

Abstract

Recent times have seen an upsurge in academic and scholarly interest in the interconnections between the city, theatre and other performative practices. Intrigued by this emerging area in research, the thesis investigates, and takes a critical view of, the nature and context of theatre and performance in an urban environment -- of Indian plays, in our case, written and performed in cities from the 1970s to the present. As a researcher, my constant aim has been to see how one might use an understanding of theatre in the city to arrive at social experiences of urban living and also analyze the transformative role of theatre in terms of these experiences. The thesis thus focuses on the multiplicity of meanings generated by the city and performed in Indian theatre during the period mentioned above. My focus in the course of the work will be to engage with theatre in its urban context – with its interface with the cit(y)zens, and analyze its themes, material and dramaturgy.

What gives a city its own character? What is it that gives a place its identity? On the surface, city spaces appear to be delimited by traffic patterns and signboards, utilities, and demarcated neighbourhoods. But, as a researcher, I am interested in looking at the kinds of ordinary encounters that give these spaces a personality, an identity that makes it a ‘place’. The city's environment is made up of residents' ambitions, dreams, frustrations, and suffering; it is a kind of receptacle, packed with human experience. Not only in terms of demographics, economics, or architecture, but also in terms of sentiment and emotion, the city is a meeting ground of people from different walks of life who share the contested space of the city. Cities thus become more than their built environment, more than a set of class or economic relationships; they become a lived, suffered, and felt experience constantly evolving.

Theatre being a cultural product informed by the historical, political and social conditions of a time is not only representative of these realities but also formative of the nature of such cities. The city is a stage that produces identities and is in turn produced by them. The thesis adopts performance studies as a tool to examine the ways in which the drama of living unfolds itself in the cities. The citizens are participants as well as audiences of urban theatre. Hence it becomes important to refract the city not only through the lens of performance as stabilized practice but through the dynamics of performativity. Performative theatre

practices encourage increased audience participation and compel them to question their own performance in everyday urban life. The performative critical approach empowers the citizens and gives them a sort of agency to question the normative and hegemonic social, political practices of the society. It also reinforces the fact that the staged drama is after all a reflection of the drama of their life. Urban theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Victor Turner have all reinforced this view in their works.

Chapters have been organized chronologically, thematically and dramaturgically at once. Each chapter seeks to offer critical insights into a particular phase of city-theatre in India and establish its right to claim as a separate (sub) genre. Chapter 1 explains how the "Theatre of Roots" movement adopted folk conventions and practices in theatre to relate urban experience. Chapter 2 revisits protest theatre in India and looks into its connections with the city. The chapter investigates the connection between the development of disturbing social and political conditions in the country during the 1970s and the emergence of this theatre of protest, particularly in the country's urban and semi-urban areas. Chapter 3 focuses on English-language plays and brings out the experiences of the 'new' urban Indian landscape. Women playwrights are examined in Chapter 4, which demonstrates how women from the intellectual and professional elite class, as well as from marginalized or underprivileged groups, manage their living spaces and negotiate their urban lives respectively. The thesis thus draws attention to the multidimensional experience generated by the interaction between the city and its inhabitants, and theatricalized on stage and in open spaces in different performance formats.

Thus, the subject of the thesis is both old and new. Old because a lot of work has been done on theatre and also on the city, but few of them have approached the synergy of theatre and urbanism, especially on the Indian stage, which this work attempts. Books such as Aparna Dharwadkar's *Theatres of Independence: Drama Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (2005) deal with 'the new dramatic canon' especially after 1950, and the different ways and processes involved in the act of writing, producing and circulating plays in a multilingual national culture. Nandi Bhatia's *Modern Indian Theatre: a Reader* (2009) is a historical take on the influence of socio-political practices on theatre and theatre's formal evolution as a result of this interaction. Vasudha Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays and Performances* (2006) focuses on the urban encounter with folk theatre forms, with their politicization on stage between the 1940s and

1970s. It primarily deals with the politics of modern Indian theatre vis-a-vis the cultural policy of the government. Though each of the above books is comprehensive and a scholarly piece in its own focal area, none of them deal with this new category of plays that can be called 'city plays' in different senses. Also to be noted is the fact that none of them include any criticism of the English-language plays written and performed after the 1980s. Dharwadkar's exclusion of contemporary women playwrights has been counterbalanced to some extent by Tutun Mukherjee's *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* (2005). However, as the title suggests, its focus is on the translation of play texts and not theatre study as such. The only book that comes close to acknowledging this genre called 'city plays' is the Mahesh Dattani introduced play anthology, *City Plays*(2004). This, I should say, is also an inspiration behind choosing the topic for my thesis; but again, it is no theatre criticism. Similarly, there have been many scholarly books on the city -- such as Jen Harvie's *Theatre and the City* (2009), Desmond Harding's *Writing the City: Urban Visions and Literary Modernisms* (2003), and Robert Park's *The City* (2019). Each of them is an authoritative work on the city, but again none of them read urbanism in the context of theatre as an aesthetic practice. The present study should fill up a visible gap in Indian theatre criticism by placing theatre within the frames of the 'urban' in its many iterations.