

How Janam responded to the urgency of the moment

In this excerpt from a new biography of theatre activist Safdar Hashmi, the author recounts the early days of his troupe

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Less than four months after *Machine*, Safdar drafted and circulated a paper on street theatre, which he described as being 'documentary and brief, shocking yet familiar', so that its impact was 'not only emotional but also rational—and therefore a lasting one.' As a form, this kind of theatre was not subtle or overly analytical; rather it was 'loud and spectacular, and funny', albeit in a particular way, where 'loudness and clownery in actual practice meant not a multiplication of antics but rather a sureness of touch where precise and clear details established a situation or a mood with an economy of gestures and postures.'

Street theatre was, to him, 'a sort of newspaper-in-action, "to make explicit our stand on contemporary events from day to day." Beyond this agitprop role, street theatre also had a larger function: "of taking healthy entertainment to the culturally starved people."...

Around this time, Janam (the street theatre group) got news of a fresh series of communal riots in Aligarh which had, as Safdar puts it, 'a long history of Hindu-Muslim riots.'... They decided to create a play on communalism; but not before doing the research and 'analysing the political and economic factors which antagonise the traditionally harmonious coexistence of two communities.' The

ensuing *Hatyare* (Killers, December 1978) was based on a report on the riots circulated in 'progressive circles' by 'three friends of ours from Delhi University' who went to Aligarh to investigate the outbreaks.

As Safdar recounts, the report found that these 1978 riots were 'qualitatively different' from earlier clashes between the two communities. Aligarh was a thriving centre of the lock-making industry. Locks manufactured by Aligarh locksmiths were renowned, and had a large market. The entire traditional lock-making process consisted of seven interdependent stages, with each stage customarily being handled by Hindus or Muslim artisans—some parts by one community, some by the other. When riots broke out, the lock-making industry was severely hit—if the locksmiths of these two communities did not work together, locks could not be made.

According to the field research, over the previous two years two large lock factories had been set up in Aligarh, but due to the reputation of the traditional locksmiths, these factories with their mass-produced products were unable to break into the market to their satisfaction. 'It was in their interest to create a riot and thereby destroy the traditional lock-making industry and consequently, force the artisans to become wage-labourers in their factories. We took this as the basis for our next play.'



Jana Natya Manch's Safdar Hashmi in Hissar

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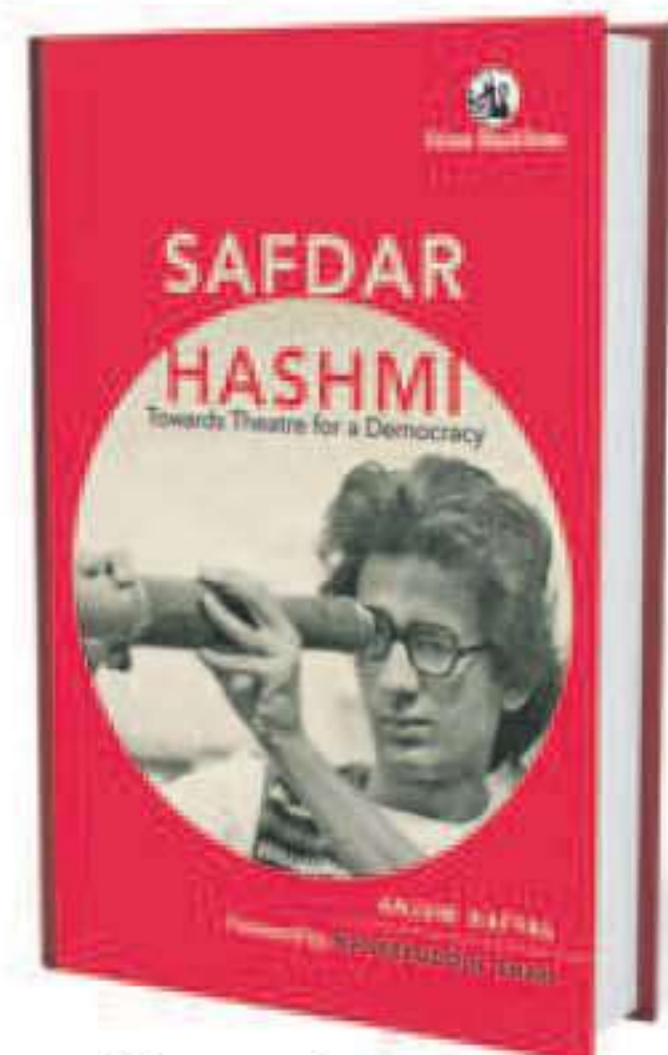
Having traced an apparently inter-religious clash to its economic and political root cause, Janam set to work to expose this conspiracy through their play, with the aim of helping the working-class identify the true enemy. *Hatyare* begins with a comprehensive introduction by the narrator, who, speaking directly to the audience, lays out the entire situation, from the traditional cooperation and friendship of the locksmiths of the two religious communities to the vested interests that wished to divide them and break up this solidarity and thereby kill two birds with

one stone—destroy their chief competition and gain cheap skilled labour for their lock factories. The rest of the play is a dramatised rendering of this scenario, weaving in the roles played by the administration, politician, capitalist factory owner and hired goons. Riots are instigated, and workers of both religions die in the violence. Eventually the dead rise and speak, alerting the audience to the insidious ways in which such clashes are instigated and manipulated by vested interests... The sutradhar or narrator draws the connection between such riots in towns

like Ahmedabad, Bhiwandi, Kanpur, Meerut, Muradabad, thereby linking the local incident to the larger national scenario. They stress that those who labour for their livelihood should realise that fellow workers, regardless of their religion, cannot be their enemy... With these original plays, Janam had established that as a street theatre group they were committed to taking up workers' rights and issues as the focus of their creative output. Their next play consolidated this approach further. According to Safdar, 'This was the first time that we operated like real street theatre should. There was an event and within hours we were able to come up with a play and take it all over the city.'

The 'event' in question was the announcement by Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) in February 1979 of a hefty fare hike. The play that emerged was *DTC Ki Dhandhali* (The Stratagems of DTC)... The immediacy of the theme and the promptness of the performance ensured its popularity; they performed it that day at Super Bazar in Connaught Place and followed it up with three more performances in that area. They chose bus stands as performance venues. 'The people flocked to see it. ... The song became a hit,' says Safdar. 'Like film songs in our country become hits.'

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