

Essay on Street Theatre in India (Nukkad Natak)

There has been an explosion of street theatre activity in India in the eighties and nineties. One study estimates the existence of about 7,000 street theatre groups in different parts of the country with the largest number in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In India, street theatre or popularly termed as 'Nukkad Natak' actors are mainly teachers and students committed to bringing about social change. Their returns in terms of finances or fame are nil. The time that this form of theatre demands is considerable. All evenings and weekends are spent rehearsing or performing.

The preparation of these plays takes a long time too depending on the topics and motive behind the play. To attract the audience they started playing a 'dholak' or choral song. When the audience surrounds in a circular position, one person narrates while the actors do mime. As these plays are mostly low budgeted, the theme and the dressing has to be kept simple so almost no makeup looks are preferable unless it's a mime. In a mime play, the face is being painted white and eyes should be highlighted in the black circle. Not much scope of good acting is considered as the theme needs to be displayed in an exaggerated version. Uses of microphones and sound box depend on the size of the gathering.

The topics or the themes of an independent street play have always been on bringing the positive changes in the society. The maker or the scriptwriter takes different topics from general day to day instances or the burning topics that shook the world. For example, Nirbhaya incident of 2013 that immensely impacted India has been portrayed beautifully in a street play in Gurgaon demonstrating the safety of women in India day to day negative impact of drinking and smoking on human health invarious nukkad natak.

The venerable pioneer of Indian street theatre is Jana Natya Manch - People's Theatre Front, or Janam - which was created nearly 40 years ago and popularised street theatre as activism. In India, we have a marathon of street play which was organised in 2017. Manthan Mahotsav, nearly performed by 125 teams in 40 states in India as well as few states in abroad like Brazil and Nepal picking up issues like women empowerment, ragging, eve teasing, religious fanaticism etc. in all prominent places around the city. Being the largest street play festival in India, started off its 10th edition on March 4. The brainchild of Verve, the street play society of Shaheed Sukhdev College of Business Studies, University of Delhi, Manthan 2017 created history with street plays being performed in so many different locations across India, many of them simultaneously.

Street play will never age as this happens to be the oldest and the most convenient way of spreading the goodness to the extremely difficult areas. It has the power to persuade someone to change ideas. Whatever the reason for choosing the street, the street is a place with a different set of possibilities than the conventional theatre space.

In India a paradigm shift from proscenium theatre to the theatre of the streets was initiated by the anti-fascist movement of communist party of India under the canopy of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The root of street theatre in India was strongly related with the anti-fascist political ideology of the leftists and the progressive political theatre in the '40's in Kolkata.

It evolved as a tool to emancipate the working class and reinforce revolution against the established power. Street plays based on issues and stories directly concerned with the people such as hunger, famine, poetry, communal violence, feudal and colonial exploitation created impact on the society deeply divided by class, caste and religion through these common grave concerning issues.

Even after Independence, Indian Street theatre evolved as a means to voice the concerns of the common man. This theatre form immediately struck a chord with the masses. Street theatre is a situation where the audience has not come prepared to watch a play, and people may not have much

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time on hand. These limitations determine the parameters of the plays. They are short.

The exchange is close, direct and intimate and, to be more effective, usually loud and larger than life. In order to draw crowds from all walks of life, the plays are humorous. Songs based on popular catchy tunes are included to add to the appeal.

After the independence, street plays became popular during the '50s and the '60s. However, it burst into national prominence during the political turmoil of the late '70s and the early '80s.

With the Emergency declared by the central government, repression unleashed against Communists and the revolutionary Naxalbari uprising in Bengal, street theatre entered a new phase. Performers were attacked, often by the police.

Safdar Hashmi's Jana Natya Manch formed in 1973, led this movement of Indian street theatre. Hashmi defined street theatre as "a militant political theatre of protest whose function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organizations".

1989 marked a turning point for street theatre after Hashmi was killed during a show. In the early winter afternoon, Janam was performing their play Halla Bol ("Raise Your Voice") for a group of workers at Jhandapur, Sahibabad, on the outskirts of Delhi, as a part of its campaign to support the CPI (M) in the local election campaign. A candidate from the rival party backed by a gang of hundred goons armed with guns and sticks, ordered JANAM to stop the performance and in consequence Safdar Hashmi was murdered in the agitation. His birthday, 12th April is now observed in India as National Street Theatre Day.

Street Plays or "Nukkad Natak" were not just used as tools of political awareness but in their early days of popularity in the 80's, it was used for fighting social injustice as well.

In 1980, the famous Mathura rape case instigated a lot of shows on the need to make the rape laws more stringent. Another famous street play of those days- "Om Swaha" dealt with demands for dowry resulting in harassment and sometimes death. There were several productions which give a short summary of the life of a woman in India and examine a woman's needs and abilities.

By the early '90s street plays were used by several NGOs for spreading awareness in villages regarding issues such as HIV, social equality, injustice against women, ecological consciousness etc. Such was the popularity of the "Nukkad Natak", that it has been even used by companies for marketing their products in India. Big players like the UN, Goonj, CRY etc. prefer this form for propagating their message to their target audience for its characteristic of being an audience magnet and being closely connected to them.

There are thousands professional theatre groups in the country today which continue to use "nukkad natak" for social awareness. The strong culture of street play can be felt in the National capital of Delhi through the dramatics societies of the universities. Hundreds of competitions are organized throughout the year and almost every Delhi college has a "Nukkad" team each with a swelling will to amend the erroneous and build a better future.

The voice of a street play artist is the voice of a rebellion. Street play is the spark that ignites numerous fires in the hearts, minds and souls of us Indians, the fire of voice, fire of initiation and the fire of change.