

Reclaiming Public Spaces in Post-pandemic India (Kolkata): Activist Theatre, Gender and a Resurgence of the Marginal

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The politics of our post-Covid times are expressed through various registers. In Kolkata, one especially powerful artistic medium for such expressions was the revival of street theatre as young and senior theatre practitioners plunged into exploring critical issues that have been all-pervasive since the beginning of the pandemic. As people finally started to venture out, content to be amidst human congregations, street plays, being located in open-air spaces, proved both economical and safe. The issues these street performances highlighted and their modes of presentations could be described as what Tony Fisher calls ‘activist theatre’ – which mobilizes the people by interpellating its audience around a specific grievance or issue that possesses an emotional appeal.¹ These performances are a form of artistic activism, or ‘artivism’ as termed by Chantal Mouffe: the use of aesthetic means for political activism, ‘as a counter-hegemonic move against the capitalist appropriation of aesthetics’.²

Bringing a range of street plays together, the aim was to create a festival of radical street theatres of the post-Covid moment (2021–2022). The festival initiative also seemed like a good way of seeing/showcasing as well as supporting these practices and their makers. The result was a five-day street theatre festival, followed by a seminar on street theatre and political activism, organized by the People’s Little Theatre (PLT) in Kolkata held in November 2022.³ Curating the festival, however, proved difficult as there were many performances with varying themes and performance techniques to choose from. Selection of the space and ensuring an adequate and receptive public to attend were equally critical. Increasingly, we realized that public spaces were difficult to procure; official state and government functions were prioritized, and PLT’s request was rejected.⁴ In a flurry, a search for a new location was initiated, and a space was found within the Jadavpur University Campus, allotted after a collaboration between PLT and the Jadavpur University Research Scholars’ Association (JURSA).⁵ The Jadavpur University campus has historically been a hub of student politics and operated as what can be called a ‘counter-public space’.⁶ The audiences here consisted of students, who although from varied socio-economic backgrounds had good foundational academic qualifications and cultural capital. Owing to this atmosphere within the campus and the composition of students, the audiences were more receptive to politically motivated performances than might have been the case on the streets in front of theatres, which had been the curators’ original intent.

If we make an attempt to classify the themes of these street plays, we would arrive at two principal categories: (1) the crises of migration and impoverishment as a

consequence of the pandemic and lockdown; (2) the different kinds of social violence, especially gender (and intersectional) violence that occurred in the face of the pandemic. The first category includes two plays by Gobordanga Naksha, a suburban theatre group, formed in 1981: *Pandemic*, depicting the suffering of people during the lockdown; and *Hulo*, a play about a beggar and his struggles. Another play, *Jamlo Makdam*, which depicted a young girl, Jamlo's journey home during the lockdown, was performed by Chena Adhuli, another suburban group formed in 2010; furthermore, *Bagh Chal* (Tiger Trap) was performed by a street theatre group, Bisorgo.

In the second category, the plays include: *Aye Brishti Jhepe* (Come, Oh Rain!), performed by the collective, Sobar Poth (formed in 2013); *Muzahemat* (Resistance) by Srabanti Bhattacharya (first devised in 2019); and *Humare Gaane* (Our Songs), performed by *Swabhav Meyeder Gaaner Dol* (a women's singing group formed on 9 January 2021 as part of a larger pre-existing theatre group called *Swabhav* formed in 2008). These three dealt with women and their plight during Covid-19 – women at the intersection of all other identities were subjected to forms of violence that were unprecedented. Ankur Roy Chowdhury's *Love Story* represented many such marginal voices. By examining these categories of street plays, the relevance of this festival in light of the pandemic can be gauged and analysed in more detail.

Migration and impoverishment in the face of the pandemic

The sudden announcement of a nationwide lockdown by the Government of India on 24 March 2020 caused, within a night's notice, thousands of labourers and their families, including children, and women working in the big cities to be stranded, without medical aid, economic support and resources. Hundreds died and thousands underwent irreparable trauma, living and migrating under brutalized conditions across the country.⁷ Consequences of isolation presented themselves in the forms of acute class disparity, caste discrimination, and gender divide, given the unequal distribution of resources, access to healthcare, technology and education, in the Indian context between different classes of society and women at the intersection of various modes of vulnerabilities.

Pandemic, as the title suggests, depicts the plight of the migrant workers, picking up common issues but also certain particular incidents. Starting with the ways in which workers and daily-wage-earners were thrown out on the streets due to the lockdown, the play recreated how and why the reverse migration – from the cities and places of work to their homes – became an imperative and the risk such a journey entailed. The choreography expressed the labour and physicality of the migrants' journeys as the actors moved in circles, asserting the hardship of the migrant workers with every encircling of the performance area. One of the narrated incidents was about the sixteen migrant labourers that were killed on railway tracks after a train ran them over. The middle-class public was featured in their drawing rooms, speculating about the different reasons for the migrants' deaths: whether it was suicide or an act of drunkenness, or an incident of communal killing in a dispute over an eloped couple. Highlighting death and poverty, the play tried to show both the middle-class apathy and media sensationalism over the plight of the destitute people – turned into fodder of mass consumption.

The migrants walking back home and the multiplicity of their hardships came to life with the play *Jamlo Makdam*, the story of the eponymous protagonist, a vulnerable twelve-year-old girl, a child labourer on a chilli plantation in Telangana, who tried to walk 150 kilometres to reach home.⁸ In the play, Jamlo, throughout her journey, pursues a conversation with a god, revealing her yearning for home and depicting what it means for children to be sent away to work. Jamlo, along with the other migrant labourers, tries to make way by cutting trees and clearing pathways. Lost, dehydrated, starved and struck with fear, she continues her journey to reach her parents but ultimately fails to make it. She passes away from dehydration, fifty kilometres away from home. Her desperation to maintain resilience, avoid fatigue and remain on her feet created a theatrical gesture replete with energetic impulses. Tied with a rope to a pillar, she jumps forward constantly and is drawn back by the rope which binds her. Her momentum is forceful, as she leaps forward every time – until she collapses and passes away – while her god can only look at her ironically.

Hulo, the third play in this category, is about a character who does not fit into any of the established social categories and is thus infantilized and treated like an animal.⁹ His hunger drives him to snatch food from the shops and when ridiculed and beaten up, in a fantastic twist, he pees in the face of his abusers, and sets fire to the shop, creating an allegory of the anger of the working class. Cloaked within the narrative are issues of labour, gaslighting by the media, and caste dynamics. In a similar vein, a ruffian, in the play *Bagh Chal*, refuses to budge from his location in the street. He is a beggar, who is so devoid of any means of livelihood that even the pandemic has no effect on his condition. Never one to seek work, he is content to remain in the state he has already been in – depicting the reality of the poor in India. Both these plays are about hunger, starvation, forced displacement and multiple layers of marginalization, which are similar to *Jamlo Makdam* and *Pandemic*, and yet they take a different route to register their protest by using humour beyond realism or authenticity. Taken together, all five plays, with their choreographic and dramaturgical variations, open up a range of experiences for the audience and invite them to think through protest strategies that can transform victimhood into empowerment.

Gender violence and intersectionality

Many of the plays highlighted women's issues – and also created a dialogue with their audiences on means of redressal and resistance. The important point to remember is that the global pandemic has been a critical factor in increasing violence against women, especially domestic violence, during long periods of lockdown. While women's vulnerabilities during the reverse migration exposed them to various kinds of public violence, lockdown forced millions of others to be confined to homes and often within abusive private spaces. As the female characters in these plays strive for collective resistance from their individual struggle, the female performers extend solidarity by the embodiment of their suffering – underlining that the marginalized women were not alone in society.

In *Aye Brishti Jhepe*, the collective voice of young actors – mostly women – became one as they dramatized many recent incidents of sexual violence against women and children. Although not specifically mentioned, it related to the pandemic lockdowns, which left women confined to their houses with abusive male family members and neighbours. The play depicts the vulnerability of young girls falling prey to sexual violence while seeking companionship. The performance intends to create discomfort in the audience by repeatedly holding direct eye contact with the spectators and confronting them in their silence. In one scene, the performers hold up a newspaper with the actual headlines, going from one audience to another, whispering, ‘This is a play. These things only happen in the newspaper. They do not happen in our homes.’ Through the device of Brechtian alienation, they hold the audience as well as the state responsible for perpetrating further violence. The violated body of the girl is used by every agent in society for its own purpose – from the state, the media to the political parties whereas in the end the seemingly lifeless body is held up by the performers as they discover signs of life and therefore, the hope of resistance within her. In protest, they break out in anger, singing, ‘Shout, girl. Let’s see how far your voice reaches. All we can do is stand in silence, holding candles.’ The mother/leader starts in a robust voice, and is then joined by the other members of the cast, inviting audiences to join in.

Though the pandemic brought out the pitfalls of women’s vulnerabilities, the real malady in the Indian context is both historical and persistent. Srabanti Bhattacharya’s *Muzahemat* is performed in the *odissi* style of dance. Dressed in a black saree, a colour considered taboo in *odissi*, she embodies the pain and torture inflicted on women’s bodies.¹⁰ In one of her dances to an instrumental piece, she depicts an incident of rape that occurred in Hanshkali, West Bengal of a fourteen-year-old girl on 4 August 2022.¹¹ The accused was associated with the current ruling party of West Bengal. The woman’s resistance against patriarchy and the state that facilitated this heinous act was shown by her insistence on standing up while she was being pushed around and molested. In her performance, which is non-verbal but focused on the body, Bhattacharya creates symbolic gestures like struggling to stand, to push back her aggressors and even when unable to stand up, she slowly places her legs in the air from her position on the floor. She puts her head on a step with a provocative glare directed towards the audience. The uneven space that would have generally stopped a dancer was used to invoke the feeling of discomfort caused by rape, indicating the anger of the woman towards society (represented by the audience) and the state, holding them responsible for the violence inflicted on women. As her legs go up in the air, the strong muscular prone body reverses representations of violation, where the woman lies broken.

If bodily representation was a powerful moment of protest purpose – the voices of a group, many of the members of which were genuinely faced with marginalization – distinguished the singing group Swabhav Meyeder Gaan er Dol (literally translated, Women’s Singing Group) created with the intention of providing a real space for these girls. This allowed them to find a community in times of isolation, speak, sing, artistically engage, collaborate and also potentially find an alternate profession as performers. In many of the cases, the families have been against them performing in

public, resulting in many girls having to leave the group or struggling to continue. Their songs discuss secularism and religious oppression. For example, a musical adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Match Girl' in Hindi speaks for the sufferings of the working class, while the piece 'Fair and Lovely' is about cosmetic products and capitalist marketing strategies that promise fair skin to dark-skinned girls. One of the songs weaves a tale of two brothers: *badbu* and *khushbu* — bad and good smells, respectively — where everybody desires to embrace the latter and eliminate the former. It is only when 'badbu' is completely gone, its necessity is realized by everyone. Couched in the language of allegory, the idea of bad smell is generally associated with the lower castes and the menial jobs performed by them in India. Through disparate themes, the women performers, mostly young Muslim girls, through their presence in the public space of street theatre engender a language of protest and address modes of structural, socio-cultural marginalization that are similar to many instances of actual discrimination they themselves had to face as women and as religious minorities.

While women are particularly vulnerable to different forms of violence, intersections of poverty, religion, class and caste expose larger social vulnerabilities, which are interrelated with the subordinate position of women in society. Ankur Roy Chowdhury's *Love Story*, using the popular folk form '*katha*' or collective storytelling, weaves a chain of stories in a continuous narrative presented through humour, parodies and songs. He talks about three interconnected love stories — between a Hindu girl and a Muslim farmer boy, between a farmer and his land, and between a red and an orange tomato.¹² The form itself carries a sense of eternity within it, narrating the misery of the downtrodden in every society, of peasants, women and Muslims, while also celebrating the small joys of their lives, rooted in their respective existence. Using ecocriticism as his lens, Roy Chowdhury weaves a layered narrative encompassing the triad between the forces of globalization and neoliberalism, the destruction of the environment and the plight of the marginalized peasants, religious minorities and labourers as a result of the encroaching upon their land by industrial and government forces in the name of development. Roy Chowdhury's *Love Story* counters the singular upper-class, male narratives propagated by the mainstream media by representing a plethora of marginalized voices. The interweaving of women's issues with other forms of marginalization in society highlights the 'pluralism, contingency and endless irreconcilability of diverse and multiple relations of inequality'.¹³

The post-pandemic street theatre, therefore, upheld all of the vulnerabilities, inequalities and feelings of rage experienced during the pandemic. Women performers embodied and represented women's suffering while also reclaiming the street through their presence. Moreover, the common language of resistance in these performances reminded the audience of the need for collective assembly to protest against the injustices faced by all marginal identities. On the one hand, the street emerges as a more accessible site and turns into an obvious choice for performers. On the other hand, the minimalist aesthetics, mobility of performance and comparatively less economic burden might also have caused a quicker comeback of street theatre.

Conclusion

While street theatre is a medium that registers protest against oppression of the most vulnerable of society, its aesthetic component is equally pertinent. This range of selected plays demonstrated their aesthetics of resistance through the virtuosity of artists, incorporation of imagination, humour and fellow-feeling.¹⁴ Tony Fisher, tapping into the genealogy of street and activist theatre, points out that they have a more popular origin, owing to the social and political situations that demand their existence and not merely propaganda or strategies of larger political projects. The recent spurt of street theatre activities bears out Fisher's analysis. Not only have they remained as crucial theatrical practices in the Global South (even after the decline of Leftist parties), but also they have re-emerged each time as a result of the conjuncture of socio-economic, historical and political circumstances. They are marked with a tendency to constantly reinvent themselves in terms of aesthetics. Fisher affirms, 'It is a theatre whose militant orientation is designed entirely to serve the occasion that expresses the singular and pressing needs of the present.'¹⁵

In conclusion, returning to Fisher's arguments, since street plays operate at the conjuncture of various issues prevalent in society, they do not require a pre-set audience, but compel people to watch by appealing to them in terms of relevance to their own context. While questions about the diversity of spectators linger, given that the festival was organized on a university campus rather than the actual streets, it can be argued that it also provided the impetus to congregate once again on campuses for students, united by a political cause. Jadavpur University has always been a hub of progressive student politics in Kolkata. However, like all other educational institutions in the world, it bore the brunt of the lockdown, closing down, and forcing students to take classes online, away from each other. In light of this predicament, PLT's festival allowed for the re-congregation of students to experience an array of plays, sown with a new aesthetics of resistance, which responded to the conjuncture of grievances that they witnessed during the pandemic. A collective environment could be conjured once again, which allowed for discussing issues of the marginalized, empathizing with them, and reclaiming spaces that were once hubs of activism and politics.

NOTES

- 1 Tony Fisher, 'Activist Theatre of the Conjuncture: Janam and the Politics of the Street Theatre in India', in *The Aesthetic Exception: Essays on Art, Theatre and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023).
- 2 Chantal Mouffe, 'Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art', *Dissidence*, 10, 2 (2014), p. 6.
- 3 People's Little Theatre, which organized the festival, is one of the major Calcutta-based theatre groups that has been active since 1971, with a commitment to political theatre. The group has produced an array of different kinds of plays, revealing many dimensions of political theatre, over the years. Ahvana, one of the authors, as a member of PLT played a role in the curation and selection. The other authors, Tamalika, Shrinjita and Sumit were active volunteers in the festival.
- 4 The space for the festival required government permission. The first choice for space – the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata – was a public hub where people from diverse social, economic and professional backgrounds would be present. It had to be cancelled when police permission was suddenly withdrawn with the excuse that a government programme was to be conducted there on the same dates.

- 5 Jadavpur University is a public university located in Kolkata, West Bengal.
- 6 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).
- 7 According to the data published by the World Health Organization, India witnessed 531,152 deaths between 3 January 2020 and 19 April 2023. However, the official numbers do not reflect the actual death toll in the country. The majority of the forty million migrant labourers across India were stranded without governmental aid, and many died during their walks back home, from the big cities to their villages. As reported by the BBC (Delhi) on 22 April 2020, ‘Authorities say they are looking after 600,000 migrants in shelters while food is being provided to 2.2 million more. But millions are yet to receive any help.’ As reported in *The Hindu*, an English daily, on 13 May 2020 by The Hindu Data Team, according to the Azim Premji University COVID-19 Livelihoods Survey, about 80 percent of urban workers lost their livelihood within less than two months of the nationwide lockdown.
- 8 Although the play itself is called *Jamlo Makdam*, many newspapers reported the incident with the name of the girl as ‘Jamlo Madkam’. There is a confusion and controversy about the name. While this was later brought to the attention of the group, they retained the earlier name.
- 9 In Bengali, *hulo* means male cat.
- 10 *Odissi* is a classical Indian dance form.
- 11 Bhattacharya performed three dances in total. The first two were revolutionary poems popularized during the National Register of Citizens–Citizenship Amendment Act (NRC–CAA) protests. A radical rupture is denoted from the traditional form, when instead of devotional hymns, considered mandatory for *odissi*, she dances to such poems, and instrumental pieces.
- 12 Love jihad is an Islamophobic conspiracy theory that Muslim men want to convert Hindu girls by seducing and marrying them. This feeds into the right-wing propaganda against Muslims and any Hindu–Muslim affair, especially where the man is Muslim, is considered social taboo
- 13 Liz Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 1.
- 14 Bertolt Brecht, ‘The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre’, translated by John Willet (1938), p. 4, at [brecht1.dvi](https://icamia.s3.amazonaws.com/brecht1.dvi) (icamia.s3.amazonaws.com).
- 15 Fisher, ‘Activist Theatre of the Conjunction’, p. 127.

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