

‘These Drumbeats of Revolution will Keep Growing’: A Look at Safdar Hashmi's Street Play *Machine*

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ABSTRACT

Safdar Hashmi was a visionary activist who always fought for the rights of the poor and the needy. The political developments and some anti-trade union steps of the government forced Safdar Hashmi to make open and forceful comments on the decisions and policies of the political masters. His inner turmoil found expression in the street play *Machine*. One of the characteristics of this play is its quality of protest and its anti-establishment stance. The play *Machine* was born out of a labour-related issue that shook the industrial complexes in Delhi as well as in many parts of the country. The incident was the strike of Herig India, a chemical factory of Delhi. The labourers used to come to the factory on their bicycles. The workers wanted a place where they could park their bicycles and a canteen where they could get a cup of tea. The defiant management turned down these two simple humanitarian demands. The workers went on strike and guards opened fire, killing six workers. Safdar Hashmi's play *Machine* is based on this particular labour strike. He condemned the incident and decided to awaken the spirit of the working class to protest against exploitation. Safdar Hashmi wrote, "Anybody who has watched a street theatre performance would characterize it as **a militant political theatre of protest**. Its function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organizations." The words, 'a militant political theatre of protest', show that protest is central to the concept of street play. The protest leads to revolution if the demands of workers are ignored by the industrialists. This paper, thus, is an attempt to show that the play *Machine* depicts the exploitation of industrial labour class which leads to protest and revolt. More specifically, the play as a whole becomes the symbol of protest as it guided many other playwrights to write plays condemning the inhuman treatment inflicted on the working class by their bosses.

Key Words: Activist, Industrial, Exploitation, Political Theatre, Protest, Revolution

Safdar Hashmi was a communist writer with a political purpose. During his graduation from St. Stephen's College, he became associated with the young wing of the CPI-M and then with the Indian People's Theatre Association, where he went on to produce several plays. His natural love for theatre and an innate desire for protest and rebellion against the powerful mill-owners motivated him to start a theatre movement with like-minded friends. He was a founding member of Jana Natya Manch. Safdar openly challenged the industrialists and politicians with left-wing political thinking and wrote street plays to fight for justice. Safdar Hashmi used street theatre as a means to reach directly to the common people. The street theatre format had been adopted and used by him efficiently to raise public awareness. The street theatre form is entirely different from the proscenium theatre. It defies the conventional methods of the proscenium theatre and brings the performance back to the place where the theatre originally belonged: amid people, the community. Thus, it breaks the formal barriers and approaches the people directly. The audience makes a deeper connection and feels 'that is mine' or 'me' and connects with it. Many theatre groups used this form and played a major part in defining national identities at the time of crisis and have provided a platform for democratic voice and protest. Safdar Hashmi wrote, "Anybody who has watched a street theatre performance would characterize it as **a militant political theatre of protest**. Its function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organizations Street theatre became inevitable when the workers began organizing themselves into Unions." The words, 'a militant political theatre of protest', show that protest is central to the concept of street play. The protest leads to revolution if the demands of workers are ignored by the industrialists.

Hashmi was a visionary activist who always fought for the rights of the poor and the needy. His inner turmoil found expression in the street play *Machine*. One of the characteristics of this play is its quality of protest and its anti-establishment stance. The play *Machine* was born out of a labour-related issue that shook the industrial complexes in Delhi as well as in many parts of the country. The playwright effectively expressed the emotions and concerns of the Indian working class. The political developments and some anti-trade union steps of the government also forced Safdar Hashmi to make open and forceful comments on the decisions and policies of the political masters. At the time of emergency (1975-1977), the trade union activities were not allowed in factories and the existing trade

unions were destroyed. It brought an abrupt end to the strikes and agitation. This period can suitably be described as a period of constitutional and political crisis. The emergency ended with the defeat of the Congress Party. Then the Janta Party came to power. The political defeat of the emergency regime in March 1977 brought back democratic activities in all fields. Intensive efforts were made to restore trade union structures in factories. However, the factory owners and industrialists were not in favour of this change as they had to face problems and could not suppress the labourers as they did at the time of emergency.

Surprisingly, The Janta Party government could not bring about a fundamental change in the policies pursued by the Congress Party. It soon proved to be anti-worker and anti-peasantry. The Janta Government started taking anti-labour measures. One such measure was the decision to re-introduce the new industrial Relations Bill. Hashmi felt troubled and criticized the proposed Bill. In the words of Safdar:

“The Janta Government tried to introduce a new Industrial Relations Bill, similar to the one the Congress Government had previously tried to introduce but had been unable to because of the combined resistance of the people. Now a similar anti-people bill had been designed. The gist of it was that a lot of power was given to the local governments to summarily deal with the trade unions and giving them powers of preventive arrests. Many of the democratic rights of the workers were taken away. Consultative structures were broken down and industrial talks obliterated. Labour Dispute Tribunals were removed.”

There were other anti-labour incidents which forced Hashmi to raise his voice against the industrial class- one such incident was the strike of Herig India, a chemical factory of Delhi. The labourers used to come to the factory on their bicycles. The workers wanted a place where they could park their bicycles and a canteen where they could get a cup of tea. The defiant management turned down these two simple humanitarian demands. The workers went on strike and guards opened fire, killing six workers. Safdar Hashmi's play *Machine* is based on this particular labour strike. He condemned the incident and decided to awaken the spirit of the working class to protest against exploitation. Sudhanva Deshpande, a theatre activist, stated, "What makes *Machine* historical is not simply the fact that it was staged during a workers' protest, but because just in 12-13 minutes we were

able to explain the whole capitalist machinery at the time in a creative and efficient way."

The play *Machine* follows the exclusive style of street theatre. The audience is seen sitting as a community, not as a collection of separate individuals present in a proscenium theatre. In a street theatre, the show is for anybody and everybody who may care to watch it. In street theatre people have an option to contribute or not to contribute at the end of the show whereas the proscenium theatre allows only those who can pay. The play satirizes the mechanization of the human worker who is reduced to a machine by industry and industrialization. It is interesting to see how the play begins. The five actors dressed in black enter the circular space left open by the audience seated on the ground. These actors represent three workers, a guard and the owner. The actors created machine out of their bodies. Together they form a machine in motion, making all kinds of hissing and peeping sounds. As the mechanical voices emerge out of the man-machine in *Machine*, with arms and legs turning into nuts, bolts and wheels, one finds it scary, suggestive of scarier future. The smooth-running machine is suggestive of the existence of a cordial relationship between the different means of production, i.e. the capital, the labour and all other supportive devices. The machine runs this way for a few moments. Then the narrator (Sutradhar) comes in and addresses the audience for a few minutes. The narrator focuses on the necessity of togetherness and unity between the owner and the labourer:

Narrator: You are right, this is a machine. A machine made of iron. A machine of the factory. The machine has an owner and has many parts, that is workers. The machine runs all day, and all night too. It produces a lot of things one after another.

Thus, from the concrete machine of the factory emerges an abstraction of the system of production. This is an attempt to enter into an analysis of the capitalist structure through an image to which all workers share tremendous intimacy- the machine. But the narrator warns:

Give it a close watch – if one of the parts does not run then the next stops, and if the next does not work then the third

falls silent. That is why they work together, and they start together

When he is finished, the sound of the machine becomes audible again. The proper functioning of the machine depends on the interpersonal relations of the worker, the owner and the guard in a capitalistic society. Safdar Hashmi advocates the necessity of togetherness of the owner and the labourer for production and industrial development of the country. But these three components are out of tune because the workers are subjected to an unending misery by the owner with the help of guards. No doubt, they are complementary parts of a system but exploitation and selfish motives make their co-existence unequal and difficult. The permanence of togetherness is illusory and an exploitative system breeds within it the seeds of its own destruction. The relationship between a worker and the machine is complex. On the one hand, it oppresses him and alienates him, on the other hand, it is also a companion as 'a machine made of iron' produces a lot of things and ensures wages for the worker to support his life. The smooth-running machine is suggestive of cordial relationship but suddenly the machine comes to a stop indicating the existence of internal tensions. Soon afterwards, one component liberates itself from the machine. He is a worker who questions the idea of "togetherness" and narrates his hardships:

Actor 1: (Giving a push to the narrator, who loses his balance and falls down) 'Together, together' what kind of togetherness is this? Who gives the support? How can this togetherness be achieved? I always get kicks only! Whose kicks? Everyone's... kicks from the house owner, kicks of the mill owner, the shopkeeper, from the milkman and from the police! I am down with these tortures. By the by ..., I forget to tell you who the wretched 'I' am. I am the labourer, a part of the machine, a useful thing, but a wretched thing. I work at machine, do the work of the master... and after that... nothing! If I demand my wages, then it's a problem... If don't again it's a problem. If I demand leave ... then firing; if bonus is demanded,... thrashing!!... 'Together... together... together...together.'

Thus, the worker presents his pathetic condition and helplessness. He feels exploited by the machine. Habib Tanvir presents an account of Machine as "an abstract, didactic play about the exploited working class." The labourer works for the machine, for the owner but gets nothing in return. This monologue is a

glaring example of the condition of a labourer both inside the factory and even outside it. It presents a vivid account of his economic exploitation, physical subjugation, financial insecurity and social inferiority. Among the three components he is the most unprivileged and neglected means of production. The call for togetherness is nothing for the labourer but an illusion.

After he returns to his place in the machine, the owner steps forward. The mill-owner tells a different experience. The sharp contrast between the words of the labourer and the owner becomes the source of laughter and entertainment. He emphasizes on the need for unity for his own vested interests. He tells that he has a hard life:

Actor 2: Oh, my customers, ... don't you know me?

...I'm the owner of this factory and who leads a very hard life. I invest money in business, bribe the ministers, instigate the police, buy the judges, intimidate the workers and run this machine... after all these, I order for some bottles of whisky from London. Don't be angry with me, my souls... my eyes... my life. For you, I will open a library, two hospitals and three cemeteries! And if I have your blessings, even I would arrange your burials too... just allow me to raise the prices ... and contests the next election... then I will show you how heaven is made on the earth. I will ensure that children are sold by their father, and sisters by their brother Now what shall I tell you? This is my life.... To sell everything ... to earn the maximum... This whole world is for selling. So we have to be together...

Next is the turn of the security guard to present his role. The guard is the representative of the repressive state machinery. The security officer describes himself to be 'the slave of the owner' but God of the workers. The owner, the political establishment, the police and the security guard are hand in glove with each other to suppress the genuine demands of the workforce. The guard goes on explaining his function as a component in the whole industrial system:

Actor 3: 'Together... together.. if a bottle of liquor is given to me and a wink from the master... I don't have to think at all. I'll kill a man or pig. See this crooked moustache, this broad chest.... I live on these. If

I get a simple signal. I will make mincemeat of you. I am called the security officer! Beware of me. I'm the servant of the owner, but for you... I'm the Lord. I'm a devil for the strikes. It's on my support this factory is running. If anyone dares to complain of injustice... listen... that's the end of him...even if that's a child or a woman. No mercy is there in my heart. My business is to keep everyone scared. If anyone frets. I'll give him kicks...! Together... together....

We find that the machine created by human figures is the symbolic representation of capitalism. The worker, the capitalists and the security officer are all parts of the machine. The machine once again runs in a heightened rhythm but suddenly stops. As the narrator had warned earlier, each part the machine is dependent on the rest, and if a single part stops working, it cannot run. The workers break off from the machine and refuse to work. The machine breaks down and the workers come out of the machine and declare collectively:

Actor 1: (Comes off the machine) This machine won't run any longer. I've lost my patience. After all, I'm also a human being.

Actor 4: (Comes out) The issue is very simple: they can't make a cycle stand.... Bastards.

Actor 5: We come from 5-6 miles away.

Actor 4: And Raj Singh comes from 18 miles' distance. And these rascals want to park the trucks in the canteen too. They cannot put up a simple stove there. The bread that we bring in the morning become stale by lunchtime. .. just to heat it up and just for a cup of tea after lunch....

The owner tries to pacify the workers but they explain that the mill-owner has refused to grant their demands of a cycle stand and a canteen. The insensitivity of the mill-owner is captured in the ensuing words: "Tea Bread! Tea Bread! Don't you think any work other than to think of tea and bread!" The workers repeated requests are declined and the workers are left with no option but to go on a strike. The owner orders the security guard to lathi charge and then fire on them. The lathi of the guard is now used as a machine gun. He fires on the workers while

producing sounds of gun orally. The workers lie dead on the ground. As they lie on the ground the narrator pronounces the final speech:

Narrator : shoot down more and more,

fire again and again...

Bring forth the shower of bullets.

But remember, these flames can't be put down.

This wildfire will spread wider and wider.

These drumbeats of revolution will keep growing.

Who can stop this? Who can stop these workers?

Who can? Who can?

Suddenly, the dead workers get up one by one with cries of 'Inquilab Zindabad'(Long Live the Revolution) and encircle the mill owner and the security guard. This shows that the workers will respond to repression by greater unity in future. What makes the play a great piece of creative art is his ability to make a perfect blend of philosophy, politics and poetry in this 12- minute play. Then the abstract idea is made concrete by building a theatrical image of machine in front of the audience. He successfully familiarizes the context to his audience leaving no chance for any symbolic obscurity. Safdar has explained the success of *Machine*: first because of its not just interesting but stylized, lyrical, near-poetic prose; second, because it captures its abstraction a very real issue and allows the audience to make a connection between the abstraction and reality. This theatrical performance provides a moral reinforcement to the striking workers. It encourages them to stick to their struggle for the right cause. Men like Safdar Hashmi make the civil society sustain its ideals of freedom for all and keep the fragile fabric of society alive. This play is a powerful example of the determination of exploited working class to carry on their struggle amidst all difficulties. The final words of the play indicate that this play will continue to guide the coming generations and the drumbeats of revolution will keep growing.

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