



The Pedagogic and the Performative in Indian Theatre

Negotiations of a Feminist Collaborative Imagination

Indu Jain



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“Indu Jain’s book is both theoretically sophisticated and historically comprehensive in its analysis of Feminist theatre artists’ interventions into Indian theatre writing, process, and pedagogy. Focusing on four outstanding women theatre practitioners who became powerful leaders in the critique and revision of the post-colonial Indian theatre landscape through their productions, their performance processes, and their pedagogy, Jain describes their impact on institutions such as the National School of Drama, and on post-independence narratives, curricula, and training practices prominent until their interventions between the mid-1980s and 2013 when they challenged the middle class and patriarchal traditions of the previous era. Jain revises and strengthens previous scholarship on Indian Feminist Theatre with reference to a wide range of Western and Indian theoreticians such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Sedgwick, Bhatia, and Dutt. She stakes out a strong claim for an imaginative disruption of the hegemonic based on interconnected sets of relationships, an unsettling of semiotic certainties, an emphasis on the body as expressive polyvocality, and pedagogic collaboration with students that empowered a further younger generation to create their own theatre ecology. This book is beautifully written, intelligently argued, and well-illustrated with a wealth of research including treating former students of the main women artists as ‘informed mediators’. This book will be important and influential in shaping how other nations’ theatre histories revise and interfere with previously traditional narratives, and will inspire feminist scholars to reconsider earlier understandings of women’s interventions and disruptions of the status quo while also existing alongside them.”

—Janelle Reinelt, *Professor Emerita, University of Warwick*

“Indu Jain’s extraordinary new book, *The Pedagogic and the Performative in Indian Theatre: Negotiations of a Feminist Collaborative Imagination*, is exemplary of new feminist scholarship on theatre and performance, offering an engaging contextual analysis of the work of prominent Indian feminist theater practitioners—namely Anamika Haksar, Anuradha Kapur, Kirti Jain, and Tripurari Sharma—which eschews conventional linear, individual-centered histories and instead explores the networks of influence and dynamics of rupture and dislocation that characterize the powerful arc of their practice, theory, and teaching. Informed by intersectional feminist perspectives as well as the critical legacy of Paulo Freire, this book illuminates the mutually formative relation between the

individual agency of these artists and the structural forces that shape, and are in turn shaped by, their transformative work in the theater, emphasizing their process-based work in rehearsal and in the classroom. In Jain's rendering, their feminist pedagogy and performance strategies are characterized by collectivity, ensemble work, and affective alliances, as well as the creation of new critical idioms and gendered stage language grounded in corporeality. Modelling the best of feminist critical approaches, Jain makes a decisive contribution to our understanding of the recent history of Indian theatre and the transformative role of women theater directors therein."

—Jill Lane *is Associate Professor of Spanish & Portuguese and of Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University. She is the author of Blackface Cuba, 1840–1895 and co-editor with Peggy Phelan of The Ends of Performance*

"This exciting new study of women's theatre practice in India makes an important contribution to the feminist scholarship, with resonances for theatre practice globally. In its focus on pedagogy as well as professional practice, it analyses the process of training new generations of feminist practitioners. Jain establishes the importance of such influential figures as Anuradha Kapur and Anamika Haksar amongst others, for their own generation and in the creation of a lasting legacy of contemporary practices that stress the collaborative imagination within a feminist framework.

Indu Jain is an important feminist scholar with an original and thought-provoking approach to reading practice against women's studies in a global context, informed by key voices in both the global North and global South."

—Lisa Fitzpatrick, *Senior Lecture in Drama, Ulster University, Northern Ireland*

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For my parents Promil and Jitendra, my son Bhavya

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Introduction: Contemporary Indian Feminist Theatre—A New Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm

A principle trepidation of feminist thought has been to point out that the crucial identity markers which are ascribed to women are usually not the ones they have chosen for themselves; rather, they are inscribed on them within the patriarchal discourses. To read, in a reflexive manner, this stealthy process of identity-fixation is to open up a space for resistance. This book examines the contemporary Indian feminist theatre, as an active site for the performance of this very self-reflexivity and the study, as an entry point explores, the feminist theatre in India as a contemporary social, political and aesthetic movement. The key focus is on the processes, which are more apparent in the pedagogical lexicon employed by Indian women theatre practitioners, namely, Anamika Haksar, Anuradha Kapur, Kirti Jain, and Tripurari Sharma, rather than the end performances they stage.

The temporal framework under consideration extends from the mid-1980s to 2013. Nonetheless, Chapters 5 and 6 critically engage with both—the oeuvre of their students and their own contemporaneous contributions. During the early 1980s, invigorated by the momentum of the women's movement, Delhi (capital city of India) street theatre functioned as a vanguard for engaging with pressing gender-related issues, thereby catalysing a broader sociocultural impact on the lives of women entrenched within the patriarchal hegemonic structures prevalent in India. Subsequently, many of these women theatre practitioners from the

collective transitioned to proscenium theatre, wherein their interventions instigated a paradigmatic shift in the post-colonial Indian theatre landscape. One can see how the mid-1980s is significant as it marks the end of this feminist street theatre initiative, which Uma Chakravarti¹ and others have eloquently elaborated on, and is also the beginning of what is seen as these feminist theatre activists (re)positioning themselves onto the proscenium spaces and essentially taking up permanent teaching positions at the National School of Drama in Delhi. Within the ambit of post-colonial Indian theatre, they brought in the discourse surrounding identification and the exploration of gender as a pivotal area of inquiry, particularly within the context of the cultural, social, and political landscape of the nation-state. Their interventions underscored the complexities and nuances of gender as a critical site of contention and transformation. This theatre, through a performative lens, highlighted that it is essential to interrogate gender identities and expressions together with their role in serving as catalysts for broader socio-political crises, reflecting the intricate interplay between individual agency and structural forces. Therefore, their work elucidated the profound implications of gender dynamics in redefining collective identities and societal norms within the national institutional space. In contrast, the year 2013 witnessed an adversarial turn in feminist experimentation within this very institutional space, with the retirement of Anuradha Kapur and Kirti Jain, along with various other social and political commotions of the time. Nivedita Menon in her book, *Seeing Like a Feminist* (168),² reflects upon the relationship between an ordered expanse and justice. She talks of how an ordered and peaceful institutional structure can be curated through a combination of force and hegemony in the interest of propertied and dominant groups, not composing a just habitus. With these feminist directors taking over pedagogical positions within the institutional space, there began a process of negotiation between this forced ‘order’ and specious ‘justice’. The transition from the street theatre to the space of the proscenium was not smooth as it was debated and critiqued; especially by the left democratic theatre, within the ideological discourses amongst the theatre activists as well as performers. The theatre movement of the late 1970s and 1980s can be located at the interstice of the feminist movement, agitprop theatre, and social activism in India, singularly because of the problematisation of socially relevant issues such as dowry, sexual harassment, rape, and communalism. The performative framework of street plays was used as an effective medium of communication that elicited

the participation of women activists. However, the intentional involvement of women was obscured by the absence of the primary subjects facing domestic violence. When the mode of interventionist performances attained a distinct turn with the shifting of focus on the institutional spaces, I argue that the impetus was to conceive the institutional spaces like the National School of Drama and others as heterogenous spaces where meaning and functions are constantly (re)negotiated and reconfigured. This opens the possibility of conceiving the institutional spaces as sites of potential resistance. Withstanding the ideological criticism of the class character of the institutional space vis-à-vis the street theatre and the post-colonial suspicion of the state-sponsored theatre enterprise, here, the proscenium is undertaken as the site of struggle without any fixed inventory and the particular historical conjecture of its emergence deepens the shallow frame of implied ideological criticism posited against it. Therefore, while keeping the structuralist pretence of the institutional space for critical scrutiny, these institutions are neither taken to be a pure site of resistance nor a site of total domination. The interventionist feminist politics of Indian theatre is further presented by exploring the pertinent role played by Anamika Haksar, Anuradha Kapur, Kirti Jain, and Tripurari Sharma in disrupting the enunciative modalities, conceptual framework, and discursive formation of the ‘malestream’ historiography of Indian theatre in line with what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan forwards as to how ‘the conflicts between gender, on the one hand, and family, community and nation, on the other, need to be analysed in terms of female identity, subjectivity and agency within a narrative of historical modernity’ (Rajan 14).³

In 1988, Kirti Jain became the first woman director of the National School of Drama. The institute underwent an enormous metamorphosis. A new syllabus was encouraged to be designed under the progressive vision of feminist theatre artists, with Kirti Jain, Maya Rao, Tripurari Sharma, and Anuradha Kapur as the chief partakers of the academic committee. Anamika Haksar joined them in 1990 and contributed much to this process. Within the next two years, the academic curriculum was completely overhauled, and what was brought in was a compelling tension between *knowing yourself* and a slender monolithic vision of tradition. Theatre in Education Company (TIE) was also founded as a supplemental programme to the National School of Drama and reflected the new pedagogical intent. For the next two decades, these radical women teachers dominated the National Drama School faculty and administration, took

control of the acting classes and course modules, making changes through the day-to-day actor-training processes and modifying the curriculum structure. This was the first time the official acting curriculum was modified after the initial acting courses introduced by Ebrahim Alkazi modelled on the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (London) and perspectives of a Nehruvian vision of theatre pedagogy in post-independence India. The Alkazi model was first presented in the 1956 Sangeet Natak Akademi seminar as a potential model of what an Indian National Acting School should have as its syllabus.⁴ Anuradha Kapur took over as the director in the years 2007–2013. She overhauled the admission process and made it more egalitarian, with interviews and workshops to be held at regional and local centres across India rather than solely centred in Delhi. At the admission level, she tried to underplay a pre-knowledge of Hindi and permitted the aspiring candidates to use local languages or non-verbal theatrical expressions. The ratio of female–male students during her administrative tenure increased by 25 per cent. In her supervisory capacity, she tried to bring in liberal and progressive day-to-day changes, as seen in the new reading propositions for students and showcasing innovative international plays. Symbolically, in 2013, after most of these radical women directors left the Drama School, the institutional space under a new head and directly under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture lapsed back into a hierarchical and conventional set-up. Therefore, this book tries to historicise and contextualise the work done by these women directors in the above-marked period.

1.1 POST-COLONIAL INDIAN THEATRE AND EPISTEMIC RUPTURES

Research has been done in recent times on the subject of feminist theatre in India. While being mindful of the existing research in the area, the book lends a new perspective to the issue. My project is a *revision*, which is my departure from the existing scholarship, and it converges on the processes of performance, progressions of training and rehearsals, furthermore the pedagogy of Anamika Haksar, Anuradha Kapur, Kirti Jain, and Tripurari Sharma. The study demonstrates a lacuna in the existing historiography in this focus area. While addressing the history of Indian Feminist Theatre by delineating it through the work of four revolutionary theatre directors, this inquiry also focuses on the very discursive formations underlying their own omission from the historiography of Indian

Theatre that rendered and inscribed the female body into a docile one. Thus, this specific historical inquiry also necessitates a different set of tools from that of a traditional historical approach, which attempts to reveal the underlying sedimentary, irreversible, stable, and linear progression of events. The onus should be on the incidence of interruptions, radical ruptures, and dislocations as the epistemological act and threshold rather than the imaginary complicities and progressive refinement of the traditional historical disposition. In the Foucauldian sense, the coherence and intelligibility of the hierarchical ordering implicated by the 'subjective unities'(authors) should be discarded as the 'harmless enough amusement' of the historians 'who refuse to grow up'(144) for the analysis of a further set of rules that governs the enunciative modality of the statements, the discursive formation.⁵ This theoretical disposition also informs the historical inquiry undertaken in the book to delineate the history of contemporary Indian feminist theatre, which was muted discursively by mainstream historiography.

The contribution of the women directors, first and foremost, is attributed to their displacement of text-based theatre to create a performance-based text, that is, a performance text based on a long improvisation process, abundant use of the body, and what could be rendered as a feminist scenography. Concomitantly, the study posits that such process-based work could not have emerged from their imagination alone but through an opportunity to work with young actors within their drama school curriculum and drama school productions, wherein experiments of this magnitude were possible to implement. Hence, one can see their working process as also a training process during productions and correspondingly culminating from their long-term engagement with teaching acting. From this entry point, the book takes up the idea of pedagogy and dissemination of knowledge, of how the students under their mentorship absorbed and learned various performance methodologies to be carried and practised in their respective regional theatrical and institutional spaces with their own perspectives and progressive theatre-making modalities.

Some of the representative recent works, grouped under post-colonial theatre studies, serve as an opening wedge to my research. These include Aparna Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence: Drama, theory and urban performance in India since 1947*,⁶ where she examines the unprecedented conditions for writing, performance and reception that the experience of new nationhood created in the major Indian languages.

It also offers a detailed discussion of the key plays, playwrights, directors, and dramatic genres of urban theatre in India and arranges it to constitute a new 'national canon'. Vasudha Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*⁷ delineates the urban interaction with folk theatre forms, their politicisation and representation within the framework of the post-colonial performance genre. Similarly, Nandi Bhatia, in her books⁸—*Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader, Performing Women/Performing Womanhood: Theatre, Politics, and Dissent in North India*, and *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Post-colonial India*—views drama and performance as central to the practice of nationalism and anti-colonial resistance. She focuses on female actors who represented the Indian housewives, courtesans and many other stereotypical roles that women inhabited in cinematic, literary, and autobiographical texts, wherein the cynosure was on the socio-political struggles outlined in the narrative through a detailed textual analysis. Analogously, the anthology *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*,⁹ edited by Tutun Mukherjee, is a compilation of 12 unpublished plays by women from various regions of the country, made available through translation. It has an introduction as well as a brief outline of theatre in the particular region of the country in whose language the playwright wrote the original play. Though the plays included are only by women, it does not delve into the detailed aspects of making theatre and only focuses on female playwrights. Indian theatre historians like Bishnupriya Dutt¹⁰ and Rimli Bhattacharya¹¹ have principally focused on colonial and post-colonial actresses on the Indian stage to find a feminist subject for theatre studies. Their research presents various approaches to examine the actresses as exemplars of the 'new woman' phenomenon, intricately linked to the dynamics of burgeoning nationalism. A. Mangai, in her latest book, *Acting Up*,¹² looks at gender and theatre in India, wherein she chronicles the rise of women's theatre in the 1980s and draws links between activism and practice. She works through a series of interviews to discuss the productions of many women theatre artists. Though she documents some key productions in the mapping of Indian feminist theatre, there is no material production analysis or an in-depth study of either the process or the pedagogy employed by women theatre directors. This existing corpus of study, using the canonical dramatic texts, pushes their arguments to aspects such as 'gender in the theatre', 'sexual politics in the theatre', and 'gender and nationalism' rather than 'feminist theatre'. The subject matter that these women

directors deal with, for instance, controversial historical female figures, female impersonation, negotiation of classical texts, reviving victims of violence, caste inequalities, and migrations, find textual visibility with an undue emphasis on the dramatic text in theatre historiographies which work within the paradigm of certain archival conventionality. However, the challenges faced and breakthroughs achieved by such feminist theatre practitioners are often invisibilised in the hierarchy of certification.

1.2 HISTORY, GENEALOGY, AND ERASURES: TRANSGRESSIVE POLITICS IN INDIAN FEMINIST THEATRE

This project begins with a questioning of the aforementioned framing and takes off from the existing writing on the Indian theatre and the sections on ‘women and gender’. I argue that a historiographical intervention pushing against the limits of earlier models and conceptualisations in such works is not only representative but also the entry point for my research, which questions the previous epistemological certitudes. As a theoretical and methodological interpolation that facilitates me to develop a new historiographical paradigm, an approach I draw from is the one expounded by feminist performance studies scholars—Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris. Aston and Harris, in their book *Performance Practice and Process: Contemporary [Women] Practitioners*,¹³ bring out the debates in the discipline of theatre and performance studies. They show how the most important object of academic enquiry is often regarded as knowledge drawn from interdisciplinary theories rather than that which derives from the work of ground-breaking professional practitioners. The book is important to my research as it examines the creative performance-making strategies of eight artists/companies for whom a resistant gender practice is crucial to their work. Focusing on ‘women’ as an expansive and contingent category, they endeavour to include consideration of the intersections between the discourses of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Without homogenising or ghettoising them, the study looks into the women artists’ different approaches to various ranges of innovative performance genres invested in the processes they engage with. Therefore, in this book, I reiterate what has been repeatedly and vocally claimed by the national and international feminist practitioners, that is, their performances are process-based, and the work offers that it is this ‘process’ that needs to be retrieved and studied if one seeks to construct a feminist approach to study feminist performances. To give an