



International Journal of Social Sciences Insights

A Globally Recognized Quality Refereed (Peer Reviewed) &
Online Journal of Multidisciplinary Social Science Research

Web: socialinsights.in



PUNJAB NAATSHALA, AMRITSAR: CONTRIBUTION OF THEATRE TO MASS COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL DIALOGUE

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Article info

Received – 20 November 2025
Received revised -05 December 2025
Accepted -22 December 2025
Available online -31 December 2025
Pages: 27-32

Keywords: Punjab Naatshala, Theatre, Mass Communication, Public Sphere, Community Participation, Participatory Communication

Abstract

Punjab Naatshala, Amritsar, is not only a symbol of traditional theatre but also an effective medium for social dialogue and mass communication. This study presents an in-depth analysis of the institution's structure, technological innovations, and cultural contributions. Through content analysis, the performances, media coverage, and online content of the Naatshala were examined. The study reveals that this platform does not limit the audience to mere spectatorship but promotes their active participation, emotional engagement, and social awareness. The research highlights the lack of academic studies on private theatre institutions and identifies significant research gaps concerning audience engagement, cultural impact, and technological innovations. The findings indicate that Punjab Naatshala exemplifies an innovative integration of modern mass communication principles and traditional theatre.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Theatre is one of the oldest and most multidimensional means of communication in human civilization. It is not limited to verbal dialogue but conveys meaning through gestures, visual design, lighting, music, sound, and collective experience. This multidimensional nature makes theatre extremely effective for transmitting social, political, and cultural messages.

According to mass communication scholar McQuail, communication is effective only when it elicits responses from the audience on intellectual and emotional levels (McQuail 45). In theatre, a direct dialogue is established between the artist and the audience, capable of conveying social issues to a wider public.

According to Habermas's Public Sphere Theory, spaces in society where people openly discuss and collectively form opinions constitute a true public sphere (Habermas 27). Theatre, in this context, provides a platform where plays stimulate dialogue on social inequalities, political events, community experiences, and cultural values.

Furthermore, Paulo Freire's concept of participatory communication is clearly reflected in theatre. The audience is not just passive observers but co-creators of dialogue on emotional and intellectual levels (Freire 72). UNESCO also recognizes theatre as an effective pillar of community communication (UNESCO).

From this perspective, Punjab Naatshala is not merely a performance venue but also an active medium for public dialogue, cultural exchange, and social consciousness (Punjab Naatshala).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent decades, private theatre institutions such as Punjab Naatshala, Amritsar, have attempted to present traditional theatre in a modern format, incorporating technological facilities, digital access, training programs, and broad audience participation.

For example, in 2016, Naatshala installed a 20 KW solar panel to meet its energy needs from a clean and sustainable source, reducing electricity costs and sending a message of environmental awareness (Saur Energy).

In 2018, Naatshala launched its digital platform, making theatre schedules, performances, history, and institutional information available online, reaching younger and digitally inclined audiences (Tribune India, "Digital Platform"). In 2021, the institution began free theatre training for youth aged 12–16, offering instruction in acting, stage design, lighting, sound, and production processes (Tribune India, "Theater Training").

Additionally, the Naatshala auditorium is equipped with modern facilities—revolving stage, advanced lighting and sound systems, and technical staff—making it a reliable platform for performances and local artists (AmritsarOnline.in).

However, a review of existing literature shows the absence of systematic, comprehensive, or academic-level studies. There is no structured data available on Naatshala's social effectiveness, long-term audience engagement, community impact, cultural change, or training outcomes.

3.0 RESEARCH GAPS :

- The social and cultural impact of private theatre institutions is under-studied.
- Long-term audience engagement and experiences are minimally analyzed.
- Limited research exists on the role of private theatre in youth training and empowerment.
- The impact of digital platforms and technological innovations is not academically documented.

Given this situation, scholarly documentation on private theatre institutions -especially Punjab Naatshala - is extremely limited. This study is therefore significant as it analyzes theatre as a social communication medium using media reports, institutional data, and field observations ("Punjab Naatshala").

3.1 Objectives And Significance:

- To understand Punjab Naatshala's theatre as a medium of social and cultural dialogue.
- To analyze audience participation and social impact.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of technological innovations and performance structure.
- To fill research gaps in academic studies on private theatre institutions.

This content analysis methodology ensures that all sources are systematically, analytically, and scientifically assessed, providing a clear and reliable picture of Punjab Naatshala's social and cultural contribution.

3.2 Methodology

This study employs Qualitative Content Analysis to understand Punjab Naatshala's theatre from social dialogue and mass communication perspectives. This method is suitable for systematic, organized, and scientific analysis of content available in existing records, media reports, digital platforms, and institutional documents.

3.2.1 Data Collection :

- Institutional records: Performance details, event reports and public program documents.

- Media reports: Newspapers, online news portals coverage.
- Digital content: Official website, social media platforms, and online video presentations.

3.2.2 Analysis Procedure :

Systematic categorization of collected content:

- Based on performances, technological innovations, social messages, and audience engagement.

3.2.3 Coding And Theme Creation:

- Each document, report, and digital content was coded.
- Main themes: structure and technological innovations, performance history, audience engagement, social impact, and digital/technological initiatives.

3.2.4 Symbolic And Referenced Analysis:

- Facts and data were verified from media reports and online records.
- Conclusions were drawn by comparing with Punjab Naatshala's actual experiences and reports.

3.2.5 Interpretation:

- Audience engagement, social awareness, and cultural impact were analyzed under each theme.
- Analysis indicates Punjab Naatshala successfully integrates traditional theatre with modern mass communication strategies.



• An exterior architectural view of Punjab Naatshala, Amritsar

3.3 Punjab Naatshala structure and technical details

Jitendra Brad belongs to the fourth generation of Punjabi playwrights and is also a director, actor, and theatre practitioner. He established his private theatre 'Punjab Naatshala'. By constructing the Naatshala, he created a distinct and unique position for himself in the field of Punjabi theatre. For the construction of the Naatshala, he purchased the land behind his factory and laid the foundation of Punjabi Naatshala there.

Punjab Naatshala was inaugurated on 27th March 1998 on the occasion of world theatre day. The hall and balcony together have a seating capacity of 204. The most significant feature of the stage is that it holds the distinction of being North India's first revolving stage. After visiting a theatre in England, Jitendra Barad designed this revolving stage himself. It took approximately seven to eight months to complete.

The stage is 42 feet wide and 36 feet deep. The central part of this stage, which has a diameter of 30 feet, can be rotated from the control room according to the needs of the play. The roof of the Naatshala is openable, which allows both light and air, and can be closed during rain. This Open roof also provides the experience of an open-air stage.



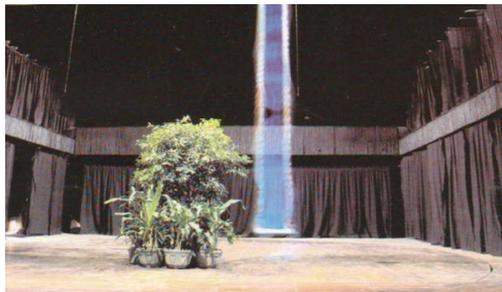
A mechanically rotating stage platform



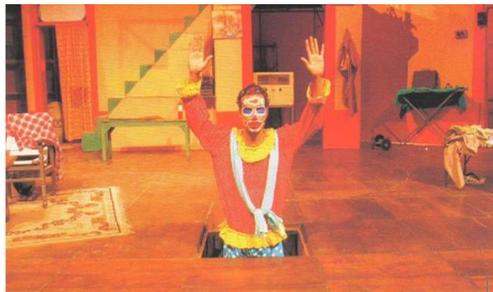
The open roofing system typical of an open-air theatre

A movable trolley is installed above the roof, which can be moved forward and backward across the hall. With the help of this trolley, the lighting setup on the stage and in the hall can be changed immediately according to the modern technological requirements of the play.

Another special feature is that a character performing on stage can enter through the roof using a rope/ping system, and entry from below the stage is also possible through the basement. Two pathways have been created in the main hall that lead to the audience areas so that actors can reach the audience and convey their expressions directly. These pathways are controlled from the control room and connected to the stage depending on the play.



The overhead structure featuring the swing used for performers' entrance onto the stage.



Artists making their entrance onto the stage from the basement area

The curtain in front of the stage is 40 feet wide. A 32-foot wide screen is installed at the centre of the stage. When not in use, this screen is retracted into the roof from the control room, making it invisible to the audience. With the help of this screen, the performance area is divided into two parts - acting takes place in the front portion while preparations for the next scene continue behind. The screen is also used as a backdrop.



1. Stage
2. Rotating stage
3. Internal rotating stage
4. Seating capacity
5. Adjustable pathway
6. Front curtain
7. Central screen
8. Cyclorama
9. Electronic stage
10. Lighting and special effects
11. Rain and mist effects
12. Open roof
13. Catwalk ramp
14. Sound room
15. Display board
16. Main instruction/control room
17. Fragrance information center
18. Swing
19. Set change management
20. Overhead entry lift

A projector is installed on the roof that displays a 30-foot wide and 17-foot high image on the screen. The stage has a cyclorama available in two colours - white and black. Different types of lighting effects are created on the white cyclorama using LED lights.

A 4-foot wide and 2.5-foot mesh-based movable platform is also available on this stage, installed 10 feet above the main stage. This platform can be moved forward and backward from the control room.

A network of sprinklers is installed on the stage roof and audience area roof, which creates a rain scene as required. When light showers fall on the audience, they feel the rain-like atmosphere, making the moment memorable.

To enhance the emotional impact of the play, a 'fragrance distribution device' is installed on the stage to spread floral scents and various fragrances. This device delivers fragrance to the audience area through pipes, making viewers participants through smelling and experiencing the environment. This increases the engagement between artists and spectators.

A movable information board is also installed to give necessary instructions to the audience before the play begins. After displaying the information, it retracts into the curtain.

The sound room of the Naatshala is equipped with a modern sound system connected to the control room via intercom speakers. For the safety of the audience, fire extinguishing systems have been installed. There are two systems - one connected to an underground water tank that can release strong water jets anywhere and the other linked to a 20000-litre overhead tank containing enough water to extinguish fire.

For the comfort of the viewers, a mosquito-repellent system and proper arrangements for food and beverages during intervals have been made.

On World Theatre Day, the Naatshala is specially decorated, and seminars are organised where scholars, theatre director and professor present their views on the development and possibility of Punjabi theatre.

Considering the stage facilities on the Naatshala, theatre groups from across India feel proud to perform here. The famous duo theatre from Pakistan, Madeeha Gauhar and Shahid Nadeem, also staged their play "Bullah" at here. Madeeha Gauhar was so delighted that she performed the play without any fee.

Over 1500 local, provincial, National and international performances have been staged here. Jitendra Barad's own plays have been performed several times. "Kadhais" and "Paaydaan" celebrated their silver jubilee here and "Dhaasle" has had 200 shows. "Lohen Di Bhatti" has also been staged multiple times. Many artists from these plays have gained fame on television and in cinema.

The plays performed in the Naatshala make the audience aware of social evils and inspire them to stand against them—such as dowry system, female foeticide, unemployment, poverty and exploitation of women and children, corrupt politics, caste discrimination, social hierarchy and economic inequality.

Because of Jitendra Barad's contribution to Punjabi drama and theatre, he has been honoured by many institutions—Punjab Sahitya Academy Delhi (1992-93), Punjabi Art Association Canada (1996), Allahabad Natyasangh (1998 to 99), Moga Cultural Society (2001), Notar Club Amritsar Main (2002), Mohammed Rais Memorial Society (2002), Guru Ramdas Society (2003), Shiromani Punjabi Ratan Award (2003), among many national and international honours.

Jitendra Barad is a disciplined personality. He has given supreme importance to discipline in his Naatshala as well. All programs begin on time. After each performance, the national anthem is played to strengthen National consciousness. This reflects not only his dedication to Punjabi theatre but also his deep sense of patriotism. The Punjab government has exempted the theatre performance staged at the Naatshala from entertainment tax—another major achievement.

Overall, Jitendra Barad is a multifaceted personality who has performed every task with utmost dedication. Despite his busy schedule, he made time for writing and created an excellent theatre space like Punjab Naatshala, which continues to enrich Punjabi theatre.

4.0 ANALYSIS FROM A MASS COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Punjab Naatshala is not only a physical theatre space but also a powerful communication medium that establishes direct interaction between the audience and the artist. According to McQuail (2010) effective communication is that which produces intellectual and emotional responses in the audience. In Punjab Naatshala, technical features like the revolving stage, projector, cyclorama, fragrance distribution device and openable roof do not keep the audience as passive viewers; rather, they turn them into participatory viewers who become part of multi-dimensional experience.

In the perspective of Habermas (1989) Public Sphere theory, Punjab Naatshala provides a platform where discussion on social, cultural and political issues become possible. Plays based on issues such as dowry, female foeticide, unemployment, poverty, exploitation of women and children, caste discrimination and economic inequality not only inform the audience but also inspire them toward social awareness and participation (Habermas 27). Thus, the Naatshala functions as a living public sphere where audience and artist co-create social message through collective dialogues.

According to Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of participatory communication, communication becomes effective when message-receiver do not remain passive but become co-creators of dialogue at emotional and ideological levels. The close audience entry points, the moveable trolley and sensory experiences in Punjab Naatshala make the audience active participants in the dialogue. This interactive model deepens the viewer's involvement and enhances message effectiveness. (Freire 72)

Technological innovations and media integrations further strengthen this communication. Visual presentation through the projector and cyclorama along with LED lights, add emotional depth. The fragrance device and rain effects enrich the sensory experience. In this way, the Naatshala presents an example of multimodal communication where visual, auditory and olfactory experiences reach the audience simultaneously (Tribune India, "Digital Platform")

Internationally and culturally the significance of the Naatshala is noteworthy. Performances by artists from Pakistan and other countries, digital coverage and more than 1500 shows indicate that this stage is not only local but also a medium of cultural exchange at a global level.

Thus, Punjab Naatshala is an institution that applies theatre and Mass communication theories through technological awareness and interactive experience. Here, the audience is not merely a viewer but also a co-creator of messages and an active participant in social dialogue, which is extremely important in the context of modern Mass communication

5.0 FINDINGS

- **Technological innovation and visual communication:** The revolving stage, cyclorama, projector and LED lights make the audience experience multidimensional.
- **Participatory audience experience:** Close proximity to the stage, rooftop and basement entry for actors and sensory devices make the audience active participants.
- **Social and cultural dialogue:** Plays make the audience aware of social inequalities and evils.
- **Global impact:** International artists and performances make the stage a medium of global cultural exchange.

6.0 DISCUSSION

Punjab Naatshala presents a practical example of modern theatre and Mass communication theories. The audience is not a passive observer but an active participant in the dialogue. Technological innovation, multimodal communication and participation deepens the viewers experience and enhance message effectiveness. The social and global impact of Naatshala makes it a powerful communication platform from local to international levels.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Punjab Naatshala establishes is a multi-dimensional dialogue between the audience and the artist. This stage is not only a theatrical performance space but also a strong Mass communication platform. It's social, cultural and global impact makes it a practical example of modern theatre and participatory communication theories.

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