

THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT IN INDIAN CONTEXT: AN INTROSPECTION

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Abstract

This paper introspect the role of theatre in development communication. Theatre is a very effective & responsive tool for foster the growth of development procedure. It starts off by the history of theatre in international & Indian context and with the origin & nature of development communication in third world perspective. Then the paper attempt to espouse the liaison between theatre & development by using Paulo *Freire* & *Augusto Boal's* analysis. In India theatre worked as a weapon against political exploitation in British rule. After independence

Theatre remains relevant for its participative & flexible nature. This paper also focuses on Leftist ideology in theatre & anti-fascist theatrical movement. In India theatre emphasizes the themes such as agriculture, literacy campaign, social harmony, girl trafficking, child labour, gender discrimination, religious tolerance, women empowerment, prevention of HIV-AIDS, family planning, pulse polio, nutrition, environment pollution etc. Three case studies of Nazariya, Kolkata Creative Art Performer & Ashokenagar Natyamukh give a detailed account on how theatre disseminates developmental idea in different parts of India. This paper concludes that theatre plays an effective & crucial role in conflict resolution, cultural identification, community development, social control, social protest, spreading mass awareness in different social issues to the grass root people.

Keywords: Development communication, Theatre for development (TFD), Traditional media, Third world countries, Participatory Communication, Street theatre.

Introduction

Theatre has its root from the ancient time of human communication. From the childhood days of theatre it caters pre-literate community member's information, education, entertainment, socialization & also creates the platform of debate & discussion. The terminology Development refers "improving the living condition of society". In every corner of the developing world theatre is approved as an effectual element for social change as well as behavioral change. From the period of early 1940's western researchers used to believe that the mass media could enhance the growth of development process more effectively. In fact, the traditional media or the folk media were eschewed in the literature of development literature. But from the 1970's a new concept in development communication arena started to flourish. This new approach focused on participatory communication consisting of interpersonal & group communication. Then the necessity of traditional media for communication purpose in a complex social system was realized by the researchers because traditional media have a deep rooted entity in every culture. Marginalized people of grass root level are also very much familiar with the various forms of folk song, dance, and drama. So it was thought that diffusing message on development through folk media it would be more approachable to the rural people who were the real target of the development communication and it would encourage them to participate in the communication process & ensure the two way process in communication. Theatre – the traditional performing art is also changing, improvising & modifying itself to the needs of the changing situation & become relevant in society. Over the decades theatre emphasizes the themes related with the agriculture, literacy campaign, social harmony, peace building, national integration, girl trafficking, child labour, child abusing, gender discrimination, religious tolerance, women empowerment, right of sex-worker, prevention of HIV-AIDS, family planning, pulse polio, nutrition, environment pollution etc.

Overview of theatre

The passion to express, to communicate & to share the ideas-opinions-emotions-believes gave inception to performing art. Performing art has an enormous artistic value. Theatre is a major functional & spontaneous expression of performing art. Primitive men adorned their caves with wall painting, artifacts, and hieroglyphics to transmit their experience from one generation to another. Theatre emerged from age-old myth, ceremony & ritualistic activities of a culture. It has

its root in ancient Greece between the 550 BC-220 BC. The Indian theatre has also a long historical value. After the development of Greek & Roman theatre India among the other Asian countries first stepped into the “era of theatre”. According to *Shakespeare* “*theatre is a mirror of highlighting man’s humanity and also a tool for understanding why man also finds it so easy to transgress that same humanity.*” It is considered as a reflector of culture specific social humanity. The transition of society and culture over the thousands of years ushered theatre with an intrinsic quality of flexibility & openness. Community theatre (CT), theatre for integrated rural development (THIRD), street theatre (ST), guerilla theatre (GT), prison theatre for development (PTFD), campaign theatre, protest theatre, oppositional theatre are the new avenue with new conception transpire in the world of theatre.

Development Communication: Third world perspective

World War II (1939-1945) reciprocated the political calibration & social structure of the entire globe. After the world war II most of third world countries emancipated from colonial imperialism. The emergence of United Nations (UN) commences the conventional beginning of development to less developed countries (LDC). “Mother of Development Communication” *Nora Cruz Quebral* in the year of 1972 first coined the term Development Communication. She defined development communication as “..... *The art and science of human communication linked to a society’s planned transformation from a state of poverty to one dynamic socio-economic growth that makes for greater equality and the larger unfolding of individual potentials.*” According to the modernization paradigm in the decades of 50’s and 60’s mass media was considered as a prime mover in developmental process. Scholars like Wilbur Schramm, Daniel Lerner, Everett Rogers, Pye, Lakshmana Rao et al assumed that mass media had inherent element to infiltrate into isolated traditional society and reconstitute social norms, values, attitudes of the society. But in many third world countries monological channels of mass media failed to materialize the goal of sustainable development. Scholars in Latin America have pointed out genuine problems with the top-to-bottom conception of westernized modernization approach. By the mid 1970’s the alternative ideas of dominant paradigm put under the spotlight. Notion of Development support communication, participatory communication became visible in the ground of third world development. Traditional media came into forefront to promote developmental issues to grass root people more effectively than big media industry. A new trend

in non-formal method of education (NFE) had drawn the attention of communication research scholars.

The correlation between theatre & development: Critical Analysis

When electronic media failed to left strong emphasis on the people of less developed countries (LDC) the re-emergence of traditional culture became necessitated. By 1970's theatre began to work as a viable tool for popularization of education with adults and children in sub-Saharan Africa, Indian subcontinent and Latin America. The author of *History and Theatre in Africa* Eckhard Breitinger opines:

“The rise of Theatre for Development also marked a change in international relations. It was both the symptom and the result of the failures of 20 years of development policies that had insisted on the implantation of the materialist and technological culture of the North as the only possible road to the development, irrespective of the cultural and social environment.”

Srinivas R. Melkote & H. Leslie Steeves in their book *Communication for Development in the Third World: Theory and Practice for Empowerment* observed Brazilian educator & philosopher *Paulo Freire* probably the most influential scholar to apply liberation theology in education & communication in development substance. In his notable book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Paulo Freire argues that development communication should be exercised as a dialogic process between communicator & communicate. Influenced by the Freire's academically influential work *Augusto Boal* developed the idea of *theatre of oppressed* (TO). Augusto Boal conducted experimentation in august, 1973 in the cities Lima & Chiclayo on the people's theatre in Peru. His objective was liberation of the viewer by theatrical performances. He used a strategy for transforming a viewer into an active participator. The four stages were

- i. Knowing the body
- ii. Making the body expressive
- iii. The theatre as language
- iv. The theatre as discourse

A new term 'applied theatre' expanded throughout the world for spreading developmental ideas to marginalized people. Generally theatre communicates with its viewer at interpersonal level & small group level of communication. Because of physical proximity, emotion, trust worthiness message content became more relevant to the viewer. Direct communication with live reality makes receiver active in communication process. Participation of local people, the use of local languages and dialects & addressing local problems increase the acceptability of theatre. Viewer feels cultural affinity with the self development mode of the medium. As a result they spontaneously involves with the process of communication. Dialogical theatre initiates active participation of receiver. Theatre is a very low cost medium. But it enjoys a very high popularity with powerful impact in many developing and underdeveloped nations. Developmental issues presented in a form of edutainment gives a new insight to the community members & enhance the possibility of discussion. Theatre has become part & parcel to compress the communication gap between different social classes in the unequal power relationship of complex social organization.

Theatre for development: Indian experience

The earliest form of Indian theatre was Sanskrit theatre which was strongly influenced by Roman & Greek theatre. It has its root in Vedic literature around 1000AD. Theatre based on *Natya Shastra* was sophisticated in nature. Popular theatre in different regional languages was also co-existed in Indian society. During the British rule Indian theatre came into direct contact with western theatre which was based on realism. In twenties two point of view emerged on Indian theatre. One was commercial professional theatre & other was 'non-professional' or 'new' or 'other' theatre. *Sisirkumar Bhaduri* first tried to admixture these two contradictory concepts. In the same time a new genre in Bengali literature based on realism started to evolve. A group of young enthusiast like *Kaji Najrul Islam, Budhadeb Basu, Achintyakumar Sengupta & Premendra Mitra* etc. formed *Kallol* group & they recognized Bhaduri's theatre as a model for the modern Indian theatre. The decade of 1940's witnessed a great political upsurge. The terror of World War II, rise of fascism & of course Bengal famine (1943) which led two million people died of starvation, malnutrition gave genesis of an influential theatrical movement - Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The leftist intellectual all over the nation such as *Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Mulk Raj Anand, Sardar Jaferry, Rajinder Shingh Bedi, Prithviraj Kapoor, Balraj*

Sahani, Habib Tanvir, Utpal Dutta, Shambhu Mitra, Tripti Mitra, Bijan Bhattacharya, Salil Chowdhury, Ritwik Ghatak, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Jyotirindra Moitra, Debabrata Biswas, Hemanga Biswas, Chetan Anand, Dina Gandhi, Shaukat Kaifi, Krishan Chander etc. formed a strong cultural organization to spread the protest against the fascism & political violence. A Bengali drama *Nabanna* based on Bengal famine written by *Bijan Bhattacharya* and directed by *Shambhu Mitra* and later by *Kumar Roy* was a big step towards the democratization of theatre. Indian theatre with its ideological perspective adopted folk form to create social consciousness among the rural and urban people. After the post-independence era Govt. of India promoted theatre for developmental activities. The first prime minister of free India *Jawaharlal Nehru* remarked

“I am greatly interested in the development of a people’s theatre in India..... ”

From the 1940’s street theatre played an anti-fascist role by the communist parties. Street theatre also became a part & parcel of Indian freedom movement. In a free India street theatre evolved as a weapon against social-political-economic exploitation. Theatre activist Utpal Dutta sharply used street theatre for political awareness. During the internal emergency (26th June 1975- 21st March 1976) street theatre upsurge its protest against the state-sponsored terror. Many street theatre activists were attacked, arrested and even murdered. In the time of performing a street play *Halla Bol* a great street theatre activist *Safdar Hashmi* ferociously killed in Ghaziabad.

In the contemporary era of globalization neo-liberal economy created ‘global village’ which changes the worldwide complex social relationship. Cultural imperialism caused detrimental for diverse indigenous regional culture of third world countries and forms a dominant culture which transfused entire the globe by powerful courtiers. But theatre remains relevant in the social context till today. Theatre persists as a major tool for empowerment of the grass root people of India. Many theatre groups in every part of India work to give voice to the voiceless. The land of vast geographical & cultural diversity with 1.27 billion populations’ only mass media is not capable to achieve the highest trust. Regional culture especially folk theatre form for its face to face persuasive nature can make sure the participation of marginalized people in developmental process.

Case Study 1:Nazariya

Nazariya in Gujarat, believe that theater is an alternative conflict resolution mechanism. It is the medium, which is known for its immense power to create question, debate and discussion among audience and the impact lasts more than the production time.

Nazariya uses Theater in different forms in schools, colleges and with young people to create a culture of gender equality, communal tolerance and religious expression for social change in the city. They have experiment various forms of theater; among them most successful was 'Forum Theater', which gives the audience much more than just being a spectator. It initiates actual dialogue and helps in drawing solutions from the audience themselves.

Issue: Gender Discrimination

Operational area of Nazariya is Ahmedabad, mostly in the old part of the city (economically downtrodden). In various spaces, like Gomitpur, Behrampura, Juhapura etc, they organized Forum Theater. The issue was 'Gender Discrimination', in this form of theater; the play stops in a crucial moment and asks audience, 'have you been there, what would have your reaction?' People from the audience come to the stage and enacts tentative solutions on behalf of the community.

They have experimented Participatory mapping along with Forum Theater in colleges and communities on the issue of Gender Violence.

Nazariya experiments the approaches of participatory mapping in F.D Girls College, where the students came up with a map where they identified areas, which according to them are harassment prone areas near their college. At first all the students were divided into groups according to the areas they come from, like: Juhapura, Jamalpur, Vatva, Saraspur, gomtipur, danilimda, Behrampura, Raikhad, Rakhiyal and Bombay Hotel etc. It was a participatory process where each of the group members discussed and came up with a map collectively. The whole idea of this mapping was to identify the types of harassment they face during they travel, the reason behind such behavior and thus identify the areas. After identifying the harassment prone zone, they spoke about the common types of harassment they face, day in and day out, identified the trend the general age group of the perpetrators and why they do this.

This mapping activity was followed by a forum theatre, where volunteers of Nazariya from college and community enacted a play where they depicted three situations of harassment (more or less similar what the student have said earlier) where each situation demanded 3 suggestions from the audience/Students. In each situation girls came up with multiple solutions and enacted the whole situation in front of others. From that point their next session was initiated, where they themselves developed their plan of action to stop such ill practices in their moholla and how could they become more vocal about this problem.

Same activity took place in one of their Community intervention area: Juhapura. It is considered as the largest Muslim ghetto in Asia. The political situation of juhapura is volatile than in comparison to the other areas of A' bad. We work on some of the IDP (Internally Displaced People, after 2002 Riot) Colonies of Juhapura where the issues of Gender discrimination and religious tolerance are more prominent.

Issue: Religious Tolerance

- Another designing form was organizing rally with Forum Theater. They organized several forum theaters in various location of A' bad, after ethnic clash broke in North east. On the last day of theater they organized a rally after the event.
- They have organized Peace rally, where religious leaders actually spoke about the problem on the sphere of religious tolerance.

Case Study 2: Kolkata Creative Art Performer

Kolkata Creative Art Performer in West Bengal started their journey in 2000. A group of young student of this group assumes that theatre can change life. Safdar Hashmi once said “if we can't take big theatre to the people, we can take small theatre to them”. According to this philosophy they continue their venture of street theatre by using Badal Sircar's 'third theatre' form.

Issue: Health Communication

Pulse Polio is an immunization program by Govt. of India for 0 to 5 year old children to eradicate polio & to make polio free India. During the initial years in many parts of Bengal

parents did not agree to take Pulse Polio. Murshidabad is one of a district where this problem was very high. 70% of total populations were Muslim. Generation by generation they worked in bidi industry. 80% of populations were rigid that their children did not take this immunization due to lack of awareness. With the help of UNICEF Kolkata Creative Art Performer started campaigning for Pulse Polio. They performed street theatre in Suti I, Suti II, Samsherganj & other blocks of Murshidabad. The impact was huge. Their performance gained highest level of mass acceptance & the situation changed dramatically. After the performances the percentage of rigid population became 2-3% from 80%.

These groups also effectively use street theatre for instigate awareness against the disease like Leprosy, Tuberculosis, Malaria, HIV AIDS etc. In every district of West Bengal they perform theatre for the prevention of HIV AIDS & create awareness of birth control, family planning. In 3 months they performed 914 shows in 36 districts of Bihar to disseminate the ideas of family planning by using participatory approaches.

Issue: Women trafficking

A recent survey shows that Girl & Women trafficking shape a major complication in Indian society. In West Bengal the majority of the victim of this illegal exploitation from the women of the district of South 24 parganas, North 24 parganas & Murshidabad. Kolkata Creative Art Performer organized street theatre in different areas of Sandeshkhali, Laksmikantapur, Sundarban & also in the districts of Howrah, East Midnapore etc.

Issue: Alcohol & Drug Addiction

Rangabelia is a village of Gosaba block which situated in Sundarban. The business of illegal liquor locally known as cholai is a common problem in South 24 parganas. In this village Kolkata Creative Art Performer organized theatre on prevention of drug addiction & alcoholism. After watching this theatre local people took initiative to organize & perform theatre on this issue in many villages of Sundarban. This participatory approach made a silent revolution. Village people of Rangabelia with the help of local police destroyed the illegal shops of Rangabelia.

Issue: Sex worker's right & Health

Kolkata Creative Art Performer worked with Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee which is a strong organization of women's right, sex-worker's right, anti human trafficking, HIV/AIDS prevention. On behalf of this organization Kolkata Creative Art Performer highlighted these issues by using theatre effectively.

Issue: child labour

In the Dhapa Dumping Ground of Kolkata the wastes of city are dumped. Children of this 450 acres area collect scraps of plastic, metal from the mountain of garbage and sell them. It is their only way of earning. Kolkata Creative Art Performer used theatre to give slum children of this area non-formal education on their right, child labour, hygiene etc.

Case Study 3: Ashokenagar Natyamukh

Ashokenagar Natyamukh used theatre in a different & alternative way. Their experiment on how theatre will be effective in modern educational system usher a new era. They applied theatre in formal education in a form of theatre therapy.

Issue: Pressure of students

Ashokenagar Natyamukh adapted theatre as a weapon against illiteracy, drop out. They devoted theatre for development of effective educational system. They performed in schools & colleges based on the topic of curriculum. By using this experimental technique they are able to eradicate the pressure of vast curriculum. In today's rat race student feels mounting pressure. Depression, suicidal activities rise among school & college students. Ashokenagar Natyamukh reinforced theatre in Ashokenagar Boys Secondary School, Jawhar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Haripal GD institution, Nahata Jogendranath Mondal Smriti Mahavidyalaya, Gurudas College, Gour Mahavidyalaya, Kaliachak College, and Agrasen Mahavidyalaya. Their effort enhanced understandability & clarity of this topic. It induced student's interest about curriculum. Students achieved education, information in form of entertainment without any stress which is very significant for student's mental health.

Issue: Unprotected children

Unprotected children throughout Kolkata face much exploitation. With the help of Humanity Association Ashokenagar Natyamukh executed theatrical performance for street children & children of sex workers. They promoted literacy campaign by using theatre in Sonagachi, Bagmari, Ultodanga, Koley market & in many different areas in Kolkata. Their aim was to focus their problems & social right. Their participatory approach evoked a great upsurge among the unprotected children.

Conclusion

Theatre is a mechanism of social analysis which can make deep impression among the audience. The principle of participatory communicational nature of theatre is very much impressive. The need-based approaches of theatre in India empower the marginalized people of grass root level. When mass media of India closely attached with commercialization the years long traditional media still work for micro-agenda. Theatrical form of communication enriches individual's development as well as community development which is significant for overpopulated country like India. Conventional theatre along with new experimentation enhances the growth of development process in India. Multiple theatre groups throughout the country deal with different issues. Plurality of expression in theatre strengthens the democratic base of India.

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