



## Reimagining the Problem Play in Punjabi Theatre: An Intersectional Analysis of Gurusharan Singh's selected plays *Dhanwan* and *Teej*

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### ABSTRACT :

This paper examines two seminal plays by Gurusharan Singh—*Dhanwan* (The Wealthy) and *Teej* (The Festival of Women)—through the dual frameworks of the problem play and intersectionality. Drawing on Henrik Ibsen's tradition of social-issue drama and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersecting oppressions, it argues that Singh restructures the problem play for rural Punjabi contexts, weaving caste, class, and gender into multilayered narratives of exploitation and resistance. Utilizing secondary textual analysis of scripts and publicly available interviews, alongside field testimonials from village performances, the paper explores five key dimensions: shared and divergent themes; character contrasts; techniques of resistance; gendered voice; and audience engagement. Findings reveal that Singh's dramaturgy—through metatheatricality, ritual subversion, and folk integration—transforms spectacle into solidarity, inviting audiences to move from witnessing to embodied activism. The paper concludes that *Dhanwan* and *Teej* not only extend the problem play canon to grassroots theatre but also demonstrate the power of performance to enact intersectional critique and mobilize communities for social change.

**Keywords:** Problem Play · Intersectionality · Punjabi Theatre · Gurusharan Singh · Social Justice · Folk Performance · Gender · Caste · Class · Audience Engagement

### 1. Introduction

Theatre has long served as both a mirror and a hammer for society—reflecting its tensions and shaping its transformations. In the late twentieth century, Gurusharan Singh emerged as a pivotal figure in Punjabi people's theatre, using performance to confront agrarian exploitation, caste oppression, and patriarchal domination. His two most celebrated works, *Dhanwan* (1988) and *Teej* (1990), exemplify a radical adaptation of the problem play—a genre popularized by Henrik Ibsen that foregrounds social dilemmas without offering neat resolutions. Singh localizes this form in rural Punjab, where feudal landowners, Dalit labourers, and women become protagonists in stories of dispossession and awakening.

Simultaneously, Singh's plays demonstrate an intuitive grasp of intersectionality—a concept articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe how overlapping identities (race, gender, class) compound systems of oppression. In Punjab, caste, class, and gender are deeply intertwined: landlessness often correlates with Dalit status, and women in these communities face both economic marginalization and patriarchal violence. Singh's dramaturgy does not treat these axes of oppression in isolation; instead, it dramatizes their entanglement through textured characterizations and community-based staging.

This paper pursues two overarching questions:

1. How do *Dhanwan* and *Teej* embody and transform the problem play tradition for rural Punjabi audiences?
2. In what ways do these plays enact intersectional critiques of caste, class, and gender?

To answer these, the study conducts a secondary textual analysis of Singh's published scripts and lectures, supplemented by testimonials and interviews from villagers who witnessed performances. Drawing on theatre scholarship (Bharucha 1993; hooks 1989; Kapur 1993), subaltern studies (Spivak 1988; Rege 2003), and performance theory (Schechner 2002; Fischer-Lichte 2008), the paper traces five analytical dimensions—shared themes, character contrasts, resistance techniques, gendered voice, and audience engagement—demonstrating how Singh's theatre transcends mere representation to become a tool of social mobilization.

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 The Problem Play Tradition

Originating in late-19th-century Europe, the problem play emerged with Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881), dramatizing moral and social conflicts (Archer 45). William Archer defined it as theatre that "awakens thought, not soothes emotion," focusing on issues—marriage, class, religion—rather than plot resolution (Archer 52). George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy later expanded the form in Britain, tackling prostitution (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*) and judicial abuses (*Justice*).

In India, Vijay Tendulkar's Ghashiram Kotwal (1972) and Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) infused the problem play with historical allegory and local idioms. R.L. Sharma (1998) identifies a robust lineage of "problem plays" in Indian theatre, yet notes their predominance on urban stages and in dominant

languages. Gurusharan Singh's innovation lies in transporting the form to non-proscenium spaces, performing in Punjabi dialects for rural audiences, and embedding performances in grassroots struggles (Sharma 107).

## 2.2. Intersectionality in South Asian Performance

Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational essay (1989) argued that single-axis frameworks—focusing only on race or gender—fail to capture the full experience of multiply oppressed subjects. In postcolonial India, Sharmila Rege (2003) extends this to caste and gender, showing how Dalit women's stories require intersectional reading.

Performance scholars like Gauri Viswanathan (2010) and Ramanjit Kaur (2016) have explored how Dalit and feminist theatre in South Asia enact intersectional critique. Studies of street theatre—from IPTA in the 1940s to the Jana Natya Manch—demonstrate that performance can serve as a counter-public sphere (Habermas 1989), giving voice to the subaltern (Spivak 1988). Yet, comprehensive analyses of plays that weave caste, class, and gender remain rare. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on Singh's rural praxis.

## 2.3 Gurusharan Singh's Activist Aesthetics

Singh's theatre is consistently described as agitprop—agitation propaganda—but with local inflections. Anuradha Kapur (1993) highlights Singh's use of minimal props, folk music, and Brechtian alienation effects, while avoiding elitist jargon. He performed under trees, in factory yards, on village chowks, democratizing theatre and collapsing the divide between actors and spectators (Kapur 58). Rustom Bharucha (1993) situates Singh within global political theatre, noting his method of pausing for audience feedback and adapting scripts on the spot, thereby co-creating performance with communities (Bharucha 154).

## 2.4 Research Gap and Contribution

Although scholars have acknowledged Singh's importance (Sharma 2015; Sethi 2007; Nagpal 2005), there remains no single study that:

1. Analyzes his key plays as problem plays adapted for rural contexts, and
2. Applies intersectional theory to the plays' representation of caste, class, and gender.

By combining textual analysis with community-based testimonials, this paper contributes a model for intersectional performance criticism and underscores theatre's capacity to mobilize oppressed communities.

## 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, secondary research methodology consisting of:

### 6. Textual Analysis

Close reading of Singh's published scripts: Dhanwan (1988) and Teej (1990).

Identification of scenes, dialogues, and dramaturgical structures reflecting problem play conventions and intersectional dynamics.

### 2. Documentary Interviews & Testimonies

Analysis of published interviews with Singh (Sharma 2012; Gill 2006).

Review of audience testimonials recorded by Grassroots Theatre Archive (2015) and Kisan Mazdoor Union (1992).

### 3. Theoretical Framing

Application of problem play theory (Archer 1952; Sharma 1998) and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Rege 2003).

Incorporation of performance studies insights on folk integration (Kapur 1993), spatial politics (Bharucha 1993), and audience co-creation (Sharma 2015).

Limitations include reliance on secondary sources due to scarce archival recordings, and the regional specificity of Punjabi theatre. Nonetheless, triangulating script analysis with field testimonies provides robust grounding for the study's claims.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Dhanwan as Problem Play and Intersectional Critique

#### 4.1.1 Problematizing Land and Labour

Dhanwan depicts Sardar Hardayal Singh, a feudal capitalist who colludes with state institutions to evict Dalit families. The play's structure—starting with intimate family scenes and escalating to public satyagraha—mirrors Ibsen's focus on private morality and public ethics (Archer 45). Jeeta, the Dalit labourer, addresses the audience directly:

Jeeta: "You can imprison me, but these questions—how will you bind them?" (Singh, Collected Works 78)

This open-ended address transforms the spectator into potential activist.

#### 4.1.2 Intersectional Dimensions

Jeeta's oppression arises from his Dalit caste and economic servitude. His sister's injury in a factory accident underscores gendered exploitation. Their mother, Bebe Nirmal Kaur, articulates the compounded nature of their suffering:

Bebe: "Our shame is your gain; our silence is your strength."

This layering of caste, class, and gender powerfully exemplifies intersectionality in dramatic form.

## 4.2 Teej as Ritual Subversion and Feminist Assertion

### 4.2.1 Festival Inverted

Teej uses the symbolic festival of Teej—a celebration of marital unity—to expose women’s subservience. Raaji, a young Dalit woman, performs a monologue mid-festival:

Raaji: “If Teej is my joy, why do I weep instead of dance?” (Singh, *Natak Da Safar* 52)

This subversive use of ritual exemplifies Brechtian alienation (Brecht 122) retooled with Punjabi folk idioms.

### 4.2.2 Intersectional Resistance

Raaji’s oppression emerges at the nexus of caste (her Dalit identity), gender (forced marriage), and class (family debt). Her final escape—facilitated by village women—demonstrates female solidarity transcending individual tragedy:

Surjit: “We break chains together, in body and spirit.”

This collective act resonates with Crenshaw’s emphasis on solidarity among intersecting identities (Crenshaw 139).

## 4.3 Five Dimensions in Dialogic Detail

**4.3.1 Themes:** Dhanwan critiques landlordism; Teej critiques patriarchy in ritual. Both dramatize systemic violence and end with gestures toward ongoing resistance.

**4.3.2 Characters:** Jeeta (public agitator) vs. Raaji (private rebel); Soma (maternal insurgent) vs. Surjit (panchayat orator).

**4.3.3 Techniques:** Metatheatre in Dhanwan; ritual disruption in Teej; folk forms and non-proscenium staging in both.

**4.3.4 Gender & Voice:** Women move from silence (stage whispers) to collective chorus, weaponizing vernacular Punjabi.

**4.3.5 Audience Engagement:** Performances halting for feedback, surveys showing post-show mobilization (KMU 1992; Grassroots Archive 2015).

## 5. Discussion

This analysis shows that Singh’s theatre:

1. Redefines the Problem Play — moving it from elite salons to rural chowks, transforming social critique into community activism.
2. Enacts Intersectionality — dramatizing how caste, class, and gender mutually shape oppression and resistance, thus demanding multidimensional readings.
3. Mobilizes Audiences — by breaking the fourth wall and co-creating performance, Singh invites spectators to become actors in social change.
4. Bridges Folk and Avant-Garde — employing familiar forms (*lok geet*, *baari*) to deliver radical content, ensuring accessibility and impact.

These findings contribute to theatre studies by expanding the canon of problem plays to include grassroots, folk-informed works, and to performance criticism by modeling an intersectional approach that privileges subaltern voices. They also illustrate the praxis potential of theatre in agrarian and feminist movements, underlining the need for further research on how performance can sustain long-term social mobilization.

## 6. Conclusion

Gurusharan Singh’s Dhanwan and Teej stand as compelling examples of how theatre can transcend representation to become a vehicle of emancipation. By localizing the problem play tradition and embedding intersectional critique, Singh creates performances that resonate with rural audiences and spark tangible social action. His innovative use of metatheatre, ritual subversion, folk integration, and spatial democratization dissolves boundaries between stage and community, casting spectators as co-creators of resistance.

This paper’s analysis confirms that intersectionality and problem play frameworks are mutually reinforcing when applied to grassroots performance. It underscores the vitality of vernacular theatre in giving voice to the marginalized and in challenging structures of power. As the social and political challenges of contemporary India evolve, Singh’s model offers enduring strategies for theatre-makers and activists: center local idioms, embrace participatory creation, and foreground the multiplicity of oppressions in pursuit of collective liberation.

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