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THEATRE AND SOCIOLOGICAL ISSUES WITH REFERENCE TO CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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Abstract

Theatre is a form of communication, which does not use technology as the primary channel. The primary role of such a medium is to inform, entertain, persuade, and provide a means for connecting people. Theatre in India, as we see it, has a rich history, heritage and culture. Many people in India believe that “Theatre is Cinema”, and that the living theatre of the stage in the village square or in the temple is dead (Farley P. Richmond et al, 1993:3). However, we find Indian theatre very much alive. As time passed, the form of communication turned to a mediated communication which means the communication interaction using technology as the primary channel, around the world for which India is not an exception. However, the theatre form of

communication has been a key medium in addressing sociological issues. The objective of this paper is to examine the ace role played by the theatre in addressing the social problems in contemporary India.

Keywords: mediated communication, Indian traditional media, drama, communication, cinema, rural, middle class, Sanskrit.

Introduction

Theatre is a primordial aesthetic practice in India and around the world. All existing evidences suggest that theatre existed in the Indian subcontinent from the beginning of civilization. According to Paul Kurtz, the *Rig Veda* suggests that dramatic theatre in India came into being around the eighth century B.C. Additionally, according to him; *Jataka* stories illustrating Indian life between 600 B.C. and 300 B.C. contain evidences of theatre (Paul Kurtz, 1988:66). But, According to P.V. Kane, for a number of reasons the *Natyashastra* of Bharata, an exhaustive memoir on the art of performance which is an earliest form of Indian drama is to be considered as the oldest extant work on the Sanskrit poetics of drama (P.V. Kane, 1994:10). Dramatic theatre in India gives the impression to owe part of its origin from religion. In Indian theatre the two great narrative epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have a greater importance.

According to Paul Kurtz, like the cult of Dionysus, Vedic religion also held the seeds of dramatic theatre in India. In the fourth century B.C, actors were employed to perform at temples in honor of deities. Also, some villages forced residents to subsidize public performances of *Stree Preksha* (women's drama) and *Purusha Preksha* (men's drama). The *Natyashastra* of the third century B.C by Bharata brings out the evidence of theatre arts at festivals and public celebrations during the Maurya Dynasty, founded by King Chandragupta (reigned 321 B.C -297 B.C). The Maurya Dynasty ruled India for a long period. During this period, kings sent Buddhist missionaries to various places like Ceylon, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Tibet, China and Japan to spread Buddhism. The missionaries used various forms of arts including drama, to teach Buddhist dogma. In a similar way, the Gupta Dynasty (A.D. 320- A.D. 535) ushered in India's golden or classical age in which the Buddhism accepted by King Asoka (reigned 274B.C- 232

B.C) and the dramatic theatre was flourished. The great playwright Kalidasa was patronized by King Vikramaditya (A.D. 373 – A.D. 415) and also gathered a unique group of poets and scholars (Paul Kurtz, Ibid).

As per Historian Will Durant (M.L. Varadpande, 1981: 36), in one sense drama in India is as old as Vedas, for at least the seed of drama lies in the Upanishads. The more actual source of drama surely older than these scriptures is the sacrificial and festival ceremonies and religious procession. Many known and unknown factors worked together to produce Indian theatre and give it a religious stamp that ambled throughout the classic age in the serious nature of the drama. Perhaps the final spur to drama came from the contact established by Alexander's invasion between India and Greece. History of dramatic literature of India starts with the plays of Bhasa which are ascribed to fourth-fifth century B.C. As many as thirteen of his alluring plays have survived crossing the time span of several centuries. The most interesting thing to note is that without knowing who the author was the individual acts of Bhasa's plays were performed by the *Chakyar* actors of Kerala in *Kutiyattam* style in the temple theaters known as *Koothambalam* at least for one thousand years. The age of the classical theatre is believed to be the golden period of Indian theatre. This period last until the fifth century, soon after which the flow of Sanskrit drama faded. Although the dramatic literature diminished, the performance traditions transformed into various forms through the traditional and classical folk, just as the basic aesthetics of Bharata.

Modern Indian theatre is influenced by and draws inspiration from various sources. It was only at time of the consolidation of the British Empire in various parts of India in the late eighteenth century, modern theatre or the so called Western proscenium style of theatre was introduced in India. However, the first aboriginal performance with native actors happened in 1795 when a Russian violinist by the name of Herasim Stepanovich Lebedeff staged a Hindi and Bengali mixed-language version of a short play by Paul Jodrell. But, the momentum was sluggish and only in the 1830s, under the patronage of the rich native families, the first Bengali-language theatre, which was outside the traditional format of indigenous folk performance genres came into force. Due to the great influence of Western proscenium style theatre, the indigenous traditional folk theatre and various other theatrical genres of India got a great hit. It is the same time; the British had established a small professional theatre outfit in Calcutta. An Indian actor

named Baishnab Charan Auddy for the first time played Othello in 1848 (<http://asiasociety.org/arts/performing-arts/theater/contemporary-indian-theatre-overview>).

Theatre and Contemporary India

The main audience for contemporary theatre is overwhelming urban coupled with a strong theoretical and critical presumption that it is homogeneous in composition. The typical Indian theatergoer is perceived as middle-class, educated (though not always professionally trained or employed), relatively unseasoned in the culture of theatre, and more or less receptive to an eclectic range of modern theatre forms (Aparna Bhargava Dhawadker, 2005:108). Although, in India as in the west the spectators have wide contact with the electronic mass media, they contrast with the western views in the case of theatre viewership. If the options are available, the Indian audience prefers films to theatre show or drama. Thus for obvious reasons, for those who brings plays to the stage, the development of serious theatre has become not less than a brave act.

Some important conclusions about the reception of contemporary Indian theatre follow from this discussion. As most of the literary playwrights rarely engage with issues of spectatorship, directors such as Subbanna, Ganguly and Chowdry and directing authors such as Dutt and Siccar took the responsibility for the primary deal in audience development. In the contemporary Indian society, the primary audience for the modern Indian theatre is educated middle-class urban viewers. In India, a number of practitioners have been striving to expand viewership across the boundaries of class, region, and language. Such attempts include the successful innovative steps of female directors in creating new models of performance on the Indian stage. A small group of Indian audiences have participated in the post-1950 theatre movement and witnessed the establishment of new national standard to bridge the enormous material gap between theatre and film (Ibid: 119).

Social Evils Prevailing in Contemporary India:

In order to understand the prevailing social evils in India, a deep insight into the rich heritage and culture of the country is required. These problems are deep rooted in the Indian heritage and

from that it has outgrown to a serious crime reigning within the boundaries. India is definitely one of the fastest developing nations of the world. It has been 67 years that the country gained independence and became a republic but sadly the very purpose of attaining the freedom is defeated. However, issues rooted in our colonial past, cultural processes, and socio-economic changes have together led to the burning problems of Indian society. The gravest social problems faced by India, at present are:

- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Gender Inequality
- Caste Discrimination
- Dowry
- Child Labor
- Drug Abuse
- Forced Prostitution
- Domestic Violence
- Female Infanticide

Further, many other social evils like corruption, illiteracy, and urbanization are also the momentous problems being faced by Indian society. All these social issues need a careful analysis and demand rational solution to help the society grow in all possible ways. There is no doubt that communication plays a vital role in this regard.

Role of Theatre in addressing Social Evils in India

India has a rich heritage and culture that is more prominently palpable in the rural India. Most of the social evils being faced by Indian society have its roots in the rural India. It is also evident that in rural India despite the vast opening out of the electronic media, theatre remains the predominant mass medium. Hence, in addressing the social evils, this medium has a great role to play.

The message intended to be communicated to the target audience should be well narrated and well scripted. It should make the rural audiences to think and analyze the problem. Also, it is very important to have an appropriate form of communication that deems fit to the audience interests. In order to note the effectiveness of the theatre communication in addressing the social evils, the feedback must be obtained.

Often, theatre is misinterpreted purely as a source of entertainment. However, theatre can be so much more than just sequined costumes and pretty songs; in fact, it is often the perfect vehicle to provide education about current social issues and to inspire social and political change.

In general, the communication process involves only sender and one or more receivers. But unlike in conventional model of communication, a theatre communications involves two or more stages of senders. The message intended to be passed to the audience involves coding and decoding at minimum two levels. So, sender-I i.e. the author of theatre theme should keep in mind the comprehending levels of both the artists as well as the audiences. Fig.1 gives the detailed flow of information in a typical theatre communication.

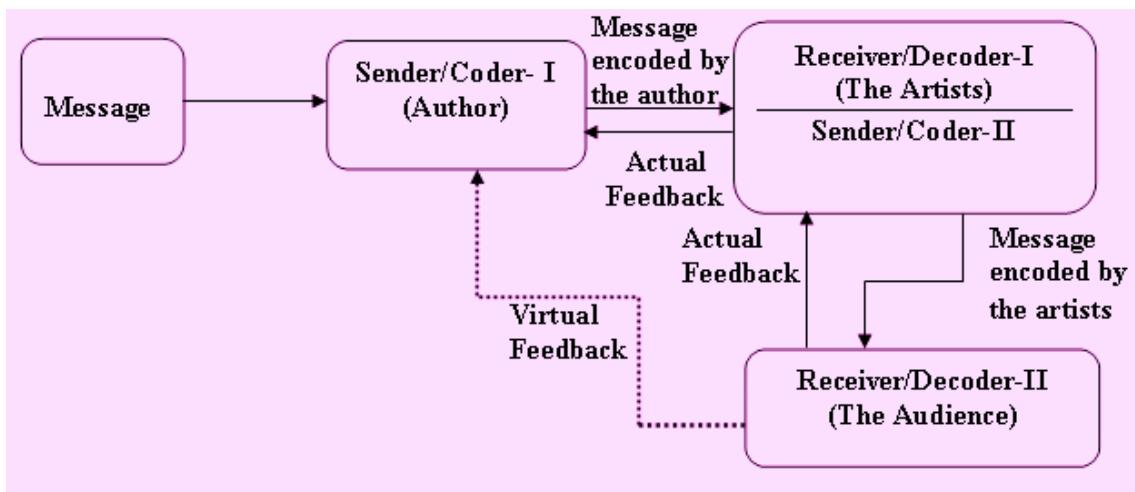


Fig 1. A Typical Communication Model of Theater

(Source: Personal Files of author Dr. Suman K. Kasturi)

In our opinion, Theatre in Education (TIE) (Samuel Jotton *et.al*, 2012: viii) (This is a new form of theatre that has cropped up in direct response to the needs of both theatre and schools and which has sought to exploit the techniques and imaginative potency of theatre in the service of

education), in conjunction with the above mentioned model would bring out the desired results. In 1965, for the first time in Belgrade theatre, TIE began to all aims and purposes. Surely, this method of fusion would bring out the new concept of *actor-teachers* specifically because they seek to combine the qualities, skills and objectives of both actors and teachers, simultaneously.

In order to address the social evils in India, the concept of *epic theatre* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_theatre) developed by Bertolt Brecht and his partner Erwin Piscator might be used effectively along with TIE. The main objective of epic theatre is to ensure that the audiences are not forgetting that they are seeing a theatrical presentation, and are therefore forced to reexamine reality. It is achieved using such techniques as very minimal scenery, harsh lighting, and actors speaking directly to the audience. These performances were meant to be seen as representations of reality but not as being real. The intent of this representation was to inspire critical reflection, rather than to encourage the audience to emotionally identify with the characters and actions of the play.

Case Studies on Effectiveness of Theatre in Addressing Social Evils in India:

In India, over the years, street theatre has been playing a significant role in spreading awareness. One such success story comes from Chandigarh. The Chandigarh based theatre groups have come forward to spread awareness among the prisoners on such issues ranging from sex education to social issues like corruption and terrorist attacks. This is the best way to get a message across to the people in an effective manner for it is staged right in the middle of people and not on an elevated platform, creating distance between the performers and audience. More so, it could be staged at the shortest of notice, without the paraphernalia associated with organized plays staged at predetermined venues (Times of India, Chandigarh report dated Apr 16, 2011).

In a similar case, a group of friends with a passion for theatre decided to collaborate and put up a play at a community theatre festival after ten years of their college. They gave their first theatre performance on January 23, 2011. It was an independent theatre group named *Aatish* meaning fire. This Delhi-based group *Aatish* is best known for their street plays, though they also conduct workshops with marginalized, underprivileged groups. They firmly believe that voicing one's

beliefs are crucial. Being themselves the theatre actors, they believe that change is each and everyone's responsibility, and whoever wishes to see it, needs to add their bit, to see it. They believe in vocalizing and bringing to fore different issues that plague our society at large, and the few steps that can be taken towards larger and greater solutions. Till date, the group has scripted and performed street plays that deal with issues such as women's empowerment, child labor, children's education, usage of solar energy, the need to vote, examining the state of democracy, anti-sedition etc. They have partnered with non-profit, grassroots organizations and conducted workshops not only in Delhi but surrounding rural areas – spreading awareness regarding decisive issues such as menstrual hygiene and post-natal care. In order to tackle serious issues such as child abuse, the group conducts workshops with children (Aprna Ray, 2012).

Threat Imposed to Theatre by New Media:

In this era of *Satmass Media* (the mass media which work in conjunction with satellite communications) (Suman K. Kasturi, 2013: 138), with the advancements in the technology and the easy availability of services to the masses, the audiences are taking a shift to the new media thus imposing a great threat to the traditional media such as theatre. But, the theatre as a medium has immense potential to address social evils to the rural folks, as their content and concept is close to their hearts. So, it is very much essential to protect the traditional media such as theatre from extinction. In actuality the new media is not new rather it is an advancement and transformation of existing media. Each and every medium contribute to a shift towards more advanced and technological media environments. Social change is an inevitable and necessary part of any given society. It can be achieved through various means. One such means is utilization of proper medium to address social evils. In contemporary India, the most appropriate medium through which the social evils can be addressed is the theatre. Hence, efforts are to be made to re-erect this prostrated medium.

Suggestions & Recommendations:

Likewise like every other medium has its own advantages, the theatre medium has its advantages too in disseminating the information among the masses, especially the rural masses. Most of the social evils being faced by the contemporary India are required to be addressed at rural areas;

and for this the best suited medium is the theatre. The following suggestions & recommendations may be considered for effectively utilizing the theatre medium in informing and educating the rural masses.

- The local bodies and government requires patronizing the artists and encouraging this medium.
- The concept of street theatre has been proven very effective. Hence, due encouragement is solicited at all levels.
- All concerned departments in universities across the country should be tasked to give performances in rural areas as part of their course curriculum.
- Under National Service Scheme (NSS) at all colleges, performances through street theatre in educating social evils to the rural masses should be encouraged and promoted.
- It is evident that a great threat has been imposed to theatre from various other media. In this prevailing situation, new innovative programs that utilize applications of both theatre and new media are to be derived. A good example for such derivative is *Panchatantra* puppetry show being telecasted on ETV channels.

Conclusion:

In India, the theatre has been used for addressing social evils, social progress and for bringing various changes in the society. Theatre for this purpose includes activist and grass-roots bodies, government and non-government organizations (NGOs), as well as socially-aware theatre groups or individuals. The groups working with Dalits, women, children, sex workers, and other marginalized populations, all qualify as practicing theatre for addressing social evils (http://www.indianetzone.com/34/theatre_development_indian_theatre.htm).

The roots of such a theatre to address social evils can be traced to the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) which came into existence on May 25, 1943 (<http://www.iptaindia.org/ipg.php?p=Kzg2KU89NzFVPFJZUDonYGAKYAo=>).

This organization sought to raise social and political awareness through theatre and other art forms. They were the first to include traditional forms and enlist folk artists, realizing that the masses already had performance idioms used for effective communication. IPTA excessively

utilised the advantages of theatres for information dissemination in a country with low literacy and high population. Especially, IPTA has been depending on the street theatre, which provides a low-cost and immediate means of reaching the illiterate in India. Whereas IPTA's focus was on rural performers, the Indian government on the other side encouraged folk artists monetarily or through other forms of patronage. The purpose was to include given social messages in their particular repertoires. The government's model of development was purely focused on education, family planning, hygiene, building of pit latrines, and other such national concerns. In the 1980s and 1990s, many NGOs, non-partisan activist societies, and grass-roots groups all over the country increasingly began to use street theatre as a means of social change.

Throughout the history of Indian theatre for addressing social evils, there has been a belief that folk forms are uniquely suited to communicate to the multitudes. In contrast to the governmental approach of providing messages for distribution, some traditional performers themselves have taken up issues relating to social evils.

So much initiative has been taken by the volunteer groups, groups patronized by the government and various associations like IPTA in addressing social evils, in India. But, it can be said with an assertion that the potentiality of theatre as a medium to diffuse information on addressing social evils has not been utilized, effectively. It should be an endeavour for all concerned stakeholders to promote this medium for effectively addressing social evils in contemporary India and also to safeguard this medium from extinction.

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