

Use of Theatre of the Oppressed in Community Development: A Case Study of Jana Sanskriti Ngo, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Theatre has always given a platform to the common people to share their emotions, feelings as well as express their discomfort on the happenings around them. There are various forms of theatre which has emerged historically; they can be classified broadly as – Proscenium theatre i.e. theatre for the stage and flexible theatre for the field and off/for oppressed. Theatre of the oppressed initiated by Augusto Boal has been used in different forms for the development of the community. Different forms of theatre are used to address the social issues in the communities for their development. They are third theatre, street theatre, forum theatre, playback theatre, intimate theatre, invisible theatre and others. These form of theatre play a relevant role in social awareness and community transformation. It is a medium for empowering the communities, a medium to voice their problems and encourage them to solve their problem with the help of their own resources. The present paper presents reflections from case study of Jana Sanskriti, an organization who are using theatre as a method of social intervention and bringing about social change.

Keywords: *Theatre, Community Development, Oppressed, Participation*

INTRODUCTION

The word *theatre* is derived from the Greek word *theaomai*, which means “to see”. Theatre is a fusion of various art forms that produce dramatic actions. Theatre arts greatly influence the society’s view of the world

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outside. Everything in society whether its history, philosophy, way of thinking, rituals, taboos all are linked to theatre as theatre throws light on all these sensitive issues through the forms of theatre arts like dance and drama. Education through entertainment is what theatre art follows. Theatre is, thus, known to be an effective teaching resource from early times.

American composer, John Cage, said, “theatre takes place all the time wherever one is”. The passion to express, to communicate and to share the ideas-opinions-emotions, believes gave inception to performing art. Theatre is a major functional and spontaneous expression of performing art. Theatre is not only associated with stage performances but is also often used beyond entertainment such as to convey religious, educational, social or political messages (UNESCO, 2006).

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THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Different forms of theatre have been used to address the social issues in the communities for their development. They are third theatre, street theatre, forum theatre, playback theatre, intimate theatre, invisible theatre and others. *Third Theatre* was initiated by Badal Sircar. It was an outcome of his dissatisfaction with the proscenium form of theatre. Direct communication was the important attribute of Third Theatre. Third Theatre focuses on the body language of the artist or the performer and it depends on the imagination of the spectator or the audience. As only human presence was to be emphasized, the other materialistic needs of the theatre became unnecessary. Because of certain similarity with the form of street theatre, Third Theatre is sometimes also compared with it. Unlike street theatre, Third Theatre is also portable, flexible and low-cost performance. As per Badal Sircar, “Street theatre in a way is Third Theatre. But all Third Theatre is not street theatre”. Sircar used theatre as a tool to bring a change. Badal Sircar never believed that theatre in itself can bring a remarkable change in the society; but, he believed that theatre can be a form of a movement to bring the required change in the people and the society. The *Indian Street Theatre* is also of the most important and contemporary forms of Indian theatre. In the recent era, street theatre has segregated itself as a means of illustrating the sociopolitical issues and

an effort to reach the common people. These short, direct, intimate and effective street theatres are a significant ways of handling issues. They play a relevant role in social awareness and community transformation. Another theatre for development would be the Forum Theatre, created by Augusto Boal; he states in his book “*Theatre of the Oppressed*” (TO) that *Forum Theatre* “is the reflection of reality and a rehearsal for future action”. It is the TO, not theatre for the oppressed. Forum Theatre can be defined as something that creates space for a dialogue. This means that Forum Theatre is a process in which views and opinions can be exchanged. Other definition is Forum Theatre is interactive, it promotes the dialogue for joint learning and talks about a participation that allows people to understand the manifestation of national, global problems in a local situation. It can also be defined as a space where actor and spectator act intellectually, engaging themselves in a dialogue to understand the problem sociologically and determine the various ways of how to apply them in real life. Forum Theatre is the theatre in which the oppressed are themselves the actors. The actors are among those who work in fields and toil in the factories, many of whom are either illiterate or semi-literate (Abbas, 2015). Development oriented theatre also has the concept of playback theatre was conceived by Jonathan Fox in 1975. This theatre is performed in collaboration with the actors and the audience. *Playback Theatre* is done through storytelling and acting helps the community to understand themselves better.

THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT

There are many forms of theatre which aim at the development of the individual, the group and the society. It can be said that the basic moto of the theatre for development is to encourage peoples’ participation and has to be practised and developed with/by the people. It is a medium for empowering the communities, a medium to voice their problems and encourage them to solve their problem with the help of their own resources.

We can use theatre in various ways for the purpose of community development.

Participation: Theatre for development can encourage participation of the community members. It helps those people to rise their voices who’s voices are normally not heard in the community. Theatre turns true and personal stories into play for the public. This reduces the fear of the oppressed to be exposed and she/he participates actively in the public causes.

Educational Propaganda: Using the local situation, culture and the knowledge and situation of the audience, theatre can be used to deliver information and messages in a top-down approach.

Advocacy Theatre: It can provide a way for the audience to participate in the issues raised. It can have a much greater impact than other forms of advocacy. Theatre can challenge people who may be able to respond to, and take action about, the issues raised.

Therapy Drama: Trauma and emotional problems can be addressed through theatre as a therapy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The TO is a theoretical framework and set of techniques developed by Brazilian director, artist and activist, Augusto Boal. Boal was a follower of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, and believed that oppression has suppressed the intellect of the oppressed. Every individual has the ability to think and take action. Boal believed that the human was a self-contained theatre, actor and spectator in one. When we observe our own action, it becomes easier for us to understand our action and, in turn, it helps us to amend and rectify our actions to impact and change our surroundings. The TO helps us to better understand ourselves, our communities and the world surrounding us. The TO is practised through several techniques and tools.

In forum theatre, a dramatic situation is developed from any of the day-to-day life situations that creates a discomfort among the people. That drama is presented by the actors in front of the audience or if more accurately said in front of the spectators. The situations can vary from child marriage, domestic violence, sexual abuse, gender discrimination, drug abuse, health, education and to any situation that is having negative impact on the community or the society at large. In the middle or the end of the drama, there are some intervention points where the drama is stopped and the audience are asked to intervene. At this point, the difference between the actor (one who acts) and the spectator (who observes the drama and is not allowed to intervene in the theatrical situation) is bridged and the spectator becomes the “spect-actor”. The spect-actors then keeps their point and enacts their ideas. In the whole process, the spect-actor engages in self-empowering processes of dialogue that help foster critical thinking. The TO follows the pedagogical and political principle of the education method developed by Paulo Freire. The principles can be summoned as:

1) to see the situation lived by the participants; 2) to analyze the root causes of the situation, including both internal and external sources of oppression; 3) to explore group solutions to these problems; and 4) to act to change the situation following the precepts of social justice (Freire, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

The present paper has used the review of literature and reflections from case study of Jana Sanskriti, an organization that is using theatre as a method of social intervention and bringing about a social change.

CASE STUDY

Jana Sanskriti centre for the TO was established in 1985, which is the first exponent of the TO in India. Jana Sanskriti believes that every individual has the intellectual ability and is capable of thinking; it just needs to be discovered and manifested. The objective is to provide a space where the oppressed have the opportunity to introspect and discover the self. Jana Sanskriti, through its activities, addresses several social issues that create discomfort in the society. The issues are mostly focused on women and children. Health, education, child marriage, trafficking, abuse are some of the issues that are dealt with. All these issues are addressed through theatre. In the TO, the oppressed speak, act and express their social will. Jana Sanskriti practises the TO through forum theatre with aesthetically refined theatre and hard-hitting questions on reality around the community. The theatre practised by Jana Sanskriti does not provide any solution to the problem or the issue raised through the play; instead, they attempt to arrive at a conclusion only with the help of the spect-actors.

Among many interventions done by Jana Sanskriti, the one that was done in Purulia holds a meaningful position. Purulia is one of the most backward districts of West Bengal and has mostly tribal population and scheduled tribes. This experiment started as a pilot with 12 high schools in Pancha block in 2014. Jana Sanskriti started theatre in education programme in a different way. Here, the focus was on “dealing with Patriarchy through theatre”. The targeted population was children ranging from 14 to 18 years of age. Volunteers / performers of this project were all high school and undergraduate level students from government schools and colleges. Plays on patriarchy related issues were created in a

workshop with these students. The same play was repetitively performed in front of the same audience for at least three times within an interval of 15–21 days. Performances were done in 12 high schools, villages from where the volunteers came from and the places surrounding those villages. Peoples' participation was very high during the forums. Young girls have started voicing out their opinion. It has brought the children and their parents to a rational stage through reflection. Thus, Jana Sanskriti used the theatre to empower student community and provided a platform for inter-generational dialogue in the communities. This initiative has noticeably increased the enrolment of girl child into schools and reduced the cases of dropouts and child marriages in Puncha block of Purulia. Teachers of these 12 high schools are of the view that continuous exposures of their students to these plays, where they see their fellow classmates acting, have increased participation in class which, in turn, is having a positive impact on their academic performance. After a year now, students associated with this programme, who are the theatre performers, are getting a different identity in their society. Community also perceives them in a different light. Their confidence levels have increased thus impacting their versatility and academic performance. This year Jana Sanskriti is scaling up this programme to encompass 50 high schools in three additional blocks in Purulia. Now, it is gradually becoming possible for the girl child to disagree with their parents on the question of early marriage. For example, a popular play called *Sonar Meye* (Girl of Gold) is about an adolescent girl in a poor family who wants to study but is not supported by her family in her efforts. Instead, her father, who is an alcoholic, wants to get her married off, and is concerned about where he will obtain the money for dowry. The play eventually reaches a dramatic climax where the oppressed character confronts the oppressor(s); for example, when the potential in-laws of the girl try to inspect her to see if she is fit for marriage and the girl refuses to cooperate. At this point, the play is stopped without solving the problem and audience members are invited to replace the oppressed character and act out possible solutions, ideas and strategies. The idea is that people from the audience can voluntarily come up and join the play to argue their point or express their thoughts.

There was a case in Jans Sanskriti area of operation in Purulia where a priest refused to carry out rituals in a marriage where both the bridegroom and the bride were under age. Jana Sanskriti had planned to form women forum and responsible citizen's forum in each village adjacent to the higher secondary schools to ensure more effectiveness of the program.

WAY FORWARD

Women's empowerment is a process which has three components: resource, that is, an enabling environment for the women to take action; agency, that is, disempowered women themselves becoming agents for their own development or freedom from oppression; and achievements or the outcomes of the action undertaken by women. Theatre, especially Third Theatre, has been a very powerful tool for communication. It has formed a major part of social action and across centuries theatre has also served as a means of protest and a portrayal of the social injustices. It has received wide acceptance and its inherent grassroots approach has helped mobilize the most vulnerable (Banerjee, 2013). Theatre as a means of development communication is a very powerful tool for social change and social action. One cannot deny the inherent role of theatre being the grassroots voice and a medium to raise voice against oppression. Through the examples and case studies above, one can see how theatre can play a major role in representation of women's voices and, hence, become a powerful means for social change and transformation.

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