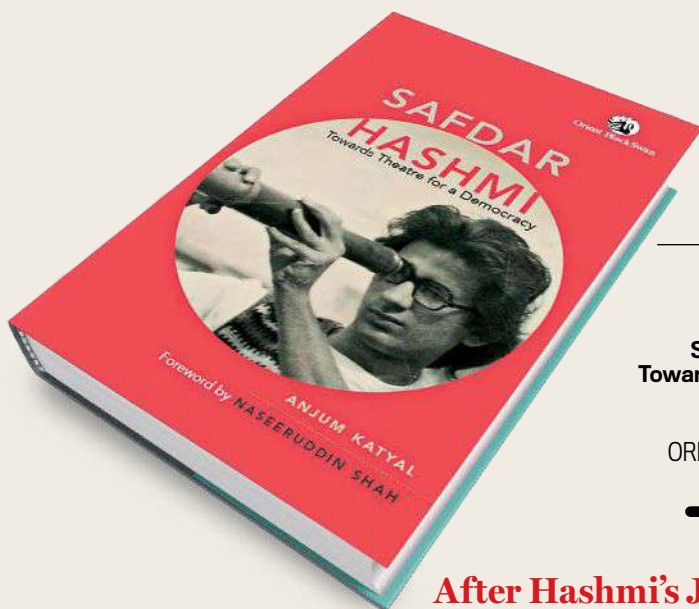


Theatre BOOKS of the People

This biography pays fulsome tribute to Indian street theatre pioneer **Safdar Hashmi**, whose life was tragically cut short in 1989



SAFDAR HASHMI
Towards Theatre for a
Democracy
by Anjum Katyal
ORIENT BLACKSWAN
240 pages

After Hashmi's Jana Natya Manch staged their play *Machine* (1978), the crowd lifted the group on their shoulders and took their autographs

If you had heard of street theatre maverick Safdar Hashmi particularly because of his murder by goons with links to the Congress in 1989 when he was just 34, you are not alone. Naseeruddin Shah, in his foreword to Anjum Katyal's newly released book on Hashmi, says the same.

"I personally never had the courage (or the conviction) to participate," Shah writes of street theatre, which subsequent pages in Katyal's book describes to be as spiritually invigorating as it was fatally dangerous between the

1950s and 1980s, when street theatre activists and audience members risked torture or death for participating in agitprop plays in public view.

Katyal's book is an earnest and mostly chronological account of those years. Hashmi's public persona and his contribution to the street theatre form is the pivot. The surrounding scenery, describing the global and national political mood during the 1960s, Utpal Dutt's protest theatre in Bengal, or feminist movements of the time, make up at least half the book's length.

Katyal's book is most exciting

and engaging when she is solely focused on Hashmi and is not caught up with over-contextualising him. Hashmi, a magnetic personality by all accounts, comes across as a visionary artist and leader, who not only revived and popularised street theatre in the capital, but also created songs, children's books and television programmes. Hashmi's nascent plans of delving into commercial cinema and creating a large-scale cultural institute for working-class and downtrodden practitioners make his early demise all the more tragic.

Anecdotes from Hashmi himself, as well as his siblings, theatre activists Sohail and Shabnam, and their mother Qamar, enliven what otherwise feels like an earnest textbook. There's Hashmi speaking of the time he and his friends, all aged 16 to 17, took over the Indian People's Theatre Association office in Delhi and restarted IPTA by throwing out the man who had taken over the premises to run his import-export business. Later, when Hashmi's group Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) staged their claim-to-fame play *Machine* in 1978, the crowd lifted the group on their shoulders and took their autographs on cigarette packets.

The events recounted in the middle chapters, which begin with Hashmi's teen years' association with IPTA and end with a fully formed JANAM touring the country, have sufficient charge to make this a worthwhile read. Otherwise, Katyal, a theatre scholar who has written a book each on Badal Sircar and Habib Tanvir, is understandably deferential towards Hashmi's legacy.

We do not get an understanding of Hashmi's exact existential and intellectual churning that produced such a maelstrom of talent. Every anecdote and observation repeats the boring assessment of Hashmi as a straightforward and uncomplicated genius. I wonder what a man of such humour and impish creativity would have made of such obeisance. ■

—Devarsi Ghosh