



## Engendering the Streets through Protests: Historicising Feminist Street Performances from *Om Swaha* (1979) to *Dastak* (2012)

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### Abstract

The cityscape is constantly touted as a much-used scenographic background, with enormous deployment of technological apparatus to stage everything. 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 the late 1970s and the 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, this paper seeks to analyze the transformative impact of these performances during the anti-rape movement, shedding light on their socio-political significance in contemporary India.

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



Gender Equality

### Introduction

The year is 1979 and in the middle of 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 item 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)

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The year is 2012, and several men and women clad in black surround a woman as she screams and urges the audience to save her from possible sexual assault. The troupe is performing their play in the immediate aftermath of the anti-rape movement in December 2012 at Jantar Mantar. The two performances are examples of agit-propaganda-based street theatre and are performed three decades apart. This paper attempts to revisit the anti-dowry protest in the late 1970s and anti-rape movement of 2012 in Delhi, as it scrutinizes selected agit-propaganda-based street theatre that transpired during this period. Initially confined to state-sanctioned protest sites like Boat Club and Jantar Mantar, 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, interfacing 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)**

Theatre has always been hailed as a popular art form for communicating new ideas and is known for being a form of entertainment as well as protest in India. It was always seen as a male-dominated arena where only women were considered as 'public' women were allowed to perform. With the anti-nautch movement and more women entering the Indian film industry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new kind of theatre movement emerged led by women practitioners, known as Feminist theatre.

This section aims to look at two performances which include one well-known cultural group whose theatrical styles of performances caused a lot of stirs during the anti-dowry movement in the 1970s and the anti-rape demonstrations in 2012. These performances further complicated the relationship between theatre and political movements and between street theatre and proscenium. This section also attempts to delve into understanding feminist activists' theatre by taking a brief historiographical intervention from the street theatre of the 1970s and the 1980s and then trying to understand the present anti-rape movement which also has performances of the street making a comeback.

The 1970s 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 movements as well as autonomous women's movements 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 was '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-class 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 the 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 endeavor to confront the political dimensions of societal transformation engendered a fresh necessity for contemplating cultural dynamics and devising strategies for actively engaging with cultural phenomena, thereby fostering democratization within this realm. This endeavor was facilitated through the utilization of a diverse array of artistic mediums such as street plays, proscenium theatre, musical compositions, and visual art in the form of posters, sculptures, handicrafts, and similar channels of expression.

Various feminist initiatives led to the establishment of multiple women's advocacy groups, such as the Forum against the Oppression of Women in Bombay, Vimochana (Redemption) in Bangalore, Stree Shakti Sangathan (Organization for Women's Power) in Hyderabad, and Saheli (Friend) in Delhi. These organizations directed their efforts towards critiquing governmental oversight of gender-based violence, emphasizing the need for proactive measures to address such injustices.

In 1979, a cohort of activists within Delhi University initiated the publication of *Manushi*, a feminist periodical that emerged as a prominent platform for vehemently denouncing the practice of dowry while also serving as a significant outlet for the burgeoning women's movement. Concurrently, Stree Sangharsh (Women's Struggle), a women's advocacy group founded in 1978 by Shubhadra Butalia, prioritized dowry as a focal point of their activism. These organizations employed various tactics including vocal protestations, public demonstrations staged outside the residences of dowry victims, and investigative endeavors into police records. Seeking to engage directly with women impacted by these societal issues, activists embraced street theatre as a medium that was both educative and entertaining.

Most of these upcoming feminist groups, collectives, and organizations used theatre and theatre workshops as an integral part of micro-level interventions. Trying to make legal amendments by mobilizing enough support to pressure the government to change the law was not the only focus, but feminists still engaged with the law from time to time. The performance was triggered by an understanding that the existence of laws is not sufficient to combat issues of dowry, sati, or rape. Yet it underscores a need to amend existing laws that instead of working in favour of women make their struggles more difficult. As Radha Kumar describes one of these powerful moments of mobilization:

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 a 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, and 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, 95)

*Om Swaha* was created by Maya Krishna Rao and Anuradha Kapur (who brought her own training in theatre when she returned to India in 1980) from Miranda House, a women's college at Delhi University, and were 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 the nation's imagination then. The style reflected agit-prop theatre and was blended with indigenous performative traditions as the linear narrative would be broken time and again with the 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 kin immediately after marriage. The Sutradhar played by Maya K. Rao in some versions speaks to the audience about the death of Deepa and how a similar fate awaited her friend, Kanchan, she also reflects on the apathy of the neighbours and family members to register police complaints.

The chorus and sutradhar also brought forth performative elements with the use of their bodies, to show the ritual of marriage most of the actors sat on the ground in a circle with their arms locked, facing the audience and chanting Hindu marriage rituals. The scene was significant for the construction of the image of fire, which becomes one of the key elements in Hindu traditional weddings, Deepa (played by Maya Rao), stands in the circle unable to move out, and is seen struggling (image 1.1). 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 groups 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 reworked time and again, and was hoped to bring change in 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 added:

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 demagogy and rhetoric to sway votes and make promises for people's salvation through a leader or organization. (Chhachhi, 1984, 95)

*Om Swaha* brought out into the public space what remained hidden in the private spaces of the enclosed homes.<sup>i</sup> 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 E., 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 E., 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.



Image 1.1: The chorus surrounding Kanchan as she struggles to escape the inevitable fate awaiting her.

Source: <http://mayakrishnarao.blogspot.in/p/street-theatre.html>

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

Many versions of street theatre circulated during the peak of protests between December 18<sup>th</sup> to December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012, at India Gate and Jantar Mantar. One of the plays, which caught the 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 interests while not losing mass appeal. The group takes up contemporary issues to underline the contours of our time while providing the 'best of entertainment' and has now performed more than 25 plays on different socio-political issues.

Asmita troupe has 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, Jantar Mantar, etc. The play's duration varies from 8 to 15 minutes and highlights issues like eve teasing, stalking, acid attacks, sexual harassment, 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 behaviour' with dialogues like *'aasli mard aurat par utpidna nahi karta'* (real man don't harass women), nuances of masculinity and femininity were not carefully dealt with. The performance which had enormous potential became an opportunity, which 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 etc, the actors must work with their bodies to create an ambiance 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 has to 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 screams of the victim getting drowned in the sound of beating drums and incoherent lines repeated by the chorus, almost resembling Hindu chants during a sacrificial ritual. The play gained a lot of significance due to its confrontational politics but somehow the message of gender sensitization and the ever-changing dynamics of the actors and audience were lost in the loud attempts to get the message through.

Another interesting and problematic area is the performance of the women during the street play. One of the star performers 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 some way or the other; she would try and reason it out with the audience (image 3.8). However, it was reiterating the fact that since her actions were reenacting what is largely considered the societal construct of hetero-patriarchal 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 he 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. He speaks

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 image 3.9) 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 her dignity, and honour 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 the 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.



Image 1.2: Asmita Group lead by actor Shilpi Marwah, known for her female masculinity performs 'Dastak' on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2012 on Raisina Road. The crowd cheers and at times exhibiting mob hysteria. This was the beginning of the violent protests at India gate.



Image 1.3: Gestures of 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.

### Conclusion

Each of the protest performances during the anti-dowry and anti-rape movement was 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. Most of the performances attempt to reflect upon and come up with strategies to fight contemporary issues through sometimes *'in your face'* tactics or at times subversive techniques. These performances attempted to maintain their historical function of subverting and questioning dominant trends and making meaningful interventions with the contemporary. These performances of protest also highlighted the condition of 'globalized assimilation' as Janelle Reinelt points out.

The forms of protests and performances on the streets as seen during the anti-dowry movement in the 1970s and 1980s, and the anti-rape movement in 2012 have the radical potential and openness to connect with the audience directly and even if it does 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.

**Conflict of Interest:** This research article has no conflict of interest

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