air productions to communicate with his audiences directly.

Theatre groups like Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) used the mode of street theatre to communicate socially relevant issues. As the format evolved into popular mode of communication, street theatre spread across different parts of the country. Groups like Nishant from Delhi, Lok Mela Manch and Samvedan from Gujarat, Samudaya from Karnataka etc. used the medium in advocating socio-political change.

### **STREET THEATRE'S TRYST WITH COMMUNISM**

It is hard to ignore the association of street theatre with communist movement which began around 1930s. Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed in 1942 as a wing of Communist Party of India. During the 1950s IPTA went outdoors and Panu Lal produced and staged a play called 'Chargesheet' on the issue of communist leaders jailed without any kind of trial. This influenced artists like Utpal Dutt who carried out further experiments in street theatre (Downing, 2011). With the emergence of Jana Natya Manch or JANAM in 1973 street theatre received impetus and much needed push in bringing the popular issues to the mainstream. JANAM became very popular among the masses as well as intellectuals by bringing in vigour into street theatre. They took their plays among the working classes and did not confine themselves into the four walls of metropolis.

Like elsewhere street theatre in India was born in response to the political turmoil that prevailed in the country. The original objective of IPTA was to act as a supporting agent for anti-colonial struggle which after independence shifted towards bringing about social and economic change. Likewise even JANAM has evolved into a radical champion of public causes, although started as a proscenium theatre group initially. Despite the intimidation of the powerful administration JANAM soon became popular for its short street skits with hard hitting dialogues. It is a testimony to the group that it came through the litmus test of Emergency with the reputation of radical theatre activism. Unlike other theatre groups JANAM had the policy of collecting donations from the audiences after the performances. They never accepted donations from corporate companies, government or NGOs. JANAM's popular plays like Halla Bol, Hatyare, Raja ka Baja, Sangharsh Kareng Jitenge, Yeh Dil Mange More Guruji among others focussed on industrialization, price hike, unemployment, gender issues, globalization and government's policies towards these issues. (Janam, 2011).

### **SAMUDAYA MOVEMENT IN KARNATAKA**

Samudaya was formed in 1975 in Bangalore as a group, but rapidly became. It expanded gloriously in a very short time. By 1979, Samudaya had units in Mangalore, Mysore, Udupi, Dharwad, Shimoga and Raichur and by 1982 it had 18 centres all over Karnataka. K V Narayan's 'Huttava Baridare' was the first production of Samudaya directed by Prasanna with music by B V Karanth. This was followed by two plays Pata Ondu and Pata Eradu, again directed by Prasanna. In the second play the actors were from Bangalore slums.

The first street play staged by Samudaya was 'Belchi,' based on the ghastly burning of Dalit agricultural labourers in May 1977 in Bihar. The play was first performed in 1978 and Samudaya continued to perform the play for over 2500 shows. Belchi was written by C G Krishnaswamy and had songs by the Dalit poet Siddalingaiah. It was performed extensively in slum areas and the actors were also drawn from slums. Close on the heels of 'Belchi,' two more plays 'May Day' and 'Struggle' dramatized by the striking workers themselves were directed by Laxmi Chandrashekar and M C Anand. Rati Bartholomew (1983) mentions few more plays staged by Samudaya: 'Chasnala,' a play on the mine workers who had tragically died in Dhanabad in 1975; 'Pathre Sangappa,' the dramatization of the brutal murder of Dalit bonded labourer in by his master in Shimoga; 'Belevaduru,' on superstition and godmen; 'Bharata Darshana' on the Tarkunde Commission's report on police killings in Andhra Pradesh; 'Jeethadahatti Ranga,' on bonded labourers. Within the first year of street theatre, Samudaya staged eight plays, a great achievement in itself.

Samudaya very rapidly became people's movement in Karnataka, which was signified by the jathas organised periodically by the group. The money required for the jathas was raised by the sale of 20,000 greeting cards made by the artists and through individual donations. Samudaya covered most of the districts of Karnataka through vans and bicycles with around 10 groups with 20 to 25 permanent members. "Samudaya was truly a first majore successful people oriented, democratic, secular, mass cultural movement since the IPTA days. It not only took progressive, even revolutionary culture to the people, it drew the people themselves into the act of creating and nourishing this culture. The expansion of Samudaya's activities from a single unit to state wide network and from initially doing only proscenium theatre to doing street theatre, and from street theatre to other arts, from single instances of creative collaborations with people to massive state wide jathas- are indeed fascinating." (Deshpande, 1997).

Sudhanva Deshpande notes that Samudaya's initiation into street theatre was aided ably by theatre stalwarts like Badal Sircar in the form of performances and workshops for Samudaya actors. With the participation of greats like Badal Sircar, Prasanna, B V Karanth, C G Krishnaswamy, Siddalingaiah, D R Nagaraj, Lankesh among others, Samudaya had truly become both a cultural and people's movement of Karnataka, only one of its kind in the entire South India. True to the ideas proposed by Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, Samudaya successfully involved stakeholders like slum dwellers, factory workers in their street plays, making it truly participatory in nature. This was also one of the major factors as to why Samudaya became people's movement within a very short span of time.

## CONCLUSION

Although the journey of street theatre movement in India has essentially been Left-centred, the key to this movement was always to bring about a social change in the lives of the downtrodden and deprived sections of the society. As enunciated in the previous sections with examples, popular street theatre could play a significant participatory role in initiating the change by communicating socially relevant issues among the masses involving members of the target group in their performances. However, in order to maximise its potential and impact a change in the society, theatre productions should be linked with long term developmental goals. And for this to happen, street theatre should be more conversant of its community in indentifying issues of importance so as to blend the same in its productions along with native expressions which could be entertaining and also thought provoking. The impact would be double folded if the members of the audience also participate in the performances.

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