

Theatre is a rather arduous form of performative art, for it does not enjoy the luxury of curating a fictional reality through extensive audio and visual effects rather it relies heavily upon an orchestrated, cohesive alliance between the performers on stage and the crew off-stage. The actors surreptitiously slip cues to those behind the curtains and without an air of rehearsal, both aural and visual unite to induce a stupor upon an unsuspecting audience and even that reaction in itself is premeditated. The contorting faces of the performers are only successful in persuading those seated near the stage for the contortion becomes distorted for those further away yet the illusion does not escape even the farthest one for it is the variation in voice that truly drives the created reality. The dynamic octaves of an actor's voice do not merely reverberate amongst the audience with dramatic intention rather they also possess the ability to shake the pillars of bigotry and complicity, for art can compel man to confront internalised ideologies. No wonder regimes of terror and intolerance attempted to reconstruct the institution of art in the lands they occupied, for they recognised the potential of influence it possessed. But as time has witnessed, wherever the right of expression was usurped, art emerged in the form of resistance, and Pakistan is no stranger to this tale.

General Zia-ul-Haq was the sixth president of Pakistan and the third to impose martial law, entrenching the society in a decade-long era of intolerant darkness. His regime of terror is synonymous with the decline of the film industry. Heavy censorship and taxes, such as the legislation that demanded filmmakers to seek approval for projects from the Ministry of Culture and present a Rs. 200,000 bank guarantee, greatly compromised the quality of the content and production. The state, under the guise of 'Islam', propagated regressive, patriarchal agendas that infiltrated every level of citizen existence in the region. The 'islamization' marked a sharp decline for the Pakistani film industry and this decline outlived the tyrant himself. But not all abandoned hope and thus some brave artists, with heroic dispositions, rose against the oppressive regime and nurtured the genre of resistance, thus re-emerged the once lost art of protest theatre.

In 1983, a group of spirited artists, led by Madeeha Guahar, pioneered a resistive theatre movement through a theatre group called "Ajoka". The name in itself insinuated an exploration of the contemporary ills that had befallen the world of the commons and the creatives. The organized group became a symbol of resistance against systematic oppression of voices. A year after their formation, the group performed for the first time in the May of 1984, in a private gathering. The humbleness of their first stage had no ill bearing upon their zeal. With determination and passion the group performed the play "Jaloos" which was written by Badal Sarkar, an Indian dramatist, and directed by Madeeha Gauhar herself. The play sensitively criticised the dilemma of the crushed commons by the state machinery and the complicit role of the islamic clergy. The initiative was reflective of the groups daring ambition to re-introduce the ideas of peaceful co-existence and tolerance which had long been purged from the society by Zia-ul-Haq. In the successive year, the group became overt in its rebellion and through an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Chalk Circle* the symbolism became transparent, for the themes of corruption and its demise through humanity were greatly explored. Though their ventures had attracted great censure by those who supported and feared the regime yet the world's derision also served as an encouragement for them to pursue their goals, serving as a reaffirmation of their need in the intolerant society. In 1987, two performances were staged, "Barri" and "Marya Hoya Kutta" respectively, written by Shahid Nadeem who drew inspiration from the personal struggles of Madeeha Guahar and various other women who were involved in a struggle to regain the liberty to live. "Marya

Hoya Kutta” was a satirical commentary upon the complicit role of the islamic clergy along with the masses who were concerned with only their individual welfare, perhaps Nadeem held the common man’s silence in contempt for the longevity of the regime. The group served as a voice of resistance for those who failed to possess the courage to confront a tyrant. But the group was not an idiosyncratic venture rather a complementary force to its contemporary partner.

A lesser known contemporary of this organisation was a group called “Lok Rehas”, founded by a group of artists and performers who were greatly troubled by the military oppression plaguing the realms of expression. Their vision complemented its contemporaries, for they too envisioned a society that inherently practised gender equity and democratic values. The group was known to stage classical performances, folk tales, adaptations of foreign plays and quick street skits often raising awareness under the guise of comedy and entertainment. Owing to the rebellious nature of the group their performances were limited to the streets and private gatherings, yet their message infiltrated the public psyche. They are known to have staged and performed more than 80 plays and organized over a 1000 performances. Every fortnight, the silent streets of the country were reimaged through their performative lens, instilling hope and the courage for resistance amongst the audience. Though time has rendered them nearly obscure in conversation, yet the fact that we enjoy a certain liberated degree of art today is a testament to their timeless efforts.

The regime of terror had unknowingly aided the revival of the punjabi theatre, which had traditionally featured “Bhands” and “Nautankis” engaged in folk and comical retellings and thus grown irrelevant with the passage of time. The oppressive decade allowed a contemporary lens to drive an art form that had inspired the locals for decades and thus marking the failure of those who wished to suppress art. Theatre became a voice for the voiceless and a beacon of hope in a time when all was lost.