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The Empathetic Artist who asked us to Reflect and Question

By: T.M. Krishna

‘Safdar Hashmi, the theatre personality who was murdered in January 1989, was not just interested in making politically important art. He was as interested in professionalising theatre and making it sustainable. He was a rare combination of an idealist and a pragmatist.’

For most people today, the name Safdar Hashmi will not ring a bell. I suspect that, even when he was attacked on 1 January 1989 in the outskirts of Delhi and died the next day, very few beyond theatrical and left-leaning cultural circles knew much about him. I was born in 1976 and, until the early 2000s, did not know of him. Therefore, this biography titled *Safdar Hashmi : Towards Theatre for a Democracy* by Anjum Katyal is important even in the straightforward way of introducing this powerful, democratic and creative theatre personality to us.

But the book does not stop there. This is not just a biography of an individual. It paints the landscape of an India that we know little about. What did it mean to be a young, imaginative and courageous Indian between the 1960s and 1980s? The book also goes beyond socio-political contextualisation and shares with us the ethical and artistic challenges Safdar encountered during his short stay on this planet. I am not going to review this book in a traditional manner, quoting lines and pointing to incidents from Safdar’s life. Rather, I am going to reflect on the book, keeping in mind the times we live in.

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Within the Indian context, left or left-leaning has come to be understood as a singular position. Most do not know the differences between being left socio-culturally, politically and economically. Adding to this compartmentalisation, in the past decade, anyone who is left of centre has been labelled as 'anti-national', 'pseudo-secular' or 'Urban Naxal'. Left suggests a pro-China, pro-Russia, dictatorial and controlling mindset. The philosophical moorings that give the left different shades and the way in which its active presence in our society pushed us closer to equality are ignored.

Safdar’s story gives us a deep insight into what it means to be an artist whose societal view emerged from deep within the left ethos and operated from an inner awareness of democratic principles. His life is even more poignant because he was not a politician; he was an artist. This allows us to get a glimpse of left politics through his aesthetic interpretations. At the heart of Safdar’s creative work is empathy for those who are oppressed, whose freedoms are curtailed and rights stripped, be it the working class, women or minorities. His was seeking true democracy for all, not just some. In that spirit, he did something that most post-Independence Indian intellectuals forgot to do: educate people on what it means to be free and equal.

Street theatre that Safdar was predominantly involved in required him to create short-format plays. In order to respond to a specific situation, they had to be churned out very quickly. But, the beauty of his plays lies not only in the way a specific issue was brought to the fore but in the abstract layers of questions and challenges that it posed, making every viewer think. This is what a democracy gifts every citizen. The right to think for themselves and never feel crushed by power. Safdar’s art took this to every person on the street and beyond, using an issue as the anchor to stir and shake people out of political stupor.

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If I had not mentioned earlier that Safdar politics leant towards the left, wouldn’t you just think of him as an artist with a heart? This is the burden of labels and attached meanings. No individual is seen for what they themselves do or say. Every thought is bracketed in a societal corner and, as soon as that is fixed, an individual’s every action is coloured by that lens. This is as true of people who are marked as right, conservative or traditional. In some ways, it is artists like Safdar who, despite being clearly on the other side of the spectrum, attempted to build bridges, but our own preconceived biases stunt our engagement with them. There are Safdars on the right who are also boxed and disregarded. Artists have to respond to the injustices that they witness, the unfair happenings that occur on an

everyday basis. Art is meant to make us reflect, question and change. This is exactly what Safdar did, making his political leanings in my opinion irrelevant. As long as we continue to stuff individuals into silos, we will never realise that dream of fraternity.

Our impression of politically clear and active artists often clouds our appreciation of their artistic work. Even admirers get so obsessed with the political messaging that the artistry is pushed to the background. It is one thing to have a strong opinion, but completely another to be able to create an art object on its basis. As an artist myself, I know the struggle of being able to create a true and honest art object that embodies a powerful political point of view. The art that is created cannot be a ‘tool’; it has to live and breathe as an artistic creation. Art has to emotionally move and intellectually nudge people from the depth of its own body, not lean on political correctness or power. The creation has to go beyond the thought or trigger from which it germinated. This can only happen if the artist sees himself as an artist and not a messenger. A life as an artist involves movement and the ability to observe, receive and empathise. This flow gives the artist the subtlety to create art that embodies the complex reality that surrounds us.

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There is a difference between remaining still and being stuck in one place. The former can be a choice and result in thoughtful action. The latter is a trap. My reading of Safdar’s life indicates ‘stationary-ness’. There is no doubt that his home, multiplicity of social interactions, travels and stays in different places gave him tremendous insight. But, for all that to become part of an individual and come out as artistic creations, stillness is essential. Irrespective of what kind of art they practice, artists tend to get stuck in one place. Getting stuck can also be a safe place. Having stumbled upon a formula that works and established an audience that is happy to consume that delivery repeatedly, artists become comfortable and sometimes don’t even know that they are stuck. Safdar kept moving, engaging with different formats, and modes of theatre, working on his artistry and remaining vulnerable. Safdar was not just interested in making politically important art. He was as interested in professionalising theatre and making it sustainable. He was a rare combination of an idealist and a pragmatist. This side of him surprised me.

There is one thing that troubles me about this biography and that is its un-criticality. While certainly not hagiographical, it provides a great deal of information about Safdar’s life and art, with many of his comrades pitching in. But, a reader never gets to see his failings, blind spots. Great art always comes from complex people, who are often difficult to understand and struggle with the darkness they see within themselves. To imagine Safdar as someone other than that is difficult for me.

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