

An artist as an agent of change

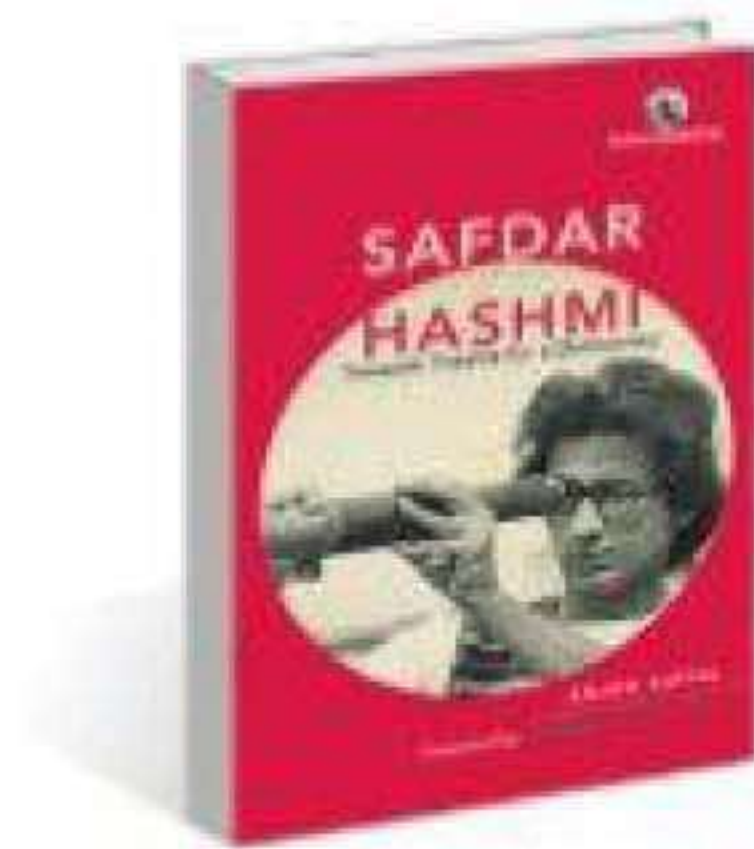
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LET me clarify at the very outset that writing an objective review of Anjum Katyal's expansive analysis of the life and times of Safdar Hashmi, his Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) theatre troupe and its impact on the cultural and political milieu of contemporary Indian society is not easy for me. I directly experienced Safdar's renaissance tutelage (the last 15 months of his life), and became an important element in the subsequent theatre movement. Those 15 months with Safdar created a lifetime of progressive influences and JANAM literally shaped my worldview.

Still, I was captivated by the book. Katyal has been able to bring in a wide perspective keeping Safdar as the anchorman, yet spreading the net of sensitive understanding of a tumultuous century of colonial and post-colonial world — the 20th century, with its great imperialist wars, freedom struggles, peoples' revolutions, peace movements, fascist takeovers and cultural upsurge. She does this by simply linking what influenced Safdar with his perennial democratic idealism, his eclectic and prolific cultural expressions and communications, and how his life and its output influenced his times and generations to come.

The author does it in a very objective and succulent manner by employing many well-known voices — emotive and intellectual, lay and participatory, cultural and political, activists and academics, from various spectrums. Among them are those who knew Safdar personally (mother, wife, colleagues, etc) and those who didn't (scholars, observers, cultural practitioners). And then she brings in her all-encompassing perspective, making even the polemics (political and cultural) very simple, direct and readable.

Safdar Hashmi dreamt of an egalitarian and just society, where creativity reigns. Unlike armchair dreamers and intellectuals, he tried to realise his dream by actually working towards it. He created theatre, music, poetry and took it directly to the masses to raise their consciousness. He wrote articles and essays to communicate an understanding of this aspiration for progressive change and taught students in college.



SAFDAR HASHMI: TOWARDS THEATRE FOR A DEMOCRACY

by Anjum Katyal.
Orient BlackSwan.
Pages 240.
₹900



Hashmi dreamt of an egalitarian and just society, where creativity reigns. PHOTO COURTESY: HASHMI FAMILY

Katyal's book on Safdar Hashmi is a reminder that no form of freedom is achieved without the consistent rigour of struggle and collective aspirations

He chose a Marxist philosophical path to understand the social reality around him and worked on the ground to fight for the rights and needs of the working class. He strived to forge unity of all humanists and progressive elements in society. But before he could further his ideas and creative and political endeavours, he was brutally murdered by political goons while he was performing a play called 'Halla Bol' with his street theatre troupe at Sahibabad near Delhi. They were opposed to the theme of the play: minimum wage demands of the workers. Post his death, a shocked creative community got galvanised across the country to unite and stand up for freedom of expression. His legacy continues.

In a fairly short book, Katyal manages to discuss a whole range of topics — social, cultural and political. Together, these laid the ground for a street theatre movement in India, eventually breaking down the very process of the form and content of political street theatre, its craft and philosophy, its reach and impact, as well as the genesis of all political expressions — the trigger for the idea. Safdar's thoughts and voice are employed from time to time to keep it alive

and ticking with positive energy, which epitomised Safdar and propelled a groundswell of cultural movements across the country, post his untimely death.

It is clearly a very important book at a time when the very idea of a just and democratic society seems like a pipe dream. It is a reminder to the dormant citizenry and the active dreamers that no form of freedom is achieved without the consistent rigour of struggle and collective aspirations.

Safdar was a product of both the euphoria of political independence from colonialism and despondency of the horror of Partition. He grew up while various socio-political movements raged around him, some secessionist and most for socio-economic justice. He came into cultural maturity when the draconian Emergency threw the Opposition out of gear. His most active period was the one which witnessed the horror of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom and the growing of the communal Frankenstein into its fundamentalist avatar around the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict, which had a tectonic effect in 21st century India.

The present generation is struggling to make sense of democratic principles.

The likes of Safdar Hashmi irrigated a fertile progressive cultural space, taking theatre directly to the toiling masses, engaging them in a lively debate about their rights and needs. In such a background, we are faced with a massive dilemma and conundrum: how to rescue the democratic cultural space from the stranglehold of the right-wing fascist propaganda, which with immense corporate investment and official machinery has appropriated and hijacked both the mainstream and alternative spaces of communication, lacing these with the vicious 'hate and divide' poison under the garb of a holy revivalist nationalistic agenda.

It would have been very interesting to see how Safdar would have responded to this monstrous challenge. But, as vividly illustrated by Katyal, Safdar's ability to bring a wide spectrum of voices together for a common cause of nurturing democratic fervour, and his constant efforts to forge artistic unity for highlighting the common man's struggle and his consistent endeavour to take art and culture directly to the people has a big lesson for all of us. Especially for the generation under whose very complacent nose (while it buries itself in its reel culture and Insta consumption), the constitutional guarantees are being diluted daily.

While Safdar kept the cultural flag of 'justice for all' flying in the last quarter of the 20th century, in her passionate analysis, Katyal bares the ideas for us to take clear hints and cues to raise that flag again.