

Cacophony of democracy

A rich addition to the body of work on Safdar Hashmi, this book reminds us above all of the relevance of making art in the darkest of times. **A. MANGAI**

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and c____ and hand and a____e holy!

Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!

The bum's as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my soul are holy!

The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy!

Thus “howled” the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg in 1955. In India, we witnessed “the best minds of my [our] generation destroyed” in the dawn of 1989 with the murder of the playwright and political activist Safdar Hashmi, followed by many more in the last decade of the 21st century. *Safdar Hashmi: Towards Theatre for Democracy* by Anjum Katyal

Safdar Hashmi

Towards Theatre for a Democracy



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howls for democracy. This study is a rich addition to the Safdar Hashmi oeuvre, placing as it does his life, works, and dreams in the larger context of keeping dialogues alive, being open to new forms and modes of reaching out, evolving horizontal leadership, being sensitive to the porous aspects of cultures in India and reminding us of the relevance of making art in the darkest of times. Katyal writes in her introduction about her affective response after watching the documentary film on Hashmi’s funeral march: “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.”

Offering the reader Safdar’s most significant contribution, namely “theatre of democracy”, the study draws from already existing resources, such as Safdar’s mother Qamar Hashmi’s recollections titled *The Fifth Flame*; Safdar’s interviews with Eugene van Erven in 1988; collections of his writings; memoirs by his wife, Moloyashree, Habib Tanvir, and M.K. Raina; publications of the Safdar Hashmi Me-



morial Trust; Arjun Ghosh's academic study titled *A History of the Jana Natya Manch*; Sudhanva Deshpande's brilliant insider narrative titled *Halla Bol: The Death and Life of Safdar Hashmi*; and Katyal's own interviews with Safdar's associates some 30 years after his death.

What I found most moving in the book is the elaborate description of Safdar's childhood that shaped him. Corroborated by his brother, Sohail Hashmi, years after his passing, it says something about Safdar's core: openness and compassion. As Safdar himself acknowledged, the music he heard in childhood came to him spontaneously.

The book also discusses international student and youth movements in detail, providing a context for similar student movements in India. Added to this rich repository is the history of how street theatre was an established mode of resistance in India and how Safdar walked into it. Katyal's recounting of the history of street theatre as political theatre of protest in Bengal from the 1930s and its close affinity to the Left organisations traces the political legacy of Safdar and the Jana Natya Manch (Janam), the radical theatre group he founded in 1973.

India's regional histories are unique and grounded in their specific realities. Sudhanva's book gives us a detailed history of Samudaya, one of Karnataka's oldest street theatre groups, and the Andhra Praja Natya Mandali. The "national" can never be the sum of the regions, and is a nuanced understanding of how

▼ **Safdar Hashmi**

in *Aya Chunav*, Janam's first political play performed in Hissar, Haryana, in 1981. BY SPECIAL

ARRANGEMENT

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each region negotiates from the groundedness of its specific realities.

The campaign for communal harmony in Delhi in 1984 after the anti-Sikh riots is well-known today. Katyal traces Janam's engagement with the issue of communalism much before that, through the play *Hatyare* (1978), which addressed the Hindu-Muslim riots in Aligarh. Set in the lock-making industry in Aligarh, Hashmi's childhood town, the play exposes the vested interests of those who indulge in divisive politics. The translation in this book of this play along with a new translation of *Aurat* and *Machine* enriches the repertoire of street theatre in India.

ATENTION TO GENDER has always been pronounced in Janam. Katyal devotes a whole chapter to *Aurat*, the all-time classic brought to life on stage by Molyashree. The upsurge of the women's movement was echoed in the plays, documentary films, and literacy films made by Doordarshan at that time, and Safdar was involved in all of them.

What I missed, though, was the story of how Habib Tanvir developed the play *Motaram ka Satyagraha* (adapted from Premchand's short story) along with Janam. Sudhanva, in his characteristic light-hearted style, has recorded how the role of Chameli Jaan the courtesan, deftly played by Mo-

loyashree, drew flak within the group itself. In many ways, this play exposed the hypocrisies within progressive circles regarding female agency. It also underscored how important it is that female desire and sexual agency become part of our discussions on gender, along with the never-ending issues of violence and safe space.

THE LAST CHAPTER highlights how Safdar passionately worked to help “build and strengthen democratic processes and practice” even as he worked to build a cultural centre in a working-class locale. The process, applied both within and outside the group and in all the mediums Safdar explored, stresses inclusivity and collaboration; innate egalitarianism; addressing

doubts without evading; collective decision-making; mobilising political artists across the nation; caring for theatre workers’ dignity and economic well-being; and above all “to re-humanise the humanity” as the Brazilian theatre practitioner and political activist Augusto Boal envisioned.

Safdar stood steadfast to keep spaces of “opposition, protest, critique, dissent” alive. At a time when all of these are under siege, we need to build these spaces, large and small, to hold ourselves together. Katyal’s book reminds us of the urgency to do that. ■

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