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STREET THEATRE AFTER THE STREET: TOWARDS A THEORY OF POST-PUBLIC PERFORMANCE IN INDIA

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Abstract

Street theatre has always had a prominent role in the socio-political and cultural life of India as a democratic mode of communication, education and political dissent. Street theatre was one of the most powerful means of communication that came to the fore through the efforts of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and later, organisations like the Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) which made the street a place for discourse, protest, and social mobilisation. Traditional studies has always perceived street theatre in terms of the reliance on public space like streets, markets, factory gates, university campuses, and village squares. But, changes in technology, digital media and the need for hybrid communication platforms, as well as the rapid urbanisation, and the private sale of public spaces, have drastically transformed the spatial and social landscape of public performance in modern India. The article suggests that the street has become a new historical form in Indian street theatre and that it isn't only a geographical location but rather a subject, networked and dynamic space of public engagement. The paper suggests the term Post-Public Performance as a conceptual lens for analysing the shift of politically engaged performance from traditional public streets to hybrid physical and digital environments such as shopping malls, metro stations, social media, universities and live streaming platforms. In this paper, I draw on the field of Performance Studies, public sphere theory, spatial theory and the field of contemporary cultural studies to show how the democratic performance is taking place in connected, physical, digital and mediated publics. These changes are not the demise of street theatre but its adaptation to the changing social realities. The proposed framework helps to rethink the concept of publicness in contemporary theatre studies, by rendering it as a performative process rather than a specific place.

Keywords: Street Theatre, Post-Public Performance, Public Sphere, Performance Studies, Digital Theatre, Political Performance, India

Introduction

Street theatre has been considered one of the most potent means of people's theatre in India since long time. In contrast to institutional and commercial theatre, street theatre became a participatory, accessible performance art that involved ordinary citizens in their own daily lives within the public sphere. In the twentieth century, street, market, factory compound, railway station, university campus became democratic spaces for debate of issues related to the labour rights movement, gender equality, communalism, environmental issues, education and political corruption through performance, for example, for the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Jana Natya Manch (JANAM), in Karnataka, Samudaya and many other regional theatre collectives. The political power of Indian street theatre can be seen in its ability to do away with architectural barriers between the performer and the spectator. The ease of its production, mobility, minimal props, and direct audience interaction allowed the theatre practitioners to present complex political ideas in a more accessible artistic manner. Street theatre thus disrupted institutional theatre's monopoly and brought the public into the theatre as a space of democratic participation. But, the social and spatial infrastructure in which Indian street theatre has developed is now quite different in the 21st century. Citizens' encounters of public performances have been transformed by processes of globalization, public space commercialization, digital communication technologies, new patterns of social interaction and greater surveillance. These changes were further propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw theatre practitioners' experiment with online performances, live streams, recorded productions and hybrid performance models. Today, then, activist performances typically take place not only on the streets but also in shopping malls, subway stations, university plazas, cultural festivals, museums, the internet and social media. Even with the changes, previous studies remain concentrated on street theatre's streetness. This view is no longer sufficient to account for the growing political performance ecology in modern-day India. This article argues that the notion of the street is no longer one of a place, but one of a form of public engagement that is produced across a variety of physical and digital places. A theoretical gap is filled by the concept of Post-Public Performance introduced in this paper. The framework does not imply the end of street performance, rather it addresses how street performance has moved to new spaces and settings, maintaining its democratic and activist aims. The theory attempts to rethink the concept of publicness as an emergent process that results from a variety of engagements between bodies, technologies, infrastructures, media platforms and audiences.

Literature Review

In India, the scholarly research of street theatre has focused on its connection with political action and participatory communication and democratic public space. In the early research, street theatre in India was linked with the larger People's Theatre Movement that was started by IPTA in 1940s. Through socialist ideology and anti-colonial politics, IPTA was instrumental in making theatre more democratic by reaching the people, the workers, the peasants and the marginalised groups. Subsequent to this, the political articulation of street theatre got reinforced with Jana Natya Manch under Safdar Hashmi which highlighted issues of labour exploitation, communalism, state violence, and civil rights. The work of Safdar Hashmi will continue to be central in the study of street theatre as a tool of political education and resistance in India. His emphasis on the notion that theatre was for the people and not restricted to institutional settings made street theatre a lasting emblem of democratic culture. Street theatre became even more politically charged after his assassination at a performance in 1989, as a means of artistic freedom and public dissent. The street theatre can be found in other theoretical bases from international scholarship of performance study. Richard Schechner proposes the notion of performance as "restored behaviour" and underlines the fact that performances continually adjust to changing cultural and social settings. The broad cultural perspective on performance that extends beyond traditional theatre enables scholars to analyse the contemporary political performance in a variety of contexts. Furthermore, the concept of street theatre has been inspired by Jurgen Habermas'

concept of the public sphere. According to Habermas, in a democratic society citizens need places where they can participate in rational public debate free of state restraint, or influence. In this sense, street theatre could be viewed as a form of artistic expression of this public sphere, as it is able to provide temporary spaces for public conversation in everyday life. Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space is another example of the social construction of space rather than its physical existence. Economic, political and cultural practices are constantly creating public spaces. It also has parallels with the work of Michel de Certeau, who also believes that public spaces are created by the human body's action and interaction with the city. The recent study has focused on digital performance, online activism and hybrid theatre in the wake of COVID-19. YouTube, Instagram reels, Facebook Live sessions, and livestreams are just a few of the platforms that researchers have shown that performances are moving through. The studies that have been conducted, however, tend to focus on digital theatre independently of street theatre, rather than study the changing nature of street theatre itself, in the context of these new settings. However, there is an important theoretical void as a result. The literature on the subject is either dedicated to the study of traditional street theatre or digital performance, but seldom to the intersection between. No overarching theory that can account for what continues to happen in public space after the transformation of its conventional status. No overarching theory that can explain what is still going on in public space after the commonplace character of public space has been changed.

Research Gap

While there has been a wealth of research on Indian street theatre for the political, community and democratic communication, current research still fetishes the street as the obvious site of public performance. These methods fail to capture the current situation where activist performances take place in hybrid physical and digital spaces. The existing literature does not offer a conceptual model that can analyze the performances that happen at the same time in several places, such as at metro stations, shopping malls, university campuses, social media platforms, livestreams, or digital archives. Furthermore, little has been done to consider how the digital circulation, algorithmic visibility and online participation are changing the concept of publicness itself. This paper attempts to fill this void by suggesting Post-Public Performance as an innovative theoretical concept that could be used to analyse the metamorphosis of Indian street theatre in the twenty first century.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- To explore the evolution of Indian street theatre in history
- To study the transformation of public sphere over India in the modern times.
- To examine the ways in which political performance has extended beyond the traditional streets.
- To create Post-Public Performance as a theoretical model for understanding activist performance in the present-day.
- To participate in current debates on publicness, space and digital culture in theatre and performance studies.

Research Methodology

The method used in this research is qualitative, which is interdisciplinary with theoretical and conceptual analysis. The research is conceptual, it does not involve empirical fieldwork, but rather it brings together the insights of theatre studies, performance studies, cultural studies, urban studies and communication theory in the creation of a new conceptual framework.

The study uses four complementary methods:

Historical Analysis: Trails of Indian Street Theatre from IPTA to the activist theatre today.

Literature Review: Critically reading and reviewing scholarly texts in the field of performance theory, public sphere theory, spatial studies and digital performance.

Comparative Interpretation: Comparing the traditional street performance method with the contemporary performance method in hybrid physical/ digital space.

Theoretical Synthesis: Concept of Post-Public Performance through an integration of concepts from Richard Schechner, Jürgen Habermas, Henri Lefebvre, Judith Butler and Michel de Certeau. This interdisciplinary perspective allows the paper to surpass the descriptive approach and result in an original theoretical contribution to performance studies.

Theoretical Framework:

Public Sphere to Post-Public Performance, using a theory derived from the fields of Performance Studies, Spatial Theory, Public Sphere Theory and Media Studies, this paper establishes the theoretical background. These frameworks individually, help to understand various components of performance, while taken together, lay the groundwork for understanding the emerging ecology of modern Indian street theatre. Richard Schechner (2020) suggests that performance goes beyond theatrical performances and relates to ritual, politics, public displays of action and even to common actions. Performance, then, isn't a set artistic form, but a constantly changing cultural process. This view enables us to interpret the theatre of today's street as an adaptive form of theatre in response to the evolving socio-political climate. The public sphere is a term coined by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1989) to refer to places where citizens can hold discussions about issues affecting them all. Indian street theatre has been a public sphere that has been a site of performative democracy, creating temporary publics out of banal urban spaces in history. But Habermas developed his theory before the advent of digital communication. Nowadays, physical and virtual surroundings are discussed concurrently. So, publicness is no longer limited to a particular physical space. This is reinforced by Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space which shows how space is socially produced and is not merely a physical space. Everyday interactions and social practices give streets, campuses, shopping malls, metro stations, and digital platforms meaning. Political performance is an active part of this production of space, and can produce temporary sites of collective engagement by transforming ordinary environments. In contrast, Judith Butler (2015) theorized that political action occurs when bodies assemble, for example when they come together in public space — physically or symbolically. Today, assembly is increasingly being mediated by the use of online communication, livestreams, recorded performances. The political community is thus much wider than a mere co-presence of actual people. Combined these viewpoints argue that one should not look at public performance today by its location, but by its capacity to engage people, make them visible, to stimulate conversation, and to create collective sense.

Street Theatre beyond the Street

The traditional model of Indian street theatre required three conditions, namely open public space, nearness of body and nearness of audience. Performers were placed in major public spaces, disrupted the normal lives of people, recruited audiences, and spoke about political issues directly to people, in the moment. So the performance culminated as the performers moved away and the audience started its daily activities. Today it's very different. Spontaneous public assembly has been curtailed as a result of urban planning. Shopping malls take the place of markets, gated communities take the place of neighbourhood streets and transportation hubs are controlled by surveillance systems. Official permission is normally needed for public demonstrations, and commercial premises restrict political expression. These changes have far from made political performance disappear, but rather have forced performers to engage in new negotiation with performance spaces. Activist performances take place in the university campuses, court yards of museums, cultural festivals, and metro stations, shopping complexes, beaches, parks, online conferences, livestream platforms and social media networks today. Every site yields a particular type of public engagement and a particular kind of audience. When a performance is staged in a metro station for instance, the commuter will face it unexpectedly. At the same time, the audience takes pictures from their mobile phones and publishes content on Instagram, YouTube, Facebook or X (formerly Twitter). In just a few hours more, thousands more viewers experience the show online. The actual audience is much larger than it might be thought. The show then goes on as the performers move away from the site. It lives on in digital circulation, public discussion, media reporting and online archiving. It's a radical departure from the accepted notions about street theatre.

Towards a Theory of Post-Public Performance

Post-Public Performance is the main ideas of this article. Post-Public Performance is a new generation of politically involved performance practices that have evolved due to the reconfiguration of the public space and are realized in interdependent physical, institutional, commercial and virtual spaces, maintaining the democratic goals of street theatre. Post-Public Performance is not a street performance; it is not bound to a specific place. However, it is characterised by the creation of public engagement on a variety of platforms. The theory states that there are seven distinguishing features.

1.Spatial Mobility: Performances are no longer on the street. It travels from campus to transport, shopping mall, museum, parks, cultural festivals, digital, and temporary civic spaces.

2.Hybrid Publics: Today's audiences are made up of both live and digital viewers. People physically at the event join in with the audience who are viewing the event through a recorded or live stream.

3.Algorithmic Visibility: The traditional street theatre depended upon chance meetings between the actors and the street children. More and more, contemporary works rely on digital algorithms that regulate the dissemination of the performance in the digital sphere. Digital algorithms are now more and more important for contemporary works, in determining how widely performances circulate online. The visibility is then – as it were – “technically mediated”.

4.Extended Temporality: The performers broke up their earlier performances. Recordings of contemporary performances continue to circulate today, and the pieces are also posted on the internet, discussed in public, and accessed via digital archives. They have political influence that spans time.

5.Networked Participation: There is a range of new possibilities for participation, such as commenting, reposting, remixing, subtitling, translation and discussing through digital communication during performances. The audience becomes a partner in spreading political messages.

6.Fluid Public Space: Publicness is spatialized instead of territorialized. Publicness is relational not geographical. Political dialogue arises where-ever communication, visibility, and participation meet, from physically public spaces to digitally mediated spaces.

7.Expanded Political Agency: The impact of political performances on public opinion is growing across a range of different ways, such as immediate persuasion, but also through prolonged dissemination in the digital sphere, educational use, media coverage and archival keeping.

Discussion

The concept of Post-Public Performance is not intended to say that the traditional street theatre is no longer available. Instead, it contends that its historic logic has undergone change. The term “street” is no longer just a location; it is a symbolic term. This "theoretical turn" allows the analysis of many contemporary performances, which are not described by traditional definitions. The protests are held in the same democratic tradition historically linked to Indian street theatre, for instance in climate change demonstrations in the malls, gender awareness performances at the universities, anti-discrimination performances in metro stations, online protest readings, Zoom theatre festivals, and digitally circulated protest performances. It is important to note that there is a difference between Post Public Performance and digital theatre here. Digital theatre is typically a performance that is specifically designed for online presentation. In Post-Public Performance, on the other hand, the process of changing public political engagement is the focus, without regard to the technology used. Digital platforms are not the only part of a larger public performance ecosystem. As is the case with the proposed theory, it is not a site-specific theatre. Site-specific performance is an examination of the connection between art-making and specific places. Post-Public Performance, on the other hand, explores the political publicness as a movement between various environments while keeping democratic participation alive. The framework is not just relevant to India. Activist performance has become a hybrid physical and digital phenomenon globally. Internationally, activist performance is increasingly occurring in the interstices of physical and digital spaces. Bodily assembly, live streaming, hash tags, citizen journalism and on-line documentation are all shaped together by protest movements. The proposed concept, hence, provides a helpful analytical framework for comparative performance studies in various contexts around the world.

Conclusion

Street theatre, as a form of performance, has been one of the most democratic and politically salient in the Indian context. It challenged the standard theatrical architecture and created a space in which public space became a site of participation, conversation and resistance. However, there has been a tremendous transformation of social conditions that originally gave rise to this practice in the twenty first century. The concept of public space and the form of public participation are changing with urban transformation, privatization, surveillance, globalization and digital communication technologies. These changes are not an indicator that street theatre is on a downward trend; rather they indicate how street theatre is flexible and adaptable. This paper has suggested that today's activist performance has moved beyond the street. It functions, however, by means of connected physical, institutional, commercial and digital environments that together generate new forms of democratic engagement. The article has offered the theoretical concept of Post-Public Performance as an original concept. The idea moves analytical focus away from the geographical, towards processes of public participation, visibility, circulation and networked interaction, to reimagine theatre, politics and society. The proposed framework adds to the study of theatre in India by bringing the relevant theories of street theatre into the digital era. It also helps to the international Performance Studies by proving that the concept of publicness is not a static space term but a process of performing the public. The research questions that can be advanced based on this theory include ethnographic studies of the activist theatre

groups of the present day, analysis of audience reception, archive of digital performances and comparative studies within South Asia and other global contexts. These kinds of studies will contribute to an understanding of how democratic performance is still developing in societies that are undergoing rapid change, yet are still dedicated to social justice, communication and political change.

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