



## **Social Impact through Polemic Street Theatre Performances of Jana Natya Manch**

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### ***Abstract***

*Street Theatre, as one of the influenced theatre forms, has emerged as social reform. Through this theatre form, creating awareness among people on critical issues had been used to bring revolutionary changes by questioning, debating and discussing. This form, unlike any other theatre forms, reaches to people directly by performing in street corners and influential. Plays about women, their social identity, problems and struggle, pains and their social existence in the society was a crucial thematic idea of Jana Natya Manch performances Apart from other social, political and economic problems. Having a vivid history in the late 20th century, the contribution of JANAM to bring social awareness through the street performances, not only showed compassion but also made a social impact through polemic street performances. This article discusses such bold writings from the group dealt with major issues of post-independence. And how the people have engaged in such performances through its journey since its inception by analyzing its legendary plays?*

**Keywords:** *Social Impact, Street Theatre, IPTA, Jana Natya Manch, Post-Independence Indian Theatre.*

### **Prologue**

Unlike any theatre forms, Street Theatre is an active and communicative form is deeply rooted in the Indian Tradition. This form has reached millions of people and has been used to promote, propagate and peruse the social and political messages. The form has influenced and created awareness amongst the people in critical issues. It is people form, creative expression with minimum expenses breaks through all the theatrical formal barriers and approaches, interacts with the people directly.

Street Theatre happens in the corner of a road or a junction where four or more roads meet. The audience was never invited with a formal invitation, but the audience who had been on the streets were attracted through the performance. The audience without preparation to watch the performance will be engaged to witness the performance. Street theatre is a performance draws the attention of the audience where people may not have much time in

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hand. This parameter determines the time of the play. Thus the street plays are short but informative. Significant thoughts and ideas always draw the attention of the audience. The chorus signing has a vital role to attract the audience and engage them with the play. These songs are catchy tunes in a folk narrative. The lyrics are so closer to the words of everyone. They engage the audience to repeat the words while the performers singing. The tunes have an appeal to engage the audience to be part of the performance. Since the conversations in the play were mostly not scripted, and the performers make their conversations in a colloquial language, it engages all those who are witnessing the performance. The interaction is close, intimate and direct thus it's more effective than any other theatre genres. This form is more effective and loud to communicate the problems. Street Theatre became the poor people's channel when the TV has not existed. The communication through this modern form is different only in the themes enacted. The performers analyses the society as it exists, visualize its future and then attempt to put the vision across the communities.

The scripts in this form, have improvised based on a theme and situational as per the audience engagement. The songs and choreography of the play vary from text to script. Street theatre plays engaged with minimum props and maximum voice. Thus this theatre form is inexpensive and mobile. No huge props are machinery props used in the street theatre forms. Mostly clothes, ropes, musical instruments, plaque cards, cloths, and hand props. These lightweight props allow the performers to carry their own hands. In this form of theatre, the voice of the performers is an ultimate tool. As Badal Sircar noted playwright sums up:

*“The essential tool of the trade is the human body. The potentiality of the human body, the ability to throw one's voice so that 4000 people can be reached without the aid of a mike, must be explored.”*

The traditional forms, snake charmers, monkey dances, magical performances, acrobatics on a rope, short dance forms in trains, and circus in the streets can't be considered as street theatre performances. And it's wrong to claim these forms as theatre form. But these performances with the primary aim are to earn money from the show rather a social impact but engaging the audience only for entertainment. Whereas street theatre performances have the process of reaching the audience with a social cause, impact on the audience, promote and propagate the relevant issues to make the audience aware for better understanding. This form is used as political weapon during the elections in a particular and to promote the ideology of a specific political party. The theatre form also used to promote the government schemes, scientific outlook in some people, make them aware of diseases like Cholera, AIDS, and others. In recent times, the Govt. schemes like Swatch Bharat, Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao also promoted and reached the audience through this kind of performance. Woman related issues like Dowry, sati, rape victims, acid attacks, domestic violence, and sexual harassments have been discussed and made aware of them. Children issues like Child Labour, School education, Child rights, and traffic awareness were also major topics in the form. The other social issues like industrialisation, tribal rights, environmental issues, illiteracy, caste conflicts, and social hierarchy had been dealt with through the street theatre performances.

Some plays expose the mechanism of black marketing and hoarding; other theatre plays talk about the use of political power for pressurizing people. Some highlights the hygiene and health. Some educate the people. The known figures like Safdar Hashmi, Habib Tanvir, Badal Sircar, and Utpal Dutt are iconic people in this form during 1940s and 50s. The post-independence Indian scenario had given an opportunity to emerge more than 3000 theatre groups in many corners of India. These groups have been highlighting the issues and educate the people through their performances. Jana Natya Manch is one such theatre groups which emerged and followed the ideals of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association).

Safdar Hashmi is a founder member of Jana Natya Manch (People's Theatre Forum in short JANAM), is a Delhi based theatre Group had been performing since 1973. The theatre Activist M. K. Raina, in his words, talking about the difficulties of running a theatre company in India, he had been explaining that the different popular theatre forms existed by enriching the tradition (from his Facebook post):

*“The disapproval popular theatre forms, rural or Urban and the related to marginalized am did not mean that they disappear on the country the florist through the 19th Century till value into the 20th Century Ply commercial urban pass your company theatre continued to borrow heavily from them do without express acknowledgement but our vital their mode of expression and whatever they entertainment value in the early Vedic age of the 20th century it would have been difficult to convince the wild Republic that the is rural and urban popular forms Could Ever Come to be regarded as repositories of tradition”.*

IPTA founded in 1943 attracted Dancers and Singers, Musician and Theatre people from all over India. It formed to coordinate and strengthen all the progressive tendencies that have so far manifested themselves like drama, songs, and dances. In order to raise the social consciousness, then, the plays from this group have attempted to link up the fate of an individual to the community. IPTA have tried with multiple themes to make people aware of problems faced by the community. Through its presentation, IPTA influenced youth among these communities. JANAM, later on, continued the legacy of the IPTA, by adopting such themes and continued to reach the people with its presentations.

### **JANAM and Plays**

The Jana Natya Manch, in short JANAM was established in April 1973 to continue the journey of IPTA. The play *Mrityur Atit*, A translated version of Irwin Shaw's *Bury and Dead* was its first performance during Durga Puja cultural program. The JANAM was initially rehearsed at CPI(M) Delhi state committee office was supported by Major Jaipal Singh, the secretary of CPI(M) Delhi committee. The members of the group used to meet, discuss and debate about the scripts at evening. Kavita Nagpal's directed play *Bharata Bhagya Vidata* is a political mileage play for CPI(M) to campaign for the candidates and performed in most of the corners in Uttar Pradesh. It's a satirical play by Ramesh Upadhya dealt with the social discrimination of *Harijans*. The play's plot had a schematic plot how the upper caste people murder the Harijans who is supposed to elect. The play engaged *Nat* and

*Nati* for narrating the story and composed with dance and music. During the emergency, in 1975, a play *Kursi* is about the malpractice of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, during this emergency, the JANAM have slightly reduced their performance due to so many reasons, the artists don't want to be arrested, and most of them have joined in the Govt. jobs. But whereas plays like *Jab Firangi Laut Aaye*, *Ab Raja Ki Bari Hai*, *Ebar Rajar Pala* were plays performed post-emergency by the group.

*Machine* is a performance exposed a real incident taken at Ghaziabad, and it's a satirical play made by Safdar Hashmi and Rakesh Saxena with the same structure of JANAM but by changing the dialogues. Later on plays like *Gaon Se Shehar Tak* (on predicament of migrate labour), *Hatyare* (on communal riots on North India), *DTC Ki Dhandhil* (on inflation and price hike), *Aurat* (on women issues), *Kitne Zalim Kitne Beimaan* (on women issues), *A Boon for Ladies* (on women's problems and their pains and struggles), *Samrath* (on price raise), *Raaja ka Baaja* (on political structure) are footprints of JANAM. These plays dealt with issues in NCR Delhi and nearby places only.

Later on, JANAM expanded to respond to other national and state issues through its plays. *Comrade, There is no war here* is an example, which is a response of custodial rape victim of a tribal girl of eastern Maharashtra. *Police Charitram* on rape and sexual harassment, *Kala Kanoon*, *Jung ke Khatre* are in the same genre structural performance dealt with the social evils. *Veer Jag Zara* and *Apaharan Bhaichara ka* are on communal violence and responded to the communalism. The play *Agreement* is a solid response to the UGC in support of DUTA (Delhi Teacher's Association). *Mai Diwas ki Kahani* is in favour of May Day celebrations has fetched new audience for JANAM.

The Play *Halabol* is a modified version of *Chakka Jam*, undoubtedly have given a different impression in the audiences. The play is an experiment that tried to bring in the love theme in the street play form. *Mujhe Yudh Chayiye*, *Balle Mere Desh ke Veer Jawano*, *Ab Badalega Hindustan*, *Videshi Karja Kyon*, *Kamar Kaso Kurbani Do*, *Chaah Paise ka Rupaiya*, *Cuba Hum Tumhari Saat Hein* are some examples of JANAM's play dealt with communalism and national interest.

The use of properties and costumes of its plays have served different purposes during the performances. They add to the characterization and colour to the visualization of the performances. The basic costume is black *kurta*, and blue jeans indicated the uniformity of the actors. But whereas it adopted different costumes for different occasions as per the script and performance demanded. The transformation of the character by using simple *dupatta* and other cloth enhanced the characterization during the performance.

### **Plays Performed by JANAM**

The long journey of JANAM classified into five different periods (Table 1) as per the history of the performances produced since its establishment. The Early period Establishment Period (1973-80), Early Period (1981-88), Peak Period (1989-94), Journey Period (1995-2002), Contemporary Period (2002-2019).

Table 1: List of the Plays performed by JANAM

Year	Plays Performed
Established period (1973-80)	Machine, Gaon Se Sahar Tak, Hatyare, DTC Ki Dhandhli, Kitne Jhalim Kitne Beiman, Aurat, Mil Ke Chalo, Teen Crore, Samrath Ko Nahin Dosh, Gusain, Raja Ka Baja, Aya Chunav
Early Period (1981-88)	Police Charitram, Kala Kanoon, Jung Ke Khatre, Jab Chor Bane Kotwal, Veer Jag Zara, Ishara, Agreement, Mai Diwas Ki Kahani, Aphanan Bhaichara Ka, Ab Chakka Jaam, Halla Bol
Peak Period (1989-94)	Hinsa Parmo Dharma, Mat Baato Insaan Ko, Hai Lal Hamara Parcham, Padhna Likhna Sikho, Mujhe Yudh Chahiye, Balle Mere Desh Ke Veer Naojawan, Ab Badlega Hindustan, Videshi Karja Kyon, Kamar Kaso Kurban Do, Har Gali Har Chowk Se Awaaz Uthni Chahiye, Chhah Paise Ka Rupaiya, Cuba, Hum Tumhare Saath Ha, Sab Mein Shahib Bharpoor Hai Ji, Sangharsh Karenge, Jitenge, Gopi Gayoiya, Bagha Bajaiya, Yeh Khak Nashino Uth Baitho
Journey Period (1995-2002)	Aartanaad, Lo Aa Rahi Hai Raat, Andhera Aftab Mangega, Lal Lal Lehrana Re, Rahul Boxer, Jinke Yakin Nahi Tha, Aya Lal Basant Chit Bhi Meri, Pat Bhi Meri, Bum Maro Bum, Gadha Puran, Nahi Qubool, Hum Hain Jhuggi Wale, Voh Bol Uthi, Patola Mera Naam (Atankvad Ke Bahane), Lao Badlav, Mehngai Ki Maar, Yeh Dil Mange More, Guruji, Bolo Kya Banoge Tum, Ek Mazdoor Ki Swabhavik Maut
Contemporary Period (2003-09)	Anti US/UK Play, Iraq Play, Shiksha Ki Daur, Bade Bhaisaab, Aya Lal Basant, Akhri Juluos, Lo Uth Raha Hai Jhanda Lal, Ye Bhi Hinsa Hai, Honda Ka Gunda, Naare Nahin To Natak Nahin, Rehri Patri Nahin Hatengi, Kaafila Ab Chal Pada Hai, Bhagat Singh, Sangharsh Hi Hai Raasta, Vaqt Ki Awaaz, One Two Ka Four, Yeh Hum Kyon Sahein? Ab Ke Kiski Baari Hai? Yeh Daud Hai Kiski?

Figures 1 and 2 show year-wise plays by JANAM and proscenium plays directed for JANAM, respectively.

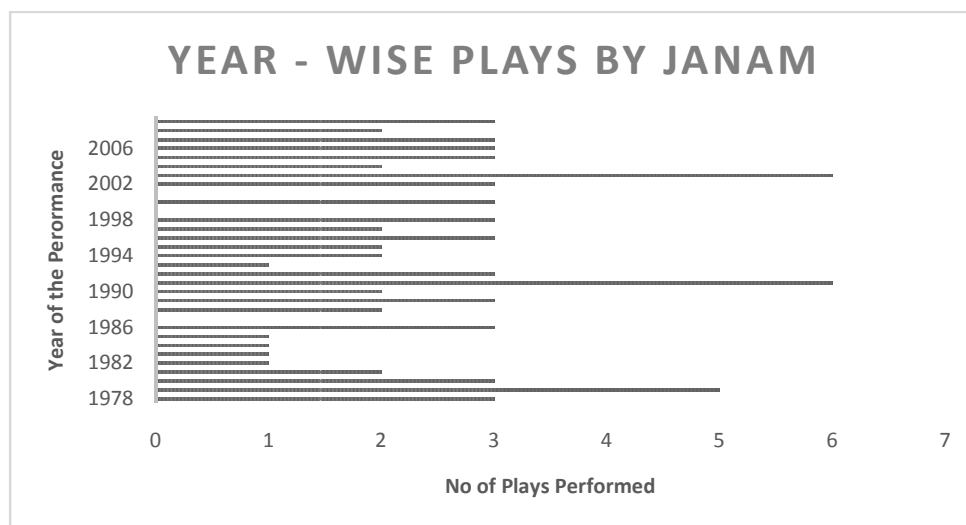


Fig. 1: Year-wise plays performed by JANAM

## Proscenium Plays directed for JANAM

Apart from street plays JANAM also performed in the proscenium plays written and directed by eminent artists. The proscenium plays journey of JANAM was started in the year of 1974 the musical play *Bakri* by Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena, written for the National School of Drama students. JANAM also produced proscenium plays like Bretold Brecht's Mother Courage *Ma* in Hindi directed by M. K. Raina, *Satyashodhak* directed by Sudhanva Deshpande. Later on other directors like Anuradha Kapur, N. K. Sharma also directed proscenium plays for it is repertoire works.

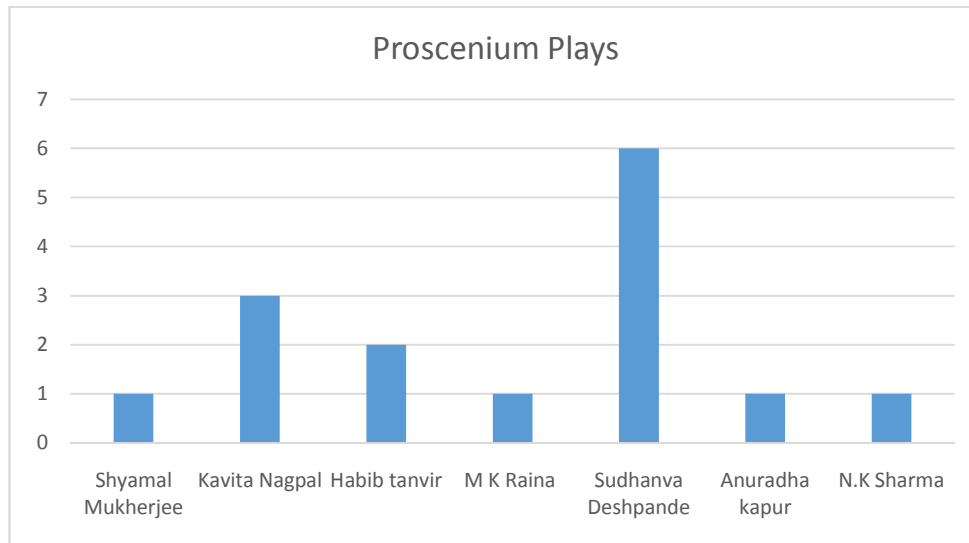


Fig. 2: Proscenium Plays directed for JANAM by different Directors

## Epilogue

JANAM performed at various venues at different conditions. They started performing in the petromax lantern light initially and later on they were facilitated by the loudspeakers and other props that needed for the performances. Most plays of JANAM doesn't require any specialized stage lights; the proscenium plays also were illuminated by the floodlights only. The political ideology of CPI(M) was propagated through its performances and have supported for their election campaign. Legends like Safdar Hashmi, Kavita Nagpal, Habib Tanvir, Utpal Dutt, M. K. Raina, Sudhanva Desh Pandey, Anuradha Kapur have engaged and devised productions for JANAM's proscenium journey. JANAM has performed and celebrated the first anniversary of its street theatre activity on October 1979 and had performed 274 shows. JANAM used different art forms in a creative manner and introduced some techniques to reach a common audience. It also used different devices in its street performances later they became part of their performances like Madari-Jamura. It also adopted folk forms in their performance. The six plays – *Machine*, *Gaon se Seher Tak*, *Aurat*, *Samrath ko Nahin Dosh Gusain*, *Raaja ka Baaja*, and *Aya Chunao* are the footprints of JANAM responding to the different issues. These plays are also be treated as classics of JANAM and crucial for the development of street theatre as a form in India. Thus JANAM has dealt with the socio, political, economic problems of the society and laid foundations in a creative for Left Movement in India.

Theatre had been used as a strong weapon in Germany and other European countries. The Globalization has influenced Indian theatre too in different formats. It's been used as a political tool. The British theatre has influenced Indian theatre and reached to only elite class at the initial stage. The IPTA has changed the notorious idea and made people conscious through its performances and taken part of the Indian independence movement. But The JANAM is an urban theatre with the audience which has powerful links with rural India. Migrant workers of rural north India are the first audience for its performances. The foremost of JANAM plays have a relation to the realities of both rural and urban people's life. It also addresses the woman problems, middle-class problems petty traders, white-collar workers problems, teacher's issues, and student's problems. Due to the adaptation of different theatre forms and colloquial and in colloquial language used in the performance have engaged many audiences. The JANAM works are the inspiration and are known for its commitment and quality. Through its performance JANAM have tried to bring out the change and made people think about the problem. It also raised various socio, political issues for a long period. And still the journey continuing through its performances in Delhi. The JANAM members have been trying to its legacy and still fighting for such social evils. Delhi is the city known for Street performances. Most of the colleges and universities have influenced by JANAM plays and these institutions have been using street theatre as a creative weapon to deal with such social evils and make the people aware of them. JANAM has continued its journey with street play by taking theatre to the people. It's not easy to bring the balance between aesthetics and political commitment in the same line. But JANAM has innovated to keep the freshness of the art. But the theoretical and ideological unity of the need to enrich and politicize together has always been there.

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