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## Biography: The life and times of firebrand artist Safdar Hashmi, and the legacy he left behind

An excerpt from 'Safdar Hashmi: Towards Theatre for a Democracy', by Anjum Katyal.

[Anjum Katyal](#)

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Safdar Hashmi.

*The streets are choked with grief.*

A river of humanity follows the cortege of a young man through the streets of Delhi. Students and workers, writers and artists, ordinary citizens – some weeping, some shouting slogans, and some silent, stunned by the suddenness of it all. They have come to express solidarity and mourn the murder of the person whose body is on the bier; someone who embodied hope and resilience and the courage to fight for a more equitable society. Someone who spoke for them, who urged them to speak for themselves.

I watch the outpouring of outrage and sorrow, the pent-up energy of protest and resistance, poignant and heartening. Unexpectedly, my eyes fill with tears.

Why? What about this scene stirs me so?

The footage I am viewing is from a documentary film made in early 1989. I am revisiting it more than 30 years later, at a time darker, arguably, than the “dark times” the documentary references at its close. Which in turn references the dark times that Brecht wrote about in his oft-repeated quote, “In the dark times/Will there also be singing?/Yes, there will also be singing./About the dark times.” It is our tragedy, as humanity, that the relevance of this quote refuses to dim.

My tears, perhaps, are for the sheer courage and hope that keeps alive faith in a just society, despite the tyranny of the powers that hate and divide.

On 1 January 1989 Safdar Hashmi (12 April 1954-2 January 1989), theatre worker and cultural activist, was attacked by political goons while performing a street play with his troupe Jana Natya Manch (Janam) and succumbed the following day to the brutal assault that left him fatally wounded. He was only 34 at the time.

This happened at Jhandapur, a village on the outskirts of Delhi, and the play was *Halla Bol* (Raise Your Voice!) which was based on the issue of workers’ rights. Ram Bahadur, a factory worker, was killed on the spot. Safdar too fell to their brutal blows as he attempted to cover the escape of some colleagues.

Hours later Safdar died in hospital. People across the nation were stunned with disbelief at this sudden tragedy. His mother, in her account of *The Fifth Flame*, describes it vividly:

“Early next morning on the lawns of Rabindra Bhavan, a crowd began to collect. Telephones, telegrams, and telexes were coming in from all over the country. An atmosphere of distress and disbelief spread as the news was reported in some of the national dailies.”

There was a spontaneous outcry, a conflagration of grief and rage that drew thousands of people from all walks of life to pay their last respects to his battered body, and to form part of the funeral procession. Qamar Hashmi continues:

“Is it possible to forget that day when thousands of the city’s intellectuals, creative persons and workers walked behind his bier in a funeral procession that covered a distance of nine miles right through the city to the electric crematorium where at last

we bade him farewell? Even today that image is etched in memory – the long, endless line of mourners, the last of whom could not even be seen from the truck; and the crowds gathered along the route, maintaining a subdued, respectful silence as the funeral procession wound its way through the main streets of Delhi.”

The response of many artists and fellow cultural activists remains recorded for posterity: the rage and bitter despair of his close associates Habib Tanvir and MK Raina; the protest by Shabana Azmi on behalf of the film fraternity; and many more. Janam, with Safdar’s widow Moloysee (Mala) Hashmi at the helm, insisted on returning a day later to the same spot in Jhandapur to complete the cruelly interrupted play. Needless to say, the atmosphere was electric with the solidarity of supporters, mourners, and well-wishers. Theatre activists took to the streets to stage protest plays of their own, across the length and breadth of the country; and 12 April, Safdar’s birthday, was declared National Street Theatre Day.

What was it about this young cultural activist that had caught the imagination of a country in such a manner that his death triggered this groundswell of solidarity and protest? What had he come to symbolise? What meaning did his life and death contain for the common man? And is he still relevant to our times?

The last question has been answered in an overwhelmingly urgent affirmative. Safdar’s memory resonates today in protest sites across India. Sudhanva Deshpande, talking of what made him pen his memories of Safdar and Janam admits that when he saw ‘young undergraduate students holding a placard saying, “We are inheritors of Safdar Hashmi, and we will speak up”, it struck him forcibly that

“the figure of Safdar Hashmi had once again become so relevant. Because he was a young man who was an activist, an artist, an intellectual, who was killed for doing what he believed in, for speaking up; and today across the country there are young people who are on the move ... who are dissenting, who are posing tough questions to those in power [ . . . ] So Safdar and his legacy have again become very relevant in this context. And I just felt that this was the moment, this was the time, when I needed to bring the story of Safdar . . . alive to the young people of today.”

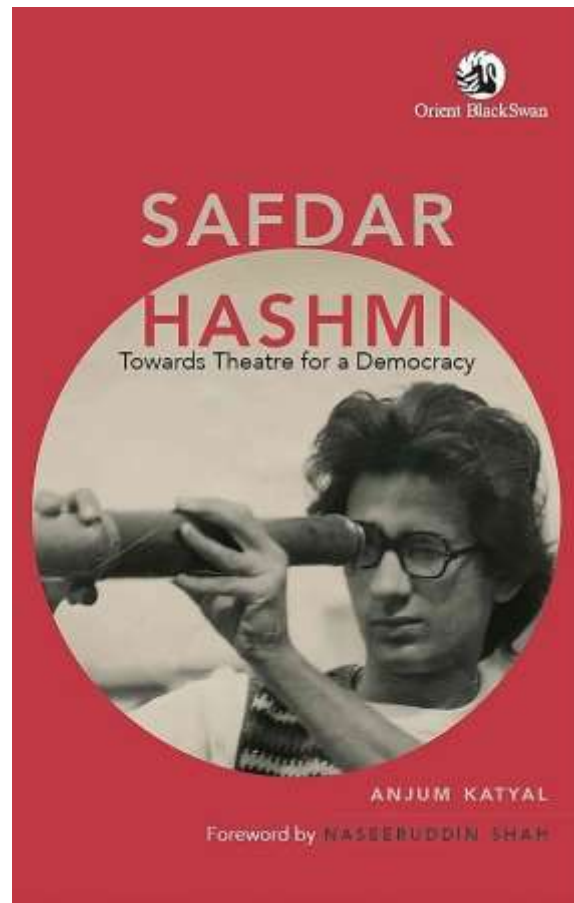
More than 30 years ago Safdar Hashmi was struck down in the midst of his work as an activist artist. The theatre he was dedicated to building and spreading was, he was convinced, vital for a society and a polity like India, where the work of democracy was still a work in progress. When Safdar was growing up, the struggle for a sovereign democratic republic guaranteeing equal rights to all its citizens regardless of caste or creed was fresh in everyone’s minds. The brutality of Partition, the human cost it exacted, was a lived reality. The importance of ensuring that the people of India were wholly participatory in the democratic process, through universal adult franchise, a hard-won right that the newly independent “sovereign

democratic republic" upheld, was paramount to activists of Safdar's bent. Inclusion of those most marginalised, most vulnerable, economically and socially, was essential in this mission to build a true democracy, which put the people, the ordinary citizens, at the heart and the helm of the democratic process, no mean feat for a country just emerging from feudal and colonial authority systems. There was a deep realisation that this commitment to democracy must necessarily go hand in hand with the building up, the strengthening, of democratic value systems, processes and practices. This was not something that could be taken for granted. It is against this background that Safdar's street theatre should be viewed: as a part of the project of democracy in India.

Safdar came of age at an extraordinary time, when the entire world was seeing the assertion of youth as a potent political force. Left idealism was riding a wave, from anti-capitalist protests in the US to Mao-influenced militancy in many areas of the world, including the Naxalite movement in India. The feminist and women's liberation movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and various forms of campus activism, were making headlines everywhere. As Safdar began his work in theatre, which was, right from the beginning, politically engaged, the country faced a milestone moment in its comparatively recent journey as a democracy: the Emergency, when all democratic rights were summarily withdrawn. After the Emergency was lifted, Safdar resumed work with a strengthened realisation that Janam's kind of theatre was an important part of the democratic process which required educating the masses and spreading awareness of their rights and responsibilities as citizens, questioning and protesting injustice, and raising issues that were central to a healthy functioning of democracy. Even though his own life and work came to an untimely and brutal end, he had already set the groundwork for a rapid spread of street theatre that continued what he had begun, with his own theatre group, Janam, being at the forefront of this growth.

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*Excerpted with permission from Safdar Hashmi: Towards Theatre for a Democracy, Anjum Katyal, Orient Black Swan.*