

Engendering the Streets through Protests: Historicising Select Feminist Street Performances in India

Protestolar Yoluyla Sokakları Toplumsallaştırmak: Hindistan'daki Seçili Feminist Sokak Performanslarının Tarihelleştirmek

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ABSTRACT

The cityscape is constantly touted as a widely used scenographic background, with enormous deployment of technological apparatus to stage various events. This paper delves into the intersection of second-wave feminist movements and street theatre within the context of India, juxtaposing historical occurrences with contemporary settings. It scrutinizes the dynamics of urban landscapes as pivotal settings for performative activism, employing technology in staging events like street theatres and Queer pride parades. These spaces, while spotlighting identity politics, also unveil the underpinning surveillance apparatus, often rebranded as 'safe spaces' under the aegis of a neo-liberal state.

Focusing on the anti-dowry protest in late 1970s and anti-rape movement of 2012 in Delhi, this paper scrutinizes selected protest performances that transpired during this period. By employing theoretical frameworks that delve into the amalgamation of social memory within performance texts and the structured embodiment of performers, it seeks to analyze the transformative impact of these performances during the anti-rape movement, shedding light on their socio-political significance in contemporary India and explores how feminist street theatre fosters socio-political dialogue, mobilizes public spaces, and influences the discourse on gendered violence in urban contexts.

Keywords: Street theatre, Anti-rape, Anti-dowry, Activism, Urban

ÖZ

Kent manzarası, çeşitli etkinliklerin sahnelenmesinde yoğun şekilde teknolojik aygıt kullanımının devreye sokulduğu yaygın bir sahneleme arka planı olarak sürekli öne çıkarılmaktadır. Bu makale, Hindistan bağlamında ikinci dalga feminist hareketler ile sokak tiyatrosunun kesişim noktasına eğilmekte olup, tarihsel olayları çağdaş bağlarla yan yana getirmektedir. Kent mekânlarının, performatif aktivizmin temel sahneleri olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü irdeleyen çalışma, sokak tiyatroları ve Queer onur yürüyüşleri gibi etkinliklerin sahnelenmesinde teknolojinin kullanımını tartışır. Bu mekânlar, kimlik politikasına ışık tutarken, aynı zamanda çoğu zaman neo-liberal devletin himayesinde 'güvenli alanlar' olarak yeniden adlandırılan denetim aygıtlarını da açığa çıkarır.

1970'lerin sonundaki çeyiz karşıtı protestolar ile 2012'de Delhi'deki tecavüz karşıtı hareket üzerine yoğunlaşan bu makale, söz konusu dönemde ortaya çıkan seçme protesto performanslarını inceler. Performans metinlerinde toplumsal belleğin birleşimine ve oyuncuların yapılandırılmış temsillerine odaklanan kuramsal çerçevelerden yararlanarak, bu performansların özellikle tecavüz karşıtı hareket esnasındaki dönüştürücü etkisini incelemeyi amaçlar. Böylece, çağdaş Hindistan'da bu performansların sosyo-politik önemini ortaya koyar ve feminist sokak tiyatrosunun nasıl sosyo-politik diyalog yarattığını, kamusal alanları harekete geçirdiğini ve kentleşme bağlamında toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı şiddet üzerine söylemi nasıl etkilediğini araştırır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sokak tiyatrosu, Tecavüz karşıtlığı, Çeyiz karşıtlığı, Aktivizm, Kent

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Introduction

The year is 1979. In the middle of the Indraprastha College lawn, a vendor has a task to begin the play by urging the audience as he shouts the qualities of the wares he is exhibiting: the items in question are grooms ready for marriage. These grooms are carried on the vendor's shoulders as their prices are negotiated as much as possible in terms of dowry.

Vendor: 'Marriage, marriage- now everyone's daughters and sisters can expect to find suitable grooms-a wide variety of choices-many kinds of grooms-one for everybody and everyone will get one; IAS, bankers, businessman, doctor, engineer, teacher, every type, every kind-one for everyone-everybody can now get one (1988, p. 43).

The year is 2012. Several men and women clad in black surround a woman as she screams, urging the audience to save her from possible sexual assault. The troupe is performing their play at the immediate aftermath of the anti-rape movement in December 2012 at Jantar Mantar. These two performances are example of agit-propaganda street theatre, staged three decades apart.

Indian urban spaces have historically served as critical stages for feminist performative activism. This paper investigates the significant influence of street theatre as both a cultural and political tool during two landmark protest waves—against dowry deaths in the 1970s and sexual assault in 2012. By contrasting *Om Swaha* and *Dastak*, the paper traces the evolution of activist theatre, its engagement strategies, and its impact on public discourse. The structure provides a clear comparative framework to contextualize the unique role of these performances in feminist mobilization and how selected agit-prop-based street theatre emerged during this period. These performances were initially confined to state-sanctioned protest sites like Boat Club and Jantar Mantar in Delhi, where protestors contested state authority and engaged in acts of dissent. Notably, this uprising prompted established performers, typically relegated to prosceniums and institutional spaces, to step into the streets and engage with broader audiences. Figures like Anuradha Kapur, Maya Rao, and groups such as Asmita Theatre infused street performances with political urgency, channeling elements reminiscent of second-wave feminism and avant-garde theatrical devices.

In Search of Feminist Activist Theatre: Politics of Streets in *Om Swaha* (1979)

The 1970s in India saw the rise of the women's movement in tandem with the second wave feminist movement in America on issues centering around violence against women. The widespread mobilization was done by organized women's movement as well as autonomous

women's movement around custodial rape and the gruesome phenomenon of dowry deaths (some feminists termed them as 'dowry murders'). The striking feature of these incidents was the irony of how the most affected segment were 'newly married brides' coming from middle-class families, who were killed by their in-laws, because they had not come with enough cash and goods as dowry. These incidents created a public outcry and shook the complacency of seemingly 'urbane metropolitan' middle classes India, and made women question the role of culture and tradition and how it sanctioned space for the extra-ordinary violence to which these women were subjected (Chakravarti, 2012, p. 62).

Both custodial rape and dowry brought forth debates surrounding Indian state, and family, which in turn was galvanized in the post-1970s women's movement in dramatic ways. As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid wrote, "All of these matters have given a pressing urgency to questions about the inter-relation of patriarchal practices with political economy, religion, law and culture-in sum to questions the politics of social change" (Sangari & Vaid, 1989, p. 2).

The emergence of political consciousness within societal transformation catalyzed a deeper engagement with cultural dynamics and the development of strategic approaches for active participation in political life. Artistic forms—such as street theatre, processional drama, musical compositions, visual arts in posters and sculpture, handicrafts, and similar expressive media—became crucial avenues for democratizing public space and discourse.

Feminist groups such as Stree Sangharsh and Saheli utilized street theatre as a direct means of communication and consciousness-raising. Their repertoire involved a range of protest techniques: local demonstrations, public performances outside locations implicated in dowry cases, and investigative journalistic practices engaging with police records. By leveraging theatre as both an educational and entertaining tool, activists sought to foster awareness and mobilize support for legal and social reform. *Om Swaha*, a feminist street play created by Maya Krishna Rao and Anuradha Kapur, dramatized the lived experiences of dowry victims, employing agit-prop techniques and indigenous performative traditions. The play's dialogical structure fostered audience participation and challenged the privatization of gender violence (Chhachhi, 1984). Radha Kumar describes one of these powerful moments of mobilization as:

After some months of intense campaigning on dowry murders several women's groups began to feel the need for a more direct method of communication with people when

raising the issue of dowry. Discussions...gave rise to the idea of having a street play... the first performance of the play *Om Swaha*... was based on the lives of two (real) women [who had been killed in Delhi by their in-laws for not bringing enough dowry]. (Kumar, 1993, p. 120)

Here is an early description of the play in a feminist eyewitness account:

In the centre of a public park a human circle is formed by the actors, surrounded by women, men and children, squatting on the grass. A woman *madari* (street juggler) carrying matrimonial advertisement in her bag walks among the audience, joking and taunting them. Reversing the mantras used in Hindu marriage ceremony she tells them what the glorious state of marriage means for the woman...the denial of self-expression, the thwarting of her personality, drudgery, and sacrifice, continuous victimisation for not bringing enough dowry. The audience is then taken through the life of Hardeep (the name of one of the many girls burnt to death in Delhi) and her marriage, in which she is taunted, beaten, harassed and finally killed. The police register the case as one of suicide and the neighbours remain silent. The same fate awaits Kanchan [unless another fate can be envisaged for her]. (Chhachhi 1984, p. 95)

Om Swaha was created by Maya Krishna Rao and Anuradha Kapur from Miranda House, a women's college in Delhi University; they were also active members of Stree Sangharsh. The play worked with the figure of *Madari* who can be seen as a traditional street performer, who brings forth the issue of dowry death that marred nation's imagination at that point of time. The play's use of the *madari* (street performer) figure and interactive structure broke down barriers between performer and audience, fostering collective reflection and dialogue.

The style reflected agit-prop theatre and was blended with indigenous performative traditions as the linear narrative would be broken time and again with insertion of Punjabi folk style. The performance uses songs sung in popular Punjabi folk style. The content of the songs is changed to fit in the contemporary issues as the play attempts to negate the traditional interpretation of songs and their lyrics as most of these songs are sung to signify marital conjugality on the eve of the wedding. The second half of the song brings out the sinister cases of dowry demands made by the kins immediately after marriage. The Sutradhar played by Maya K. Rao in some versions speaks to the audience of the death of Deepa and how similar fate awaited her friend Kanchan. She also reflects on the apathy of the neighbors and family members to register police complaints.

The chorus and Sutradhar also brought forth performative elements with the use of their bodies, to show ritual of marriage most of the actors sat on the ground in a circle with their arms locked, and facing the audience and chanting Hindu marriage rituals. The scene was significant of the construction of image of fire, which becomes one of key elements in Hindu traditional weddings. Deepa (played by Maya Rao), stands in the circle unable to move out and is seen struggling (figure 1). The fire that marks the completion of the wedding becomes the ultimate source of doom as Deepa, along with most of the dowry victims, are burned by their in-laws.

The chorus and sutradhar became the voice of reason as the play used songs and dialogues to build a dialogical platform to engage with the audience. The patronizing attitude of laying claim to privileged knowledge by theatre group is avoided. In anticipating audience responses, the play seems geared towards generating a dialogue in public spaces around the issue of violence against women. The performers attempt to consciously break the theatrical hierarchies established between a play and its audiences. Theatre, instead of a medium to educate the masses, here becomes a tool to initiate dialogue in public spaces around dowry. *Om Swaha* was one of the most performed plays of the street theatre repertoire, where its end was re-worked time and again, and was hoped to bring change in the society.

Uma Chakravarti gives a first-hand account of witnessing the play,

Om Swaha was performed all across the city, in various mohallas, colleges, parks and genteel middle-class residential areas, with a rotating team of 'actors' and actresses, enabling the 'show' to move rapidly to a new site and occasion of performance, whether its designated personnel were free to perform or not. High drama, crudity-to capture the gross behaviour of the in-laws who first made outrageous demands for goods and cash, and then killed young wives; at parents who closed doors to daughters returning home, and at a 'society' that looked on passively as women burnt to death. I can recall policemen with tears in their eyes-the play struck a chord in almost everyone watching it, even die hard lawmen-contributing to the play when the cloth came round the donations. (Chakravarti, 2012, p. 64)

Amrita Chhachhi adds:

The mode of communication and consciousness raising experimented with in street theatre was perceived as an alternative kind of politics: [it] was a new form of political organizing which started through people coming forward to share their personal

experience of the political organizing which started through people coming forward to share their personal experience of the political structures that caused these phenomena; thus it appealed to both emotion and reason. It emphasized a person's own perception of her situation and ways in which she could struggle individually and collectively. This was quite contrary to a politics which used demagoguery and rhetoric to sway votes and make promises for people's salvation through a leader or organization (Chhachhi, 1984, p. 95).

Om Swaha brought out into the public space what remained hidden in the private spaces of the enclosed homes. The efficacy of the play was such that several people especially women approached the group and asked the performer where they could seek help (Erven, 1992, p. 118). Other plays like *Dafa 180* (Law 180) performed by Theatre Union addressed themes such as Sati and the problem of rape, following a discussion in the Parliament regarding legislation for the rights of women in custody. The group presented the play in colleges, parks, and slums in order to raise awareness about the frequency with which women were raped in police custody (Erven, 1992, p. 119). Often women, and hijras involved in sex work, are raped and policemen accused of raping them get away with their claims of them already being 'public women'.

Several theatre groups operated in major cities and in villages, where they regularly conducted theatre workshops. Other groups included groups like *Jana Natya Manch* (People's Theatre Forum), or *Janam*, run by Mala Hashmi, Shamsul Islam's *Nishant* (Dawn); groups run by activists and theatre practitioners such as Habib Tanvir (Dastoor, 1986, pp. 50-51) and Badal Sircar and organizations such as the Ahvaan Natya Manch (Summons Theatre Stage). Discussion on another version of street theatre is highlighted in the next section.

Figure 1 shows the protagonist, Kanchan, a woman fighting to avoid a certain fate as she is symbolically surrounded by flames. This illustrates the terrible truth of dowry deaths in India, where brides are often killed through burning. The chorus around her acts as a double bind, physically and metaphorically trapping her. This imagery connects to the Hindu marriage ritual of taking seven rounds (pheras) around a sacred fire, linking the holiness of the fire to the danger and violence hidden within marriage customs. Kanchan's desperate struggle represents a fight against oppression and cruel traditions.

Figure 1.

The image shows the chorus surrounding Kanchan as she struggles to escape the inevitable fate awaiting her.
 Retrieved from <http://mayakrishnarao.blogspot.in/p/street-theatre.html> under Creative Commons License (CC BY 4.0).



Asmita performs Dastak: Ab rape pe Halla Bol? (2012)

On the night of December 16th, 2012, a 23-year-old paramedic student and her companion were brutally assaulted and the woman was gang-raped aboard an off-duty chartered bus in South Delhi. Prior to attacking the couple, the group of perpetrators had already victimized another passenger, robbing and assaulting him before throwing him off the bus. During the attack, the couple was beaten and the woman subjected to extreme sexual violence, including the use of a blunt instrument to inflict severe internal injuries. After the assault, both victims were abandoned near Saket, left injured and exposed for nearly an hour before being transported to Safdarjung Hospital. Despite intensive medical intervention, the victim battled for her life for thirteen days, during which she provided her statement to authorities before ultimately succumbing to her injuries.

The incident galvanized unprecedented public outrage and media attention across India.

Continuous news coverage fueled collective grief and anger, leading to mass protests and occupations of prominent sites such as India Gate and Rajpath. These demonstrations were often met with forceful responses from law enforcement, including barricades and the use of water cannons and tear gas to disperse crowds. As public mourning intensified following the victim's death on December 29th, the protests transitioned from the streets to more contained venues like Jantar Mantar. The activism witnessed during this period included processions, demonstrations, and street theatre, with the victim being symbolically renamed "Nirbhaya" (meaning the 'fearless one')—signifying her resilience and fearlessness. This tragic event not only exposed the vulnerabilities in urban safety and governance but also catalyzed a nationwide movement demanding justice and reforms to address gender-based violence.

The public protests that erupted in response to the December 2012 rape case were strongly reminiscent of the anti-rape and anti-dowry movements that marked the rise of India's feminist activism in metropolitan centers during the early 1980s. These prior movements operated through broad-based coalitions that brought together student organizations, women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), women's wings of leftist political parties, and human rights lawyers on a unified platform of opposition to gender-based violence and patriarchal structures.

A central characteristic of these feminist mobilizations was their capacity to renegotiate the boundaries between private and public spheres. The women's movement in India increasingly relocated activism from the confines of private domestic space to public arenas, adopting strategies drawn from earlier forms of anti-colonial resistance. This strategic shift reflected a conscious engagement with India's rich traditions of dissent, borrowing heavily from the legacies of the anti-colonial struggle, leftist and democratic movements, as well as indigenous practices in music, theatre, and street performance (Chakravarti, 2008).

Many versions of street theatre circulated during the peak of protests between December 18th to December 29th, 2012, at India gate and Jantar Mantar. One of the plays, which caught attention of the spectators at the venue and various political organizations alike was *Dastak* performed by Asmita Theatre troupe. Established in 1993 by Arvind Gaur, Asmita Theatre is known for its staging plays of varied socio-political interest while not losing out mass appeal. The group takes up contemporary issues to underline the contours of our time while providing the 'best of entertainment' and have till now performed more than 25 plays on different socio-political issues.

Asmita troupe have been touring with *Dastak* for quite some time as they have performed it at venues like Dilli Haat, Delhi University campus along with India gate and Jantar Mantar. The play's duration varies from 8-15 minutes, and highlights issues like eve teasing, stalking, acid attacks, sexual harassments and assaults faced by women at home as well as public spaces and comments on the bystander culture in Delhi. The underlying tonality of the performance was quite effective in gripping the audience but the way the performance was devised was through the deep-rooted fear instilled by the notions of patriarchy that came across during the performance of the play.

The play aimed at promoting gender sensitization amongst the audience instead issues diktats of 'moral and acceptable behavior' with dialogues like '*aasli mard aurat par utpidna nahi karta*' (real men don't harass women). However, nuances of masculinity and femininity were not carefully dealt with. The performance had enormous potential to become an opportunity, but this potential got lost in the process of engaging the audience. An atmosphere to take direct action, in the form of anarchic vigilantism threatened to turn the non-violent protest into a violent one.

Working with constraints like lack of scenographic designs, varied light conditions, and lack of acoustic set-up, the actors must work with their bodies to create an ambience suitable to hold the attention of the audience and get the message through. Hence, one of the most important mediums of dialogue between the actors and the audience is the voice. The voice must be moderated in a way that the most subtle moments can be captured and presented. However, while performing *Dastak*, the actors work with the same stereotypical 'Bollywood' representation of rape, with the actors surrounding the performer playing the rape victim and rapist. The constant shrieks and scream of the victim getting drowned in the sound of beating drum and incoherent lines repeated by the chorus, almost resembled Hindu chants during a sacrificial ritual. The play gained a lot of significance due to its confrontational politics but the message of gender sensitization and the ever-changing dynamics of the actors and audience were somehow lost in the loud attempts to get the message through.

Another interesting and problematic area was the performance of the women during the street play. A 'Star performer' of the Asmita troupe, *Shilpi Marwah*, is usually at the forefront of these performances but her dialogues are always in a loud masculine tonality, and her gestures reflect that. In this performance, she portrayed the role of the narrator and after every scene of the 'man'

trying to harass the ‘woman’ in one way or another, she would try and reason it out with the audience (figure 2). However, it was reiterating the fact that since her actions were reenacting what is largely considered as the societal construct of heteropatriarchal norms of masculinity in society, which inevitably conjures up notions of power, legitimacy, and privilege, it often symbolically refers to the power of the state. The performance of maleness or ‘Female Masculinity’ defined by queer-trans scholar Judith/Jack Halberstam, where ze talks about the ‘act or imitation of maleness’ in day-to-day life, becomes the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity so that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing. Ze says,

In imitating gender, it implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. There is no doubt about the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. (Halberstam, 1998, p. 105)

The gendered typecasting of roles of the perpetrators of violence in the play to ultra-masculine men, who would assert themselves over the female characters by aggressive body language, threatening to hit them or standing around the raped woman with clenched fists as mute spectators with woman’s head hung in shame was (see figure 3) used in the concluding scenes of the play. Women were usually shown as the victims of gender violence, and there was no attempt to celebrate the life of rape survivors, as the troupe propagated the same logic of how women’s life and their dignity and honor are destroyed upon getting raped. This kind of ironic and inherent misogyny that most of the feminist and women organizations are trying to counter was an overriding factor in Arvind Gaur’s problematic interpretation of rape and sexual assault in *Dastak*. This current interpretation in the context of Delhi Gang Rape is not only retrogressive but is rampantly heteropatriarchal even in terms of the legacy devised by these radical theatre groups, as they indulge and play out the rampant gender stereotypes in representing men and women.

Figure 2 below shows the intense start of violent protests at India Gate on December 19, 2012. The Asmita Group, led by actor Shilpi Marwah, known for her strong female masculinity, performs the powerful street play ‘Dastak’ on Raisina Road. Marwah, in the center, engages the crowd with her passionate expressions and wide gestures, igniting a strong reaction. The cheers and raised arms from the crowd show support and excitement, demonstrating how performative activism by gender-defiant figures can turn public anger into physical protests.

Figure 2.

Figure 2 explains the beginning of the violent protests at India gate with the Asmita Group lead by actor Shilpi Marwah, known for her female masculinity performs 'Dastak' on 19th December 2012 on Raisina Road. The crowd cheers and at times exhibit mob hysteria. Personal Documentation by Priyam Ghosh.



Figure 3 below portrays expressive theatrical postures signifying collective grief and shame. Performers clad in black stand with clenched fists and bowed heads, symbolizing determination and sorrow. Nearby, women curl up and weep with heads hidden in their arms, a common gesture to depict deep shame and despair. These embodied expressions have long been used in street theatre to convey oppressive social realities and the emotional weight they impose. The silent but powerful body language reveals shared suffering and resistance, engaging the audience and emphasizing theatre's vital role in reflecting and challenging social injustice:

Figure 3.

The images demonstrate clenched fists and head hung in shame and women curling up and weeping in shame have been used often in theatre and signified the moods of the time. Personal Documentation by Priyam Ghosh.



Conclusion

Each of these performances complicated the relationship between theatre and political movements, as well as between street theatre and proscenium stages. Through a historiographical lens, the paper compares street theatre from the 1970s and 1980s with contemporary anti-rape performances, highlighting the resurgence of street theatre.

The comparative framework reveals both continuity and transformation in feminist street theatre. While *Om Swaha* foregrounded collective agency and dialogic engagement, drawing from folk traditions and reversing marriage rituals, the play reframed marriage as a site of gendered oppression and was performed in diverse urban settings, catalyzing public debate and direct engagement from women seeking assistance.

However, *Dastak*'s approach to the 2012 Delhi gang rape with a confrontational depiction of gender violence, highlighting issues from bystander apathy to prevailing gender stereotypes. The play's choreography placed the 'victim' at the centre, surrounded by performers embodying perpetrators and passive onlookers, echoing real-world power dynamics. While effective in mobilizing outrage, the production sometimes reinforced traditional notions of femininity and masculinity rather than subverting them, and at times risked promoting vigilante sentiment.

Dastak was performed at major protest venues, contributing to both the momentum and complexity of the anti-rape movement's public expression.

Both plays transformed acts of protest into cultural interventions, making gendered violence visible and actionable in public space. While *Om Swaha* prioritized dialogic engagement and collective empowerment, *Dastak* foregrounded confrontation and the affective properties of outrage. Despite their differences, both contributed to shifting public discourse and expanding the possibilities for feminist activism within urban India. This further succeeded in making private issues of gender violence visible in public spaces and mobilizing audiences for social change (Chakravarti, 1989; Reinelt, 2014).

Each of the protest performances during the anti-dowry and anti-rape movement were known for its communicative method and left a deep effect on the audience during the movement. The audience reception and effect of most of the performances was quite phenomenal which slowly dissipated with the passing year. These performances attempted to maintain their historical function of subverting and questioning dominant trends and making meaningful interventions in the contemporary world. These performances of protest also highlighted the condition of 'globalized assimilation' as Janelle Reinelt points out and have the radical potential and openness to connect with the audience directly and even if they do not, the spectators of most of these performances turned themselves into participants and performers attempting to change the course of any protest movement. Though the effect of most of the performances dissipated eventually, most of the performances and the performers tried to achieve to establish a self-reflexive approach through their activist cum artistic intervention.

Feminist street theatre in India, exemplified by *Om Swaha* and *Dastak*, has played a vital role in mobilizing public sentiment and challenging entrenched structures of gendered violence. While their immediate social impact may diminish over time, these performances continue to guide activist strategies, foregrounding the importance of direct engagement, public dialogue, and the reshaping of urban spaces for feminist intervention. The evolution of this theatre reflects broader shifts in feminist praxis and the enduring potential of art as a catalyst for social change (Chakravarti, 1989; Reinelt, 2014).

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