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*Sahmat 1989-2009: The Liberal Arts in the
Liberalized Public Sphere [Book excerpt]*

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SAHMAT 1989-2009: THE LIBERAL ARTS IN THE LIBERALIZED PUBLIC SPHERE: BOOK EXCERPT ARINDAM DUTTA

Author's note: Carlo Ginzburg once wrote that to the extent that he had a model in mind for what came to be known as microhistory—the genre with which he is most associated—it was Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. How is one to write to the simultaneity of factors that determine an event? In Tolstoy's fiction, Ginzburg observed, the multiple structures and relationships that intersected at Austerlitz and Waterloo could be linked together precisely in its contempt for the conventional history of historians. Only in fiction, could one simultaneously imagine the thoughts going through Napoleon's head as well as the temperament of the troops, and portray them as if in a global, bird's-eye image. The battle scene, with its clash of multiple worlds, of ideas, actions, technologies, catenaries, politics, social dynamics, and the private and public world of individuals, in this sense remains the exemplar for what the historian construes as "event." More to the point, the event, in its multid denominational character and its irreducible unexpectedness, is precisely what resists capture along the lines of whatever lines of 'interest' the historian may seek to expose. "No human eye will ever succeed in catching contemporaneously... the historical specificity (real or presumed) of a battle and its cosmic irrelevance. A battle, strictly speaking, is invisible." Those amongst my generation of Indians who aspire or purport to be historians or social commentators have "lived in interesting times"; willy-nilly, they have had to live out a social war of sorts: the rise of religious fundamentalism in South Asia. In living out that ongoing war, I was fortunate in coming close to a small organization, Sahmat, that was particularly active in engaging that conflict. My friends in Sahmat impelled me to reconstruct, from its immaculately kept archives, some of the facets of that interne-cine conflict. The book from which this extract is taken is an attempt to peer into that invisibility. The excerpt given here is unexcised, and recapitulates in its most part the events of one day in Delhi, seen through its prelude and aftermath in preceding and ensuing months.

January 1, 1989

Sahibabad is a hodgepodge of semi-legal industrial units and unauthorized workers' *bastis*, only some fourteen kilometers to the northeast of Delhi, but actually situated in the Ghaziabad district of Uttar Pradesh. The worker's movements in this area strongly owe allegiance to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the trade union group affiliated with the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the most

prominent communist party in the Indian electoral fray. Over the preceding years, the environs of Delhi have become an angry battleground, following two major industrial actions in these industrial areas, a three-day general strike in November 1987, and then a significantly more ambitious and far-reaching seven-day strike in November 1988. CITU officers have been conscious of the rapidly changing profile of industrialization in the region under the Rajiv Gandhi administration. Although the CPI-M lacks an electoral presence in the city, CITU's widespread reach amongst the working population has triggered tensions with the ruling Congress's increased resort to street toughs—*goondas*—to fill their political ranks at the lower echelons, helmed by two thuggish Delhi political fixers honed during the Emergency era: H. K. L. Bhagat and Sajjan Kumar.

Indrani Mazumdar's exquisite and extensive study of the labor organizational files of this period gives us a blow-by-blow account of the events and organizational efforts that led to the landmark strike of November 1988. In her account, the CITU files of the period offer "a sketchy but eloquent record of the initial process by which the spreading torpor in the trade union movement was broken by the CITU leadership which was pushing for a line of building a movement."¹ Early in 1986, the greater-than-expected response to CITU industrial actions in the region had apprised its officers of the possibility of a major action on the issue of the minimum wage. In addition to the pressures of heightened migration and sordid living arrangements, general governmental policy collusion with the factory *maliks* had kept the minimum statutory wage in 1988 at Rs. 489 (approx. USD 28²) per month, up from Rs. 300 in 1982. In the same period, Mazumdar calculates the consumer price index as having risen by 334 points, which means that nominal increases in wage rates fell significantly behind general inflation levels. By contrast, the Net Value Added (NVA) in the small scale sector rose from Rs. 36.35 crores in 1972 (USD 48.5 million³) to Rs. 396.17 crores (USD 226 million) in 1987-88, which meant that each worker was producing a surplus of Rs. 23,000 (USD 1314) for the year 1987-88, more than three times the unskilled worker's mandated wage and twice that of skilled workers. In any case, the mandated wage was seldom paid; the *maliks'* economic coercion was further exacerbated with increased police repression as liberalization efforts in the Rajiv era sought to break the back of labor organizations.

The three-year prelude to the 1988 strike is a study in the relationship between the organizational efforts of CITU, its sibling and rival outfits in the communist and Congress party and trade union offices, and the inchoate tide of worker anger. As a formal goal, the agitation coalesced under a demand to raise the minimum wage to Rs. 1,050. The coordinated organizational efforts by CITU and the CPI-M involved bringing out posters and leaflets numbering three-quarters of a million. Up to one thousand "street corner" meetings across the length and breadth of the region between party officials, local organizers and neighborhood volunteers rehearsed *gherao* (picketing) strategy, *juloos* (march) routes, and retreat options based on

expected participation and ferocity of police response. Organizers went into the factories and the *jhuggis*, sought support from unions in the formal sector, drumming up support for the forthcoming strike. Commencing on November 22, the strike shut down industrial activity in the entire region, drawing the participation of 1.5 million workers, making the seven-day strike the largest industrial action in the history of Delhi. Increased dissatisfaction with the Rajiv administration also brought out the media and the intelligentsia in support, a factor which substantially stayed the strong arm of the law when acting against the militant workers. The outcome of the strike can be evaluated in various ways, not least being the heightened awareness and consciousness amongst the workers in terms of legal rights and benefits, catalyzing a brief moment of coordinated action that would become increasingly unavailable as the decade wore into its next. The principal success of the strike was the government's response to raise the minimum wage to Rs. 750, in addition to the concession of routine dearness allowance pro-rated to rises in the consumer price index.

In analytical terms, the strike revealed as much the tremendous organizational energy of the halcyon days of trade unionism as it exposed its limits. The demands of the strike had been directed towards the government, using the formal goal of the minimum wage as its clarion call. On the one hand, this recentered the State as the political representative of the people at large, while tentatively demonstrating the relevance of standards used for the formal workplace in the larger context of informal employment. At the same time, the protean work of coordination carried out by CITU and communist cadres significantly revealed the cognitive difficulty of articulating the economic *target* of industrial action in the informal sector. In ensuing years, the thrust of liberalization would simply whittle away statutory power in industrial relations, eroding both the wherewithal and the inclination to *enforce* legal standards in industry.

* * *

Founded in 1973, Jan Natya Manch (People's Theatre Front), or Janam (birth) for short, is one of the CPI-M's cultural "fronts," aimed at creating greater awareness of working class struggle through the medium of street theatre, a particularly versatile and adaptive art form germane to both proselytization and organization activity. In the period leading up to the November seven-day strike, the troupe staged twenty-eight performances of a play, *Chakka Jam*,⁴ written particularly for the occasion. In keeping with its political beliefs, the troupe shuns the elite purveyors and prosceniums of central Delhi, going instead to the industrial areas, the *jhuggis*, and factory gates to find its audience.⁵ By the winter of 1988, Janam has given, since its inception, about 4000 performances of its 24-play repertoire. The de facto leader of the troupe is founder member Safdar Hashmi. He has an M.A. in English and is an alumnus of Delhi's elite St. Stephen's College, alma mater alike of Bhaskar Ghose, chief of Doordarshan (the Indian state television body), the author Amitav Ghosh

and historian Ramachandra Guha, the Congress politician Kapil Sibal, the neoclassical economist Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the CPI-M member Sitaram Yechury, media mogul Samir Jain, the Hindu right-wing columnist Swapan Dasgupta, and Mohamed Zia-ul-Haq, the Islamicizing former president of Pakistan. In the prelude to the strike, Hashmi has been active amongst the city's intelligentsia, art and media circles, apprising them of the goals of the strike, soliciting their support. Hashmi's initiative has been crucial in organizing a large march of artists and intellectuals in support of the strike. Public statements by this section proved critical, bringing media visibility to the events of the strike, emboldening worker participation, and forcing police and Congress goons to keep a low profile.

Energized by November's success, today, on New Year's day, 1989, Janam is performing *Halla Bol*, an adapted version of *Chakka Jam* in Ambedkar Park in Jhandapur village, Sahibabad. Hashmi is watching in the audience. Ever the food-lover and gourmand, the night before, he had enticed troupe members to explore a new culinary find in the storied streets of old Delhi: *laal roti* and *korma*. At one point the play, expressly scripted to rally workers to CITU's umbrella, stages altercations between CITU-affiliated performers and their opponents that amounts to a morbid premonition of events shortly to come. "*Natak roko! Yahan koi naara nahin, koi jhanda nahin. Is ilaake mein CITU ka naam nahin liya jaana chahiye.*" (Stop the play! No slogans, no flags here, CITU's name should not be taken in this area.) While the play is being performed, a procession headed by Mukesh Sharma, a local factory-owner and Congress-affiliated aspirant for local political office, halts the play, demanding that the procession be let through. With the play due to be over shortly, Hashmi intercedes, requesting that the procession wait until the play was over. Sharma and his henchmen ostensibly agree. In actuality, grudges from November fresh in their minds, they call up reinforcements. An armed mob with sticks and guns drives up in a bus. They attack the audience and the performers, who disperse in panic. In the subsequent course of events, four people are injured. Hashmi, along with a group of people, runs towards the local CITU office, seeking shelter. One group of Sharma's party chases them to the office, pushing and battering down its flimsy door. Concerned about their safety, Hashmi urges the others to escape by a rear window and over the back wall, helping some of the older men and four women to get across. He is unable to do so himself and runs in the opposite direction. He has lost his glasses and is unable to see well. A Janam colleague, Sudhanva Deshpande—we will encounter him again later in this book—hears shots being fired.

Hashmi is soon found in the middle of a nearby road, bleeding profusely from head wounds, having being beaten up with sticks. One Janam actor, a doctor, bundles his limp body and rushes him to the nearby Mohan Nagar hospital, where he is administered first aid, and then admitted to Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan hospital, where doctors try to revive him. Lacking CAT-scan facilities, Hashmi is once again moved to the better-equipped Ram Manohar Lohia hospital, where the senior neurosurgeon

Figure 1 Safdar in Performance, date indeterminate.

Figure 2 Safdar Hashmi in a Rally, date indeterminate.

Figure 3 Safdar Hashmi's Funeral, New Delhi, January 2, 1989, Halla Bol, Bijendra, Mala, Sudhanva.



All images courtesy of Safmat.

is on leave.⁶ Angry phone calls to his home, along with the presence of a growing crowd of people outside and inside the hospital bring him back to work. Hashmi is found to have three skull fractures, resulting in severe, multiple traumas to the brain.

At 10 p.m., Hashmi is declared dead. He was thirty-five.

January 5, 1989

Along with Safdar, Ram Bahadur, a worker and innocent bystander was also killed by Mukesh Sharma's goons, mistaken for a CITU official; his story remains a subaltern footnote in the Sahmat story.

Inter-party political violence is a common-enough feature of Indian life. Political organization in India relies significantly on territorial control, physically wrested by formal and informal syndicates of local youth and mid-level leaders with varying degrees of adherence to the party line, retained by ideological conviction, opportunism or money. Partha Chatterjee has drawn attention to what he calls "political society"⁷—the political topos of the neighborhood *mandals*, the corner and paan-shop *addas*—as providing something like the undercarriage to the more bourgeois stratum of "civil society." Inasmuch as Chatterjee would cast this undercarriage somewhat in opposition to the State (as did theorists of "civil society"), in India this stratum must be seen to be constituted as much by their para-Statal functioning: *mohalla*-level mobilizations undertake not only the delivery of social goods as much as deliverance of kangaroo justice, the monitoring of social behavior, and the defense of territory, aspects which Chatterjee more than tends to gloss over, but also present signal overlaps with the party structure. Communist parties in India are as prone to these tactics as are their Congress or BJP contenders. (The Safdar incident, for instance, brought anonymous comment from the extreme, non-electoral, left—the CPI-ML or Naxalite⁸—in the pages of the *Economic and Political Weekly* regarding the CPI-M's own murder of a dissenting activist in Panihati, West Bengal on charge of "counter-revolution." This plaint set into motion tit-for-tat recrimination between cultural activists representing the CPI-M and the CPI-ML, with the latter accusing the former of apathy towards the government's ongoing persecution of the Naxal poets Gadar and Vara Vara Rao even as they drummed up sympathy for Safdar's murder.⁹)

By that yardstick, the extraordinary outpouring of public outrage, across party lines, after Safdar's murder must be seen as unprecedented. More prominent international figures such as Salman Rushdie and M. F. Husain had been and have since been attacked and found themselves *persona non grata* with very little political consequence. Safdar was by contrast a significantly lesser-known, young party-ideologue and artist more or less at the beginnings of a career. The conflagration following January 1, 1989 leading up to the formation of Sahmat, must consequently be seen to be fanned by a broader political moment, a generalized schism within a institutional

and political environment, occasioning a unique convergence between civil society elements, the fraternity of artists, and political workers. Memories of the November strike were still fresh, and the networks active in its organization were still extant. So were keen recollections of Safdar's crucial role in bringing together the gamut of the Delhi intelligentsia, the trade unions, and the CPI-M. In the broader realm, political and public anger against the Rajiv Gandhi regime from left and right wing alike was at its highest pitch, anger that would sweep the Congress from office in general elections a year later. For the intelligentsia, there was the long-festering sense of the disintegration of liberal institutions and constitutional freedoms since the Indira Gandhi period, as well as further instrumentalization of the government institutions of culture in the interests of ruling party ideology. A banner designed by Vivan Sundaram may be taken here as indicative: "Who killed Safdar Hashmi? Those who organize popular *Utsavs* (festivals)." ¹⁰ Safdar's brazen murder in broad daylight brought all that to a boil, eliciting responses from across the length and breadth of the country, the bulk of it from artists and intellectuals who had little or no occasion to know Safdar.

There was one other crucial element in this convergence. Little reported in the news, more than one participant and observer felt it important enough to bring it to my attention, each new confidence confirming the last one as it was repeated to me again and again. As it so happened, on January 1, the Delhi leaders of the CPI-M were ensconced far from Delhi in closed-door sessions of the party's thirteenth Congress in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Had they been in Delhi, the spontaneous crossing of party and ideological lines that led to the formation of Sahmat—and the portrayal of Safdar first as an artist and only subsequently a communist partisan—would have been strongly curtailed, particularly in the factionalized context of Delhi where intra-party grudges are often worn on the sleeve. The lowered lines of defense allowing "civil society" elements to commingle with communist party cadres without strong politburo supervision were also, implicitly—we remember that this is 1989—the *internal* flowering of a *perestroika* moment.

* * *

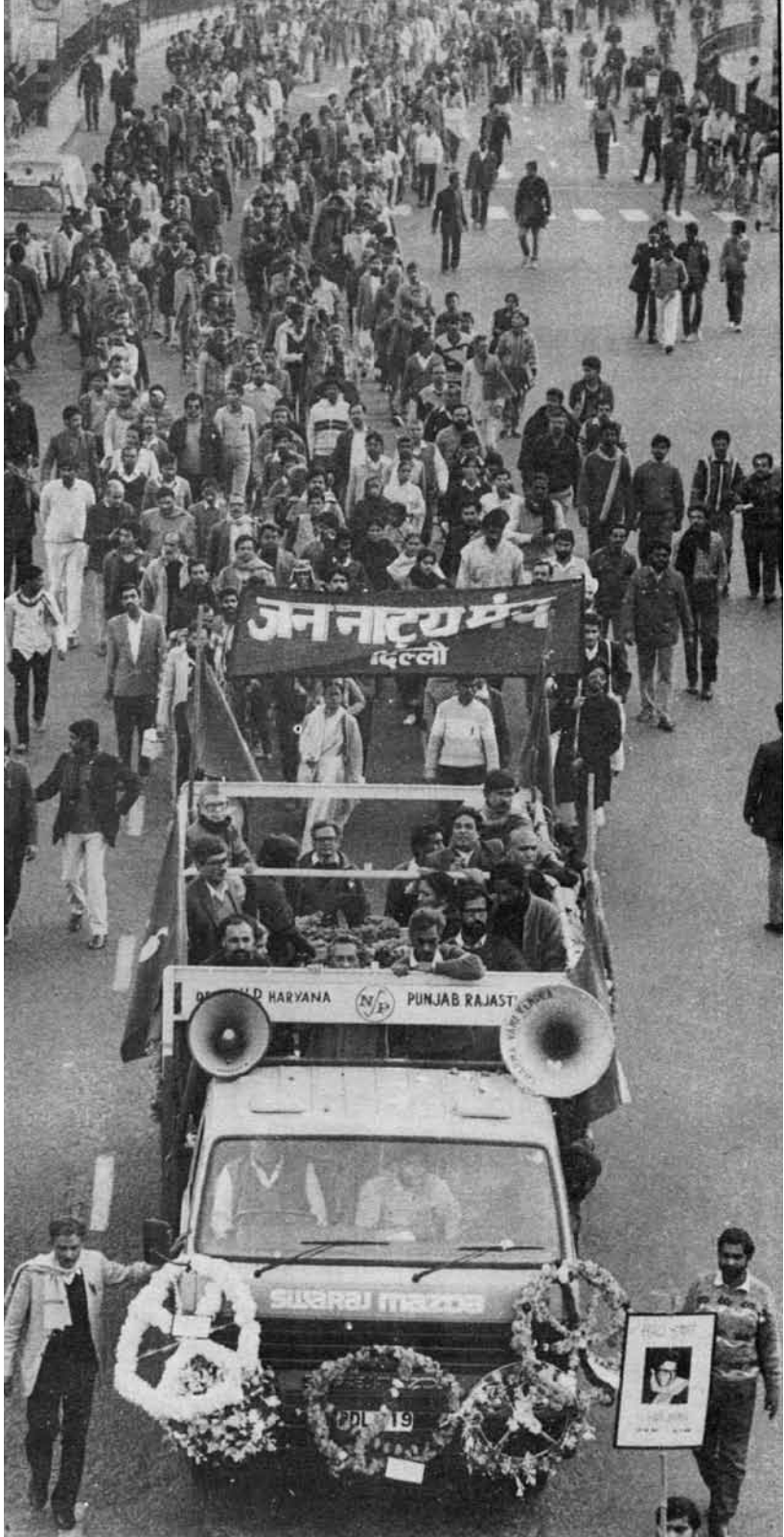
By mid-morning of January 2, incensed phalanxes of CITU activists and CPI-M cadres as well as a large number of intellectuals and artists converged on the VP House party office where Safdar's body had been brought. Late in the afternoon, the crowd, now numbering ten thousand, filtered out into a procession with Hashmi's bier, draped with the hammer and sickle, lying in state on a flatbed truck. Marching in file, the procession wound its way to Mandi House—the headquarters of India's state television network—onto Connaught Place and then to the electric crematorium, bringing traffic to a standstill. The electrifying and emotion-charged slogans that rent the air and the disciplined marching of communist cadres lent the procession the appearance of a state funeral.

Two days later, January 4th, Janam went back to Jhandapur, this time led by Safdar's widow and theatre-comrade Moloysree (Mala), and gave an emotion-laden, uninterrupted performance of *Halla Bol*, watched by thousands of workers and activists from Ghaziabad and Delhi. The audience had first congregated at Rabindra Bhavan—the epicenter of state cultural patronage—and were driven to the venue in buses. After the play, a silent procession filed past the CITU office where Safdar had been killed. On January 5th, the CPI-M took out a silent march, this time led by their Red Guards, with thousand of placards bearing Safdar's photo and the phrase, "Shaheed Safdar Hashmi," red flags dipped in salute, once again bringing downtown Delhi to a standstill and ending up at the home of Buta Singh, the Congress Home Minister. Editorials across the land condemned the murder and Congress's involvement in the killing, even as Congress functionaries disowned Safdar's killers from any association with the party.

By the end of the week, voices from across the country had become vociferous enough for the group coordinating events to contemplate implementing and coordinating a national protest action. January 9 was designated a national protest day. Rallies and tribute meetings were held in scores of cities, as local artists, intellectuals and political activists across the spectrum came together to express dissent. Lawyers in Orissa's High Court abstained from work. Cinema halls in Calcutta remained closed, and all cultural events in Bengal—plays, performances, etc.—were suspended. Students in Delhi's elite Jawaharlal Nehru University boycotted classes. Marches, meetings and performances of *Halla Bol* were held at prominent public locations in Jaipur, Calcutta, Ambala, Bombay, Pune, Chandigarh, Lucknow, and Bilaspur in Madhya Pradesh. In Delhi, once again, another spectacular torchlit, silent procession, this time comprising the city's intelligentsia—its artists, theater and film persons, journalists, schoolteachers—was taken out from the Supreme Court—where Mala and Janam once again performed *Halla Bol*—to Rabindra Bhavan. Speaking at the meeting, Ebrahim Alkazi, founder of the National School of Drama (NSD), demanded that College Road at Mandi House—the Indian State's cultural hub comprising the NSD, Rabindra Bhavan and the Shri Ram Centre for Performing Arts—be renamed Safdar Hashmi Marg.

That matters had reached a national flashpoint is evinced by the further turn of events on January 12 at the Twelfth International Film Festival of India. Attended by several international film-makers and dignitaries, this was an event to which the government attached great prestige, an occasion meriting the rare live evening coverage on India's tightly controlled Doordarshan network, usually disposed towards canned (i.e. censored) fare. Stepping up to the dais to hand out one of the awards, the protean Indian actress Shabana Azmi interrupted the proceedings, reading out a prepared statement explicitly naming and shaming the Congress at an international event hosted by it. As the rear of the auditorium erupted with slogans in a well-rehearsed move, Azmi registered their "protest against a system that on the one hand

Figure 4 Safdar Hashmi's Funeral Procession, New Delhi, January 2, 1989.



claims to promote creativity and on the other, connives in the murder of cultural activists." At the subsequent press conference, John Schlesinger, invited guest of the Festival for his 1988 Azmi-Shirley MacLaine film *Madame Sousatzka* chimed in, "I would unhesitatingly lend my voice to a protest against a murder like this of a theater person." Congress's ignominy was complete on state-controlled national television.¹¹

* * *

Events so far had a spontaneous air. Theory of emergence: processes where "the results were neither predictable nor controllable... a multiplicity of seemingly random transactions gradually coalesce into a[n apparently] self-organized pattern, generating results that could not have been planned at the outset."¹²

At the same time, it is plausible, in retrospect, to comprehend this spontaneity as in fact the activation of the tacit structural lines of alliance within the old—now increasingly perceived as threatened—liberalism: defined by convergences of interest between artists and teachers, between trade unions and electoral parties, between civil society and "enlightened" state functionary. To that extent, the events following Safdar's death and leading up to Sahmat's formation represent greater and greater formalization of one subset of these lines of communication, impelled by a rising tide of political dissatisfaction with Congress. Communist cadres, for one, had sensed the change in the wind that was to eventually lead to the Congress' defeat a year later, bringing them close to power at the Centre in coalition with the Hindu right, the latter witnessing a growth in its parliamentary representation from two seats in the eight Lok Sabha (1984-1989) to eighty-five in the ninth (1989-1991). To that extent, Sahmat was formed by the same historical set of forces as its future antagonists.

On the part of the artists, there had been the marked degeneration of state patronage of art and its cultural institutions. (Indeed, the 1988-90 Haksar Committee Report on cultural institutions commissioned by the Human Resources and Development ministry under Rajiv Gandhi would acknowledge as much, but this "admission" was patently in the interest of budgetary divestment. The report made no suggestion of loosening administrative controls over cultural policy, so far monopolized by an exclusive prime ministerial coterie.¹³) For the media, there was the matter of the "increasingly centralized and arbitrary use of the public domain"¹⁴ since the Indira Gandhi days and the exacerbated erosion of authority and confidence within public institutions and the bureaucracy, brought to a head by the revelations about the Bofors arms deal kickbacks to Congress.

Sahmat's formation thus can be seen as catching a mood.

Figure 5 Moloyshee (Mala) and Janam performing Halla Bol, Jhandapur, January 4, 1989.



Figure 6 Protest March, New Delhi, April 12, 1989, March from Mandi House to Buta Singh's (then Home Minister) House.

Figure 7 Protest March, New Delhi, January 5, 1989.



The intensity of disparate communiqués triggered by Safdar’s murder found a core group coalescing at the point of its convergence, at VP House, defined less by vocation than by a certain aesthetic and political bent. Sahmat’s founding “Deed of Trust,” signed February 9, 1989, explicitly formalizes this mood into an agenda, setting down an authorial stake, a corporate ownership, in the angry effusion around the name “Safdar” that had driven events of the month preceding. The immediate occasion for this organizational delimitation was Safdar’s impending thirty-fifth birthday, April 12th. In a letter published in *Economic Political Weekly*, Sohail and Mala Hashmi, two of Sahmat’s founding trustees, apprised its readers that April 12 would henceforth be named National Street Theater Day, calling for daylong theater performances in Delhi and elsewhere, and announcing a *Jan Utsav* (“People’s Festival”) to be held from April 12-16. Plans were announced for seminars, for publishing Safdar’s articles on theater as well as his poems and songs, and for compiling a memoir of all the media coverage and response following his murder, in addition to a video on his life and work.¹⁵ A series of events were announced to raise funds for the incipient Sahmat: ticketed events such as a dance concert, a music concert, poetry readings (*Kavi Sammelan-Mushaira*), and an auction of donated artists’s work. Academic seminars, performance and visual arts, the dissemination of print, audio and video media, and a strong archival impulse—Sahmat would veer very little in future from these basic formats, with one exception. Sahmat would never ticket a single event in its entire history: the trait of an aneconomic sensibility which would push it, as we shall see, towards economic options that would bring it no end of conflict.

Despite its two CPM card-carrying signatories, Sahmat’s first *EPW* letter indicates a palpable erasure of Safdar’s identity as a communist partisan—a heavily tilted one at that, abundantly evinced in his writing on theater and art¹⁶—towards an almost exclusive emphasis on his status as an artist. The letter ends with a note whose tone may be considered critical for its future career. Seeking to foreground the arts as a political field, and redescribing Safdar’s communist affiliations in markedly aesthetic terms, the phrasing of the letter gropes its way towards a historical and theoretical terminology that appears to elude it, in its description of artists’s need to embrace political activism based upon an idea of “fellowship,” a kind of “loose guild” to express “self-reliance,” away, ostensibly, from the dominion of state or party:

Safdar’s murder has made us conscious of the necessity of being self-reliant; the necessity to establish a kind of loose ‘guild’ based on fellowship that resists, and that acts when the moment comes, on behalf of artists. Safdar’s sacrifice is a sign telling us that some time or another all of us may have to function as artists-activists to ensure that abuse, violence, murder are not taken for granted in our society.

The response to the letter was prodigious. Events centered around the question of

art and cultural practice were hosted across the length and breadth of the country, rallies, readings, performances, seminars, “*goshties*” running into days after April 12. No less than a phenomenal *thirty thousand* plays were performed in these days, in towns, cities and villages from Assam and Manipur to Punjab, from Gujarat to Kerala and Himachal Pradesh: an artistic outpouring aimed to strike at the heart of the political establishment.

* * *

Sahmat’s announcement in *EPW* occupies half of page 382 of its February 25, 1989 issue; the other half is taken up by another self-appointed corporate entity of “Concerned Citizens,” identifying themselves as “all non-Muslims,” seeking to bring the attention of the Rajiv Gandhi administration to the fast deteriorating situation over the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. “Our government, much to its shame, sits idly while the situation worsens.”¹⁷ The letter implores the government to pay heed to proposals by the Muslim leaders to expedite the appointment of a special high court bench to resolve the status of the mosque: either “that the mosque itself should be cleared of idols and declared a national monument” or alternatively a wall be built separating the mosque from the Ram Chabutra, and that a temple to Rama built on the other side. The signatories of the letter comprise, like Sahmat’s membership, a mix of personas from the academic, literary and political worlds: Rajni Kothari, Balraj Puri, Khushwant Singh and so on. Two national-level politicians also signed the letter, both arrested during the time of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency: Ram Vilas Paswan, a Dalit leader who would become a key player in the Janata Dal government of 1989-1991, and George Fernandes, the veteran trade union leader responsible for India’s largest industrial action ever—the railway strike of 1974—and whose brother had been tortured by the Indira’s Emergency government to yield up his whereabouts. (He was in hiding in a house not more than a hundred meters from this author’s home, then all of eight years old.) In the Janata government of 1977-1980, Fernandes had been an outspoken critic of the right wing Bharatiya Jan Sangh (the Bharatiya Janata Party’s forerunner) and its leaders Atal Behari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani for their links to the Hindu ultra-nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS and the BJP were the driving force behind radicalized Hindu sentiments over the Ramjanmabhumi-Babri Masjid dispute.

It was a sign of the times to come: both these “Lohiaite” leaders would *join* the BJP-led coalition government in 1999. In time, Fernandes would become its key fixer.

1 Indrani Mazumdar, "Unorganised Workers of Delhi and the seven day strike of 1988," *Archives of Indian Labour*, accessed 6 August 2012, <http://www.indialabourarchives.org/publications/Indrani%20Mazumdar.htm>.

2 1990, average annual rate of Rs. 17.505 to the US dollar.

3 1970, average annual rate of Rs. 7.862 to the US dollar.

4 The expression "literally jammed wheels" refers to a particular strike form where vehicular movement in a region is arrested by strikers, thus freezing all economic activity.

5 Accounts of this event and the descriptions therein are taken from the following: Paul William Roberts, "The Play's The Thing: The Life and Death of Safdar Hashmi," *The Toronto South Asian Review*, (Spring 1991); *Safdar*, compiled news reports of Hashmi's death, (New Delhi: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, 1989); Qamar Azad Hashmi, *The Fifth Flame: The Story of Safdar Hashmi*, trans. Madhu Prasad and Sohail Hashmi (New Delhi: Viking, 1997).

6 In her book on Safdar, Hashmi's mother Qamar Azad Hashmi still refers to these hospitals by their colonial/colloquial names: Irwin hospital, Willingdon hospital.

7 See Partha Chatterjee, "Populations and Political Society," *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

8 The communist factions in India are divided along several different electoral and non-electoral in some cases armed organizations. The original Communist Party of India (CPI), was formed in 1920 in Tashkent, after the Second Comintern. The CPI-Marxist split from the CPI in 1964 over a series of ideological conflicts relating to the communist's relationship to the then-dominant Indian National Congress, sharpened by the Indo-China war of 1962. The CPI-ML (Communist Party of India-Marxist Leftist) was formed in 1969, advocating armed resistance and subsequently splintered into a

pro-Lin Biao and an anti-Lin Biao group. In 2004, the armed factions of the CPI-ML and its subsequent bantlings People's War Group and the Maoist Communist Center have reconvened as a united front under the name of CPI-Maoist.

9 "What is relevant here is that it is time to expose the hypocrisy of those who claim to be champions of civil liberties but do not hesitate to deprive others of the same in the state where they are in power." Arun and others, letter to *EPW* 24, no. 12 (Mar. 25, 1989), 590. Also see: G. P. Deshpande, "The Life and Death of Safdar Hashmi," *EPW* 24, no. 1 (Jan. 7, 1989), 4; "Warning Signal," *EPW* 24, no. 2 (Jan. 14, 1989), 57; G. P. Deshpande, "Strange Logic," *EPW* 24, no. 7 (Feb. 18, 1989), 326; "Political Violence and the Left," *EPW* 24, no. 12 (Mar. 25, 1989), 590; G. P. Deshpande, "Varieties of Blindness," *EPW* 24, no. 15 (Apr. 15, 1989), 754.

10 The reference here is to the string of Festivals of India organized abroad by the Indira and Rajiv Gandhi regimes throughout the 1980s. See Arindam Dutta, "The Politics of Display, 1886 and 1986," in *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, numbers 30-31, December 1997; also see Dutta, "Congress: Gandhi at the World Exhibitions," *The Bureaucracy of Beauty* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

11 The news reports for all the above events are compiled in *Safdar* (New Delhi: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, 1989).

12 Mark Swilling, "Rival Futures", in *blank – Architecture, apartheid and after*, Hilton, Judin and Ivan Vladislavi (eds.), (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 1998), 297.

13 Haksar Committee, *Report of the high-powered Committee appointed to review the performance of the National Academies and the National School of Drama*, Department of Culture, Ministry of Human Resources Development (New Delhi: Government of India, 1990).

14 Rajni Kothari, *Rethinking Democracy* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005), 69.

15 Sohail Hashmi and Moloysree Hashmi, "Commemorating Safdar

Hashmi," *EPW* 24, no. 8 (Feb. 25, 1989), 382.

16 That Safdar viewed aesthetic form strongly through the lens of political affiliation is evident in his last interview, given to Eugène van Herven, where he reviews the competing oeuvres of his peers in street and political theater, including Habib Tanvir, Irfan Habib, and Badal Sircar. As the CPM's P. Govinda Pillai put it in 2003, "Safdar did not shy away from the fact that he was partisan both in politics and arts." Written for his American audience, Van Herven's subsequent account of this encounter, called to account by Kavita Nagpal for its atrocious transliteration of Indian names (Gandhi is repeatedly written as Ghandi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz is written Fez, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale became Bindranwale Singh) significantly covers over Safdar's complete immersion in the CPM's activity, portraying him more as a kind of left-oriented radical artist. This implicit tension would be revealed to much greater schism later in Sahmat's history, as we shall see. See "The People Gave Us So Much Energy," Safdar interview with Eugène van Herven, in Sudhanva Deshpande, *Theatre of the Streets: The Jan Natya Manch Experience* (New Delhi: Janam, 2007); P. Govinda Pillai, "Politics of Performance in Contemporary India," *Safdar Hashmi: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Lectures* (New Delhi: Digangan, 2001); Eugène van Herven, "Plays, Applause and Bullets: Safdar Hashmi's Street Theatre," *The Drama Review* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1989); Kavita Nagpal, "Another Angle on 'Plays, Applause, and Bullets,'" *The Drama Review* 35, no. 3 (Autumn 1991), 11-12.

17 Rajni Kothari et al, "Solving the Babri Masjid Problem," *EPW* 24, No. 8 (Feb. 25, 1989), 382.