

The Show Must Go On

The people's theatre group, Jana Natya Manch, and its work have been depicted skilfully by Lalit Vachani in his documentary Natak Jari Hai by a sensitive shadowing of the team and its members, snippets of their performances and interviews. Janam's work might be seen as didactic or propagandist but dwelling on its theatre practices would be missing the larger point, which Vachani thankfully does not do.

BELA MALIK

There are some differences between my father and myself, with him supporting Bharatiya Janata Party. At the same time, there is some common ground.

– (Sarita, quote to reviewer)

Sarita comes from a regular middle class family in Delhi. Her father is a supporter of the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party, while she is a part of a people's theatre group, Jana Natya Manch (People's Theatre Front), better known as 'Janam' (birth), which spends much of its energies performing plays against communalism. That is not the only irony. Janam is supportive of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and has, as part of its work, campaigned for the party's candidates in general and assembly elections.

Uttam, another Janam member, rooms with four young men engaged in small-time

jobs, who urge him to make a name in mainstream cinema as an actor, and who firmly believe that in a communal conflagration, it is necessary to kill the Muslim before he kills you. It is another matter that since then Uttam has begun to look for work in mainstream Hindi cinema, but he describes that as something done to earn money, not "work", which has to be meaningful, like with Janam.

Then there is Kalia (Vijay Kalia) who sings off-tune and works in government; a self-made supervisor of working class origins. Nakul (Nakul Sawhney), from an upmarket south Delhi home, is articulate in English and able to explain with a smile the presence of a desk calendar with photos of communist leaders such as Mao Tse Tung, Lenin, Stalin, Che Guevara and Safdar Hashmi, the young martyr, one of the founding members of Janam.

To enter the world of Janam and its people, Lalit Vachani¹ uses a technique

similar to the one that he did in his two previous films on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the fascist organisation working to create a Hindu nation in a culturally diverse India. The entry is unobtrusive. The organisation, Janam, and its work, theatre, is brought out skilfully through a sensitive shadowing of the team and its members, with some snippets of their performances in diverse settings and interviews filling the gap. It is striking that the Janam members could as easily have become recruits of the 'shakhas' (branches) of the RSS, just like Kali of his previous film *Boy in the Branch*, or Sandeep in *Men in the Tree*. Here is where political orientation and socialisation, ideology and political organisation come in but, in what is now emerging as a "Vachani-touch", they are brought out through the words and actions of the group and its members.

How does a theatre group that owes its legacy to the energetic Indian People Theatre Association (IPTA) deal with the diversity of its team members? There is no audition or screening process. The group attracts those interested in theatre: students passing time before joining college, workers who want to do something more, those wanting to become actors on the silver screen and others, all from different class backgrounds and age profiles. "This diversity gives the group energy", says Mala, who has been with the Delhi-based Janam since its beginning in 1973.

Janam writes or evolves its own plays, or then some plays are written exclusively for Janam (GP Deshpande, Habib Tanveer, for example), and the group does everything by itself. Sometimes it performs proscenium theatre such as in 'Shambukvadh' (playwright Brijesh), which is on caste, but this was not covered by *Natak Jari Hai* because the shooting of the documentary had ended by the time the play was staged. But other plays are shown in the film, including *Natak Jari Hai* (1990, directed in memory of Safdar Hashmi and based on a parable about a child in an authoritarian society, that takes off from where 'Hallaboh' ended), *Machine* (cinematically stylised for the film), *Voh Bol Uthi* (She Spoke Out, three narratives on women's issues) and *Yeh Dil Maange More, Guruji* (This heart wants more! The tagline for Pepsi set up against Hindu fascism), *Aartanaad* (footage of a rehearsal was included in the film), *Aurat* (Women, a poem from the play was in the film), *Loh*

Uth Raha Phir Jhanda Lal (an election play, which was covered extensively in the film).

The title *Natak Jari Hai* must be inspired by the section of the film that documents, – through black and white photographs, archival footage, new footage of the location, and narration by Mala (Moloyashree Hashmi, Safdar's widow) – the trials of Janam when Safdar was murdered in the line of duty. It was on January 1, 1989. The place, Jhandapur village, Sahibabad industrial area, near Delhi. Janam was supporting a workers' strike, during the time a municipal election was underway. Supporters of the rival, a Congress (I) backed candidate, went on a rampage, during which all the actors escaped but for Safdar who succumbed to injuries, and a CITU worker, Ram Bahadur who was killed on the spot.

The group was stunned. Protest marches were held in the city. Mala, through this part of the film, remains composed even when she recounts, using photographs, her comradeship with Safdar among other personal and political memories. However, the poignant section is when, according to Brijesh of Janam, they decided to restage the same play at the same venue on January 4, 1989, three days after the incident. They were imbued with a sense of outrage. Tears were not allowed to show on the faces of the defiant actors because at that point they became comrades. The support for Janam and the sense of anger was overwhelming. Supporters and sympathisers, not all affiliated with the CPI(M), poured into the venue and the play was attended by a large audience that participated in the show of peaceful, militant strength against those threatening democracy and freedom of expression. The red flag flew high. The show must go on. This is the spirit of Janam, and by capturing this, Vachani has performed the task of a historian documenting people's struggles.

Vachani does not flinch at any point from the images, symbols, slogans and rhetoric of the members of the group he documents. The camera focuses on Stalin at the CITU office, the Safdar Hashmi 'smaraksthal' (memorial) at Shahibad and at Mala's home without apology. It is able to take the entire group, its ideology and political location on board. This is the intriguing part.

Within the larger progressive movement in India, there is an uneasy relationship

that many share with the CPI(M). It is variously accused of being Stalinist, revisionist, deviationist, bureaucratic, centralised and patriarchal. This inside glimpse of some team members who work with an affiliate or mass organisation provides a different picture. The sight of a personable Nakul or Mala or Sarita or Sudhanva spreading a money collection shawl in front of people at the end of the show is a quiet way of announcing that this people's theatre group runs entirely through contributions from people. It receives no funds from any other source. The documentary captures the travels of Janam through the hot north Indian plains in a second class compartment of an Indian train, on motorbikes, jeeps, local buses and other modes, to reach diverse settings, from a school to a factory gate, or a town.

Janam is an active actor in the world people's theatre movement, which is also populated by exponents performing

interactive theatre of oppressed forms such as invisible theatre, guerrilla theatre, forum theatre and newspaper theatre. In this varied world, Janam's work might be seen as agit-prop, didactic, propagandist, a monologue, and therefore less effective and democratic than a dialogue form. But when a hundred flowers are blooming, and a thousand schools of thought contending, dwelling on Janam's theatre practice is to miss the point, and thankfully Vachani does not get distracted from the task of recording the inspiring and relentless work of this significant participant in the people's theatre movement. **EPW**

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Note

- 1 *Natak Jari Hai* (The Play Goes On), directed by Lalit Vachani, 84 minutes, Hindi and English, India, 2005.