

Safdar Hashmi and SAHMAT

In the early afternoon of January 1, 1989, Safdar Hashmi, cultural activist, playwright, actor, teacher, member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and a columnist for the Economic Times, was brutally attacked by goondas (thugs) associated with the local representative to the parliament, who belonged to the Congress Party of India, as he and his drama troupe, the Jana Natya Manch (Janam), were performing a street play, Hulla bol (“attack”), that dealt with government repression of the labour movement. The performance was in support of workers on strike at Sahibabad, a township about 15 miles from Delhi, across the river Yamuna. Apart from Safdar, a migrant worker and trade union member, Ram Bahadur was also fatally assaulted.

With his skull bashed in, Safdar was rushed to a hospital. He lay there battling death till he ultimately succumbed to his injuries the following day. He was 34 years old. As news of the attack spread around the country, hundreds of his friends and comrades came to Delhi. Among them were prominent theatre and film personalities like M. K. Raina, Habib Tanvir and Shabana Azmi. As Safdar’s funeral procession advanced through the streets of Delhi, it was joined spontaneously by thousands of bystanders and workers with shouts of ‘Comrade Safdar Amar rahe’ (May (the name) of Comrade Safdar live forever) and ‘Safdar Hashmi ko laal salaam’ (A red salute to Safdar Hashmi). The day after his funeral, as a testament to the sort of courage that kept the movement going, Moloysree, Safdar’s wife, returned with the troupe to Sahibabad and completed the disturbed play.

To understand the reasons for Safdar’s grip on the public, one has to understand his antecedents and his contributions to theatre in India. Safdar Hashmi was the son of Haneef and Qamar Azad Hashmi. Both parents were born in India prior to partition; both chose to stay back in India while the rest of their families migrated to Pakistan at the time of partition.

Safdar grew up in Aligarh and Delhi. Even as a child, he was a good creator and narrator of stories. Qamar Azad remembers that his stories would have very intricate plots, sometimes with one tale embedded in another. After completing his school, Safdar went on to study at St. Stephen’s College, where, in the early seventies, he became a member of the Student Federation of India’s cultural unit. Among other activities, this group performed songs from the independence movement and a short play on Vietnam. Sometime later he joined the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) where he went on to produce plays like Kimlesh, presented at the Kisan Sabha (Peasant’s Union) All India conference, and Dekhte Lena.

In 1973, the Jana Natya Manch or Janam was formed with Safdar as one of its early active members. Initially the troupe performed proscenium plays written by prominent playwrights like Ramesh Upadhyay’s Bharat Bhagya Vidaata and Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena’s Bakri. With time, they started writing their own plays. Their initiation to street theatre came when Mrs. Indira Gandhi was accused of rigging elections and refused to resign. Janam came up with a short skit called Kursi, Kursi, Kursi (Chair, Chair, Chair)

about an elected king who is sitting on a chair when a new king is elected. He gets up from his chair but the chair rises with him. Despite trying, it is impossible to separate the two. The troupe performed this skit outside on the Boat Club Lawns in Delhi, the hub of political activity, every day for about a week. Each day thousands of people would gather around, encourage them and suggest additions. Janam incorporated these suggestions and the skit grew by the day. This was a turning experience for the fledgling group.

The imposition of the emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1975, and the censorship of all activities critical of the state which followed, put an end to their performances for a few years. During these years Safdar taught English literature in the universities of Garhwal and Kashmir. Besides teaching, he was involved in producing many plays, including ones by Buechner, Brecht and an eighteenth century Chinese play. Since there was no tradition of amateur theatre at these universities, Safdar had to take responsibility for everything, ranging from selecting a play for production to arranging for refreshments for the performers during performances.

After returning to Delhi in 1978, Safdar became active with Janam and in the mass fronts of the CPI(M). It was around this period that Janam started writing its own street plays. Their first play, *Machine*, was a dramatized version of a real life incident involving workers in a factory who wanted a tea-shop and a cycle-stand set up. When talks with the management failed, the workers went on strike. Goons hired by the management fired from inside the factory, the police on guard outside retaliated, and six workers were killed. This was followed soon by *Gaon se Shahr Tak*, which focused on the problems of migrant labour. Other subjects for plays included communal riots, the oppression of women, mismanagement and corruption in the Delhi Transport Corporation, and the history of May Day using the speeches of the four Chicago workers who had been jailed in 1886. Many of these were performed widely, especially in slums and working class neighbourhoods as well as at factories and workshops.

From the earliest days, Janam was extremely democratic and tried to involve everyone in the process of creation and execution of their plays. In the words of Moloysree, “in our group even direction became a collective activity. From the creation of a script to preparing for its performance, there was a feeling of shared responsibility and effort. Everyone was involved, although Safdar’s creativity was of a high order and formed the basis on which our activity progressed at such a furious pace”. Janam was easily one of the most active street theatre groups in Delhi. By the time Safdar died, Janam had performed at least 4000 times and has produced over 20 plays, many of them written by Safdar. Many of their plays have been translated into other languages and performed by numerous other street theatre groups.

In his work, Safdar was motivated by two great concerns. The first was a desire to achieve excellence in whatever he did. The second was to develop a kind of political theatre that would effectively express the emotions and concerns of the Indian working class and peasantry. In doing the latter, he struggled with the problem of combining traditional forms of art without bringing in the traditional content of “superstition, backwardness,

obscurantism, and its promotion of feudal structures.” He was also careful not to vulgarize traditional performing arts. Neither did he practise mere reductionism, such as borrowing a traditional dance and just substituting a current meaning, to attempt to make it mean something else.

Yet, Safdar did incorporate ideas from the older forms. For example, he felt that music was an excellent theatrical device which effectively attracted attention. Despite many in his troupe not being able to hold a tune, Safdar would try to involve them in at least the chorus. With his melodious voice, Safdar became well known for his songs which were often based on traditional folk songs he learned as a child. Many of these are based on the Alhay meter which is popular in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan.

Safdar’s creativity was not confined to writing and acting in plays. At the Press Trust of India, he was part of the editorial staff of the in-house magazine Vidura, and organized workshops on teaching and acquiring journalistic skills. He continued his journalistic activities when he later began to write for the Economic Times. He was closely involved in the production of several documentary films. He produced a television series on education. For a documentary, ‘In Secular India’, on the controversial Muslim Women’s Bill (passed in May 1986), he wrote the theme song ‘Ek Purdah Nasheen’, on the life of a poor muslim woman in India, which was widely appreciated. He was closely associated with the Committee for Communal Harmony, which was started after the anti-Sikh riots in 1984, and which was revitalized after the resurgence of Hindu fundamentalism in the mid-eighties. The committee helped organize several artists and members of the intelligentsia in the cause of peace and an end to communal conflict. Safdar was also involved actively in building ties with progressive forces in Pakistan. In 1987 and 1988, he and Badal Sircar, the prominent playwright and director, held a series of workshops for Pakistani political theatre groups in Karachi and Lahore.

The above-mentioned activities are only some of the reasons why performers all over the country were fond of Safdar. His own friendly and warm personality and his contributions to the artistic creations of several others also contributed to a large extent. It is, therefore, no wonder that artists all over India were shocked at his brutal murder and reacted so strongly. At the inaugural ceremony of the International Film Festival, actress Shabana Azmi read out the following sharply worded statement of protest on behalf of several artists : “While performing a street play in Sahibabad township, only 15 kms from Delhi on 1st January 1989, Safdar Hashmi, member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and a well known cultural activist was murdered in broad daylight by the followers of a Congress(I) supported candidate. Apart from working in theatre, Safdar contributed to the cinema as a critic, actor and a commentator. We film makers and film lovers wish to register our protest against a system that on the one hand claims to promote creativity and on the other connives in the murder of cultural activists.” There was no response to Safdar’s murder by the Prime Minister. Nor has there been any progress in the case against the murderers though it has been over eight years since the dastardly attack.

Many of India's leading artists, intellectuals and activists were galvanized by this act of barbarity and went on to set up the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT). The list of the initial board members of SAHMAT involve several distinguished citizens of India. Some of them are Bhisham Sahni, Habib Tanvir, Ibrahim Al Qazi, Utpal Dutt, Justice V.R.Krishna Iyer, Vivan Sundaram, M.K.Raina, Sohail & Molayashree Hashmi. With about 4000 members, including many prominent artistes, SAHMAT has been well positioned in its attempt to use culture to combat communalism and sectarian divisiveness. Apart from producing books, videos and posters, SAHMAT has also come up with very creative ideas to help appreciate the very complex entity that is the living culture of India and the various strands that are integrated to make the rich forms that comprise it. In continuation of the ideas that underlay Safdar's street theatre experiments, SAHMAT events are organized as far as possible in public spaces like parks and open grounds, and in multiple languages.

One of their very popular events was organized on January 1, 1993 - a fourteen hour non-stop concert of Sufi-Bhakti poetry and singing called Anhad Garje. It included prominent Indian musicians like Pandit Jasraj, sufi singers from Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Baul singers from Bangladesh. Later that year, their exhibit entitled Hum Sub Ayodhya on the geographical, historical, religious, architectural and cultural history of Ayodhya and the Ramayana was the subject of controversy (see box).

As with the banning of the SAHMAT exhibit, the murder of Safdar Hashmi has had a completely different effect on the street theatre movement from what the perpetrators must have expected. From being a relatively little known art form a decade ago, today street theatre has succeeded in attracting a far larger number of people, both practitioners and spectators. As Safdar himself sang in one of his plays :

Aaj agar main mar jaon to

grahayudh hoga kal se

(If I died today, there will be a civil war from tomorrow)

Today, as never before, street theatre has managed to establish an alternative cultural form, filled with progressive political ideas.

In conclusion, a quote from the recent biography of Safdar by Qamar Azad Hashmi is appropriate: "We will not mourn Safdar. We will remember him in celebration."