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## A Theatre That Lives – Political Theatre In Contemporary India

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the importance of theatre from a societal presentation perspective. It focuses on the requirements that will enable the theatre to continue existing by maintaining a connection to the common mass and their problems or complaints. The Theatre of the Rebels is all that political theatre is. Political Theatre needs to be utilized as an instrument for social change, not just for entertainment. Human life is valuable, and it is our responsibility as artists to help save it. Political Theatre played an integral role in India's freedom struggle – what purpose does it serve in the country today? This paper discusses political theatre in modern India as well as India at large.

**Keywords:** Theatre, Political Theatre, Indian Theatre, Dalit Theatre, Bertolt Brecht, Epic Theatre, Safdar Hashmi.

**Introduction:** Theatre has the power to reflect society and raise issues on the policies, behaviors, and attitudes of governments, social groups, and individuals. It has the power to challenge traditional thinking, bring forgotten truths to light, and give voice to the voiceless. Today's political theater is preoccupied with figuring out how to establish freedom of speech and action. It faces fresh challenges.

India is a largest democracy in the world. Theatre matters because democracy matters. Theatre is the essential art form of Democracy. India was once far more tolerant of political theatre. Ironically, The case doesn't remain the same now. The older generation of theatre practitioners like Mahesh Dattani, Sunil Shanbag, Maya Rao, Na Muthuswamy, Gnani Sankaran and Mangai Arasu continue to ask urgent questions about who we are as a nation. there are new voices seeking to be heard too: Irawati Karnik, Abhishek Majumdar, Neel Chaudhuri, to name a few. The young Chennai director Aruna Ganesh Ram recently embarked on the concept of freedom, Director Quasar Padamsee, SwarThounaojam, a Manipuri playwright and activist are some more such names. But in a country with a population of over a billion, their voices are far too few.

When we write a play, we aim to make a statement about the world. It will likely focus on issues like economy, politics, how the general public responds to these issues, how it affects our lives, and issues like gender, class, and religion. A person who writes political plays doesn't decide to do so; it's just how they choose to see and interpret the world.

The police departments in three cities put pressure on Evam, a theatre troupe based in Chennai, to cancel their performances of Ali J, a monologue about modern-day Islam and what it means to be a Muslim today. The play, which was banned from being staged in Mumbai in the year 2014. When asked about the facts, Karthik Kumar, actor and director of Ali J said, "In spite of obtaining prior permission from the city police regarding the play (which was to be staged at Jagriti, Bangalore), a team of police came to the venue and told us to cancel the show at the last minute. It was shocking for us. It is sad that the police failed to provide us the protection to stage the play and instead asked us to cancel it. Since the dates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls have been announced, the cops used that as the reason we cannot stage our play here. It apparently goes against the code of conduct with regard to the elections. But the fact is that our play has been banned in Mumbai and Chennai in the recent past, even though there were no elections in the offing. The Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, a fundamentalist group, is gagging our freedom of expression."

The play cannot be performed, according to the religious organization, considering it is "anti-national." In reality, when this theatre troupe opened the play in January 2014 at Bangalore's Ranga Shankara, the conservative organization protested. The play was staged with the help of the JP Nagar police, and the crowd enthusiastically applauded. Ranga Shankara's creative director, Arundhati Nag, who battled against all obstacles to present the play in January, said, "In a democracy, everyone has the right to express their views. Banning of any form of expression is not right. Those who oppose the play have every right to come up with a new play countering Ali J." When asked if the play is 'provocative, Arundhati says, "The purpose of every play is to provoke the audience, be it in emotionally or mentally."

Earlier, plays and other forms of performing arts required prior permission from the police commissioner concerned before being staged. Two years ago, a Supreme Court judgement clearly stated that no police permission is required to stage a play or any other performing art. It's getting alarming that more and more fundamentalist organizations are focusing on theatre companies around the nation by literally killing their basic and fundamental right of freedom of expression and freedom of speech. This is deeply disheartening, for me particularly as an artist.

Bertolt Brecht is closely linked with the Epic theatre style, and there are a range of elements associated with it. Epic theatre often features a non-linear plot and episodic moments that, when put together, would create a montage effect. The narrative communicated might be told from the viewpoint of a single storyteller and the choice of viewpoint can appeal to different groups. Within Epic theatre, audiences should remain distant, not becoming emotionally involved in the performance, so that they can make rational judgements about the social or political issues involved. Political theatre can be used to present a campaign or show an injustice to an audience in the hope of making changes to the situation shown. It can be a useful style in raising awareness about a particular subject but it is important to research a range of issues, and establish

the message that will be conveyed to the audience, at the outset of the devising process. Epic theatre is considered an experimental form of political theatre. Bertolt Brecht established it in the 1920s in Germany with the intention of appealing more to the intellect than the feelings and emotions of the audience or the spectators.

Twenty-five years ago, the street-theatre playwright and director Safdar Hashmi was killed in the middle of a performance during local municipal elections near Delhi. Safdar Hashmi (12 April 1954 – 2 January 1989) was a communist playwright and director, best known for his work with Street Theatre in India. He was also an actor, lyricist, and theorist, and he is still considered an important voice in Indian political theatre. He was an activist of the Students' Federation of India (SFI).

He was a founding member of Jana Natya Manch (People's Theatre Front; JANAM for short) in 1973, which grew out of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). He was murdered in 1989 in Jhandapur, while performing a street play prominently named as "Halla Bol"

On 1 January 1989, the JANAM troupe began a performance of the street play Halla Bol (Raise Your Voice!), during the Ghaziabad municipal elections in Sahibabad's Jhandapur village (near Delhi). During the performance, the troupe was attacked by Indian National Congress workers. Hashmi was fatally injured and died the following day. On 4 January 1989, two days after his death, his wife Moloysree Hashmi went to the same spot again with the JANAM troupe, and defiantly completed the play. Fourteen years after the incident, a Ghaziabad court convicted ten people, including Congress Party member Mukesh Sharma, for the murder. The writer Bhisham Sahni, along with many other artists, founded the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) in February 1989, as an open platform for politically and socially conscious artists. I always bow down to such dedicated visionary Theatre Lovers.

That was the power of political theatre by then.

The world's first political and social theatre was created 2,500 years ago. A "Buddhist theatre" was what it was. History provides additional evidence for it. This theatre blew the trumpet for socio-cultural revolutions in India and helped to evolve socio-political consciousness. Change or transformation towards a socio-political awakening was the main goal of this theatre. The ultimate goal of this Theatre was to eradicate inequality and achieve equality.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's "Satya Shodhak Jalse" was formed against the backdrop of this political theatre; later, "Ambedkar Jalse" emerged

from it. This political theater encouraged a revolution without sacrificing bloodshed. Afterwards, in India, during the period of independence, a few more political theatre groups such as Janantya troupe and EPTA, were formed in the 1950s as a result of the impact of Marxist/ Leftist ideology. This is affected by thought of Karl Marx, Lenin, Mao's

ideology. This ideology believes in revolution that depends on bloodshed. However, "Dalit Theatre" was founded by those who embraced the ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity, and nonviolent revolution in order to effect change against inequity. These principles were essential in the fight against social inequities and injustices faced by Dalits, who are marginalized and oppressed communities in India. In the 1950s and 1960s, this political theatre came into being. Political Theatre was not merely an artistic expression but a form of political activism. It aimed to challenge and change the socio-political structures that perpetuated discrimination and inequality.

Dalit Theatre has persisted in India beyond the mid-20th century, adapting to changing contexts and continuing to address social issues. While it may not always be referred to by the same name, its core mission remains influential. Over time, the theatre's form and presentation have evolved. It may appear under different names or take various forms, reflecting the changing dynamics of social activism and artistic expression in contemporary India. Overall, Dalit Theatre represents a significant cultural and political movement that continues to impact and reflect the ongoing struggles for social justice and equality in India.

**Conclusion:** Theatre is not just an art form but a medium through which political and social issues are explored and expressed. The notion that every play is political implies that even if a play doesn't explicitly address political themes, it still reflects and influences societal values, norms, and power dynamics. Plays often mirror the social and political climate of their time, whether they challenge existing norms, reinforce them, or simply reflect the status quo. The audience is not a passive observer but an active participant. Their reactions, interpretations, and discussions contribute to the meaning of the play and influence how its political messages are perceived. Theatre often raises questions and issues that prompt discussion and debate. The issues presented in a play encourage the audience to engage in dialogue, analyse different viewpoints, and consider the implications of the themes presented.

The idea that the political nature is deeply rooted in human nature suggests that politics, or the influence of power and social organization, is intrinsic to human interactions. Politics involves decisions about power, resources, and social norms, which permeate all aspects of human life.

The assertion that all theatre is always political reinforces the idea that theatre inherently involves political elements, whether through its content, its impact, or its role in society. Even abstract or non-political plays contribute to the broader political conversation by shaping or reflecting cultural attitudes.

Theatre, by its very nature, is a political activity because it involves collective creation and discussion, reflecting and influencing societal norms and power structures. Through

engaging with theatre, audiences participate in a political process that can challenge, reinforce, or transform social and political perspectives.

Only Political Theatre is a futuristic form of theatre that has an everlasting lifespan.

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