

Driving Social Change Through Forum Theatre: A Study of Jana Sanskriti in West Bengal, India

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Abstract

This article examines Forum Theatre as a form of participatory communication for social change. Based on an ethnographic study of Jana Sanskriti (JS), a Forum Theatre group working for over three decades in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, this article seeks to show how this form of theatre, developed by the Brazilian activist Augusto Boal, subverts the passivity inherent in the communicator–receiver model of the dominant paradigm by activating the critical consciousness of the spectator and triggering a process of social change through dialogue and discussion. JS has been using Forum Theatre to address some of the deeply entrenched social norms in rural West Bengal, including those related to patriarchy, child marriage, domestic violence, and maternal and child health related issues, by extending Boal’s notion of the ‘spect-actor’ to encourage the spectators to become ‘spect-activists’, who then are engaged in community-level work on social change. We suggest that this form of communication is clearly bottom-up, radically participatory, community-based and led by the oppressed, as has been advocated by several scholars working on communication for social change.

Keywords

Communication for social change, participatory communication, forum theatre, theatre of the oppressed, social norms

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Introduction

Participatory communication for social change is now a well-established framework in the field of study that used to be called development communication, with all its historically problematic connotations. It has been over two decades since Joseph Ascroft, along with White and Nair, published their landmark volume (1994). The contributors to that volume offered us possible ways of theorizing a field characterized by a set of concepts only then emerging, such as ‘participation’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘knowledge’ that sought to interrogate the modernization paradigm as well as an approach to communication that was preoccupied with information dissemination for directed social change.

Ascroft, among others, drew our attention to the multiple interpretations of such seductive concepts, which, while being politically potent, were malleable and contestable. It has been pointed out by many scholars that ‘participation’ cannot be seen as an either/or concept and that it is best understood as a continuum; that true participation is elusive as it is often reduced to consultation and co-optation, bordering on manipulation of people for achieving the goals set by the change agent or development communicator. Similarly, these perspectives questioned the hegemony of media-centric approaches to development communication, underlining the importance of interpersonal communication and other modes that are more direct and unmediated by technology.

Inspired by Freire (1970), there has been pioneering work in Latin America as early as the 1970s around ideas of revolution and liberation, anti-colonial struggles, and people’s movements. They emphasized communication processes that do not seek to further colonize the marginalized, but help incite their critical faculties and enable them to become fully aware of their conditions of existence and collectively seek ways out of those conditions. Boal’s (1979) work was one such communication form that was informed by Freire’s liberation pedagogy. Eschewing the one-way propaganda theatre of the left as well as the more conventional proscenium of traditional theatre, Boal developed a participatory form, also called Forum Theatre, that broke down the performer–spectator dichotomy and transformed the performing space into a ‘rehearsal for the revolution’.

Fair and meaningful dialogue can happen only when both the parties are positioned at the same level—to speak, to enquire, to interrogate and to be heard. Forum Theatre enables the marginalized, silenced and forgotten people to speak up for themselves. It is based on the principles of non-violence and equity, where the oppressed ones need not become oppressors themselves in the pursuit of freedom (Freire, 1970, p. 48). It empowers and equips the oppressed people to engage in a dialogue with the oppressors. Through its liberatory techniques, people are awakened to analyze their needs and gaps, and critically assess the socio-political interventions directed at them. They cease to be passive receivers of ‘development’ and become empowered to drive their own social change.

This article examines the power and potential of Forum Theatre as a tool of participatory communication for social change in rural India, in the eastern state of West Bengal, where it has been used intensively for three decades by Jana Sanskriti (JS), an activist theatre group. Deploying Forum Theatre across villages

in the Sundarbans area of West Bengal, JS has been challenging entrenched social norms and encouraging the poor and the marginalized to act individually and collectively to bring about changes in their lives.

Forum Theatre and Social Change

There is at least five decades of history of using theatre for development and social change by the activists and the state. Theatre as a propaganda tool in contemporary statist development practice for promoting such things as immunization or sanitation has been well documented. Most such uses of theatre tend to be interventionist, in the sense of downward dissemination of messages for bringing about attitude and behaviour change among the poor and the marginalized. However, a critique of the dominant paradigm of communication for development has led to the emergence of more participatory theatre forms that are embedded in the empowerment paradigm (Flynn & Tinius, 2015). One such example is Badal Sircar's theatre work, often referred to as the 'theatre of conscience', broke theatre conventions and promoted a Third Theatre with firmly embedded social critique (Katyal, 2015).

Forum Theatre is a unique form of theatre that is categorized under the broad genre of 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. Developed by Augusto Boal during the mid-twentieth century, today Theatre of the Oppressed is practised worldwide. It has a range of techniques, like Invisible Theatre, Rainbow of Desire, Forum Theatre and Newspaper Theatre. All these theatre forms have a basic principle in common, which is to address 'oppression'. Freire defines oppression as a 'dehumanizing act', 'a distortion of the vocation of becoming fully human' (Freire, 1970, p. 44). The Theatre of the Oppressed aims to support the oppressed to be liberated from oppression by inducing in them critical thinking about their own situation, and also to give them an opportunity and platform to voice out their opinion and rehearse their choices in response to the oppressive conditions under which they are currently living. It is different from propaganda theatre, in that, it does not offer or advocate solutions to their problems, but enables them to work out solutions through collective reflection or at least resists the oppression. Traditional theatre forms, Boal (1979) says, are oppressive because they are not dialogical in nature and try to impose ready-made solutions. They are the forms of one-way communication, which tell the audience what to do and direct their choices, suppressing their potential for 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess, 2007) and ruling out plurality of perspectives and opinions.

During the 1950s and 1960s, under Portuguese colonialism in Brazil, Boal and his Arena Theatre team were still experimenting, learning and improvising, providing citizens a mode of escape and cultural liberation through alternative forms of theatre. In the early 1970s, the Arena Theatre team dispersed, while Boal continued to develop and improvise various theatre forms, even during the time of his exile in Argentina, with the passion to address oppression through art. As he learnt from his experiments, he identified various oppressive elements in his own theatre forms and rectified them. Today, Theatre of the Oppressed has taken on

multiple local adaptations in different national and societal contexts. Forum Theatre is one such method used all over the world for social and political activism, for resolution of individual and group struggles, community building, therapy and treatment, and in the making of government legislations. In its purest form, Forum Theatre is composed of the real oppressed people as actors. The oppressed ones co-create Forum Theatre plays drawing from their own real-life experiences. The plays are designed through a set of workshops, consisting of various games and other interactive techniques, which also function as an empowering and liberating phase for the actors themselves, who come together to make and perform plays to drive social change in their own communities.

An important characteristic of Forum Theatre, when used as a social change tool, is that it does not suggest solutions to the prevailing problems, but re-enacts the existing reality. It primarily aims to trigger critical thinking and everything else is a by-product of that process. So, Forum Theatre tries to simply replay the situation of oppression prevailing in a community, and inspires the stakeholders witnessing the 'replay' to think of their own situation, reflect on their own opinions/attitudes towards the issue and imagine their own solutions for the problem being enacted in front of them. A 'Joker' in Forum Theatre plays the role of a facilitator, breaking the hierarchy between actors and the audience and guiding the discussions and debates, that is, the 'Forum', on the issue that is being played out. It is a role that is usually played by an experienced member of the team, who is also responsible for creating a comfortable environment for the spectators to interact with the actors freely and encouraging them to act out their own script. According to Boal, the most important role of the Joker is that he/she 'incites the audience in accordance with the theme dealt with in each play' (Boal, 1979, p. 164). In the Forum Theatre when a particular situation of oppression is being played out, it is abruptly paused at a certain point with no happy ending. The 'Joker' then intervenes, and encourages the spectators to critically analyze the situation, and also to re-script and re-enact the play by assuming the role of any character in the play and posit his or her opinion or argument, as a response or as a possible solution to a certain oppressive situation. Sanjoy Ganguly refers to this process as one in which the actors and spectators together 'script the play' rather than 'play the script' (interview with Robyn Kirkby in Ganguly, 2017). In that way, it is a highly democratic space and a communication process that is radically participatory in nature.

When the spectators come forward to play their own script, they become 'spect-actors' (Boal, 1979) or 'spect-activists' (Sanjoy Ganguly, personal interview, 2018), who are identified and documented by the theatre team for any focussed community intervention in the future, or, simply, to expand the community of practice of Forum Theatre. This intervention by the Joker breaks the passivity of the audience not only during the play, but also in their real lives. The oppressor and the oppressed are made to think about and question their own state of oppression, thus becoming 'conscientized' in Freire's (1970) terms. The loop of the narrative is kept intentionally incomplete and open, to provide space for different narrative possibilities from the spectators' side. This technique aims to awaken them, first, to reflect on and realize their own state, and then also to be able to identify their own potential for leadership and the intellectual capacity to be able to change or redirect the current

state of their life. Forum Theatre, therefore, manages to mobilize and carve out some space and time in the day-to-day life of the community and erects an important platform for them to come together to introspect, question, and to formulate strategies to challenge oppressive systems and structures. Thus, Forum Theatre creates an opportunity for the oppressed to 'rehearse for a revolution' (Boal, 1979, p. 120). This conscientization process can have a long-lasting effect, and can translate into individual or collective actions, like overcoming even deeply entrenched oppressive social norms.

In this article, we examine how JS, a Forum Theatre group operating in the state of West Bengal in eastern India, is using the form to challenge age-old social norms prevailing in rural Bengal, like patriarchy, child marriage and gender discrimination in educating children.

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative participatory evaluation, conducted by the authors in February 2018, of a funded project implemented by JS addressing some critical gender issues through Forum Theatre.¹ During their preparatory engagement with the local community, they had identified a few key issues like early marriage of the girl child, school dropouts and child trafficking prevalent in the project area. They had carried out the project in the Patharpratima Block of South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The district encompasses the Gangetic delta, and because of its geographical peculiarities, communication and transportation infrastructure are relatively underdeveloped. The South 24 Parganas has a population of about eight million, with Muslims constituting more than a third of the demography and a similar proportion of the population is made up of lower caste Dalits (called Scheduled Castes in the Indian Constitution). It has a sex ratio of 956, about the level of the state average, and a female literacy rate of 71 per cent.² More than a third of the households in the district are listed as being below the poverty line (BPL), with an occupational structure dominated by those working in the unorganized sector as agricultural labour and migrant workers.³ Development indicators in the Patharpratima Block suggest that the poverty ratio is over 40 per cent, with less than 1 per cent of the households having access to electricity, and a female literacy rate of under 40 per cent (Government of West Bengal, 2009).

In the district, JS has been working mostly in the Patharpratima, Kulpi and Kakadweep blocks in more than 100 villages across 11 gram panchayats (GPs). We carried out the evaluation at the end of one year of project implementation.

The broad objectives of our study were to: understand the methodology and process of Forum Theatre; gather information about the contributions of JS in addressing issues of social change and to assess their contributions in bringing about changes at the individual, community and institutional levels, especially with reference to the issue of the girl child.

After a background study through secondary sources, we had extensive discussions with the staff of JS, which helped us to identify key informants for interviews, sample important sites and events for observations, and choose critical

groups for conducting focus group discussions. We then carried out a 5-day ethnographic visit in the Patharpratima Block of South 24 Parganas district, the locus of the project.

We conducted in-depth interviews with the founder of JS, Sanjoy Ganguly and with local elected representatives, including the president of the block and the *pradhan*⁴ of Digambarpur GP.⁵ We organized focus group discussions with: adolescent girls from three different villages; JS supervisors representing the seven GPs in which the project was being implemented and with six theatre teams of JS. The number of people reached through this process was about 75, of whom nearly 90 per cent were women.

Finally, we did participant observation of Forum Theatre performances of JS at different locations—one in Baddimod village under Dakshin Raypur GP and another in a school in Ramganga GP—followed by a stakeholders meeting held in Sri Narayanpur–Purnachandrapur GP that was attended by about 30 women frontline workers and 10 others representing the local government. We also observed a meeting of the Responsible Citizens' Committee (RCC)⁶ in Gangadharpur GP that was attended by about 20 women leaders and members. After witnessing the meeting, we also conducted a focus group discussion with these women.

In a nutshell, our research may be seen as a participatory evaluation, one in which an assessment of a programme or policy is conducted in consultation with the key stakeholders. This approach, we believe, helps in identifying locally relevant evaluation questions, explaining the processes underlying an initiative, and contribute to organizational learning and growth. While in ideal terms participatory evaluation calls for longer duration immersion in the field setting, time constraints on our research meant that it ended up being more of a rapid participatory assessment.

Jana Sanskriti's Forum Theatre: Breaking the Silence

The founder of JS, Dr Sanjoy Ganguly, was a politically active young man in the state of West Bengal in the early 1980s, when he, like other urban youth, disenchanted with the anti-democratic functioning of the ruling Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), distanced himself from the party and sought alternative ways of working for and representing the aspirations of the working class and marginalized people in the state. Identifying the key issues, Ganguly and others moved into the villages, where they witnessed the power of folk culture and involved themselves in its practice. Living with the community and developing a well-grounded approach, they founded JS as a theatre group in 1985, with Sanjoy Ganguly as the founding director. Launched more in the mould of a mass social movement (Boal, 2010, p. 145), over the years the JS evolved, on the one hand, in terms of its experiments with Forum Theatre, and on the other, as a non-governmental organization committed to participatory social change.

Initially, their plays tended to be propagandist and consisted of some unintended oppressive elements in the way their plays were talking down to the audience. Eventually, through personal contacts and interaction with Augusto Boal himself

and also informed by his own learnings from the past experiences, Ganguly led the group's theatre practice more firmly into Forum Theatre (Sanjoy Ganguly, Interview, 2018). As a group oriented to bringing about social change at the community level, JS gradually expanded its scope to engage with the spectators offstage after the play. In Ganguly's rendition of Forum Theatre, the 'spect-actors' of Boal were constructed as 'spect-activists', who then carry forward the ideas and discussions triggered during the play and spark off some concrete development or emancipatory actions in the rural communities of which they are a part.

JS has been actively mobilizing the rural poor to tackle problems like alcoholism (leading to an escalated mass movement), and to demand assured rural employment to address seasonal out-migration, and for provision of quality education and health services. At the centre of this mobilizational activity is, of course, the Forum Theatre plays, which highlight the oppressive norms prevailing in the community and build a debate around them (Ganguly, 2009). Breaking the silence over these norms, the theatre team takes up the taken-for-granted oppressions and displays them for the community to enable critical reflection to ponder over alternative actions (Boal, 2010, p. 151).

The main characteristic, then, of the social change approach practised by JS through Forum Theatre is the expressive enactment of the oppression, incitement to critical thinking and laying the pathway for actual emancipation (Boal, 2010, p. 151). It is executed through facilitation of reflection and realization of the oppression that they are confronting, designing the expression, decision-making and taking political action—all by the community itself, as individuals or collectives. It is these features that indeed make it a theatre 'of the oppressed' and not 'for the oppressed.' The communication approach is clearly bottom-up, radically participatory, community based and led by the oppressed, as has been advocated by perceptive scholars working on communication for social change (Dutta, 2011; Thomas & Van de Fliert, 2015; Tufte, 2017).

JS has more than 30 theatre teams, one of the largest Forum Theatre collectives in India. These teams are spread across the country—in West Bengal (mostly in the districts of South 24 Parganas and Purulia), two in Tripura, two in Jharkhand, one each in New Delhi and Orissa. These teams reach out to at least 200,000 spectators every year. Nine teams in West Bengal are entirely composed of women. They are all independent local teams consisting of 'actors' who emerged from the spect-actors-turned-spect-activists during the previous plays. These local teams, however, are centrally connected to the core JS team at Badu, headquarters of JS, near Kolkata, which provides logistical and training support and coordinates various campaigns.

Forum Theatre Challenging Social Norms in Bengal

As mentioned earlier, JS has been able to challenge existing social norms in rural West Bengal around issues, such as domestic violence, alcoholism, status of the girl child and dowry. In a study conducted in the villages of two districts in West Bengal, Jalan (2016) examined the effectiveness of JS's work in women's

empowerment, addressing some social norms underlying patriarchy and domestic violence against women. The study found that JS has not only been able to give voice to the oppressed women, but has also been able to change the mindset of the men towards gender equality. It was able to make people aware of the existing laws that protect women against violence.

In our own participatory evaluation, we found that at a microlevel, there is a perception that attitudes and behaviour towards the girl child in the villages have visibly changed. During our focus group discussion with about 10 adolescent girls at Muktamancha, Digambarpur, many of them asserted that there is much reduced discrimination against girls ever since JS started spreading awareness and motivating people to refrain from performing child marriages. Priya Mondal, who is currently studying for her final year undergraduate degree and actively involved in JS, thinks that her own example demonstrates the shift in attitudes in the community:

The most significant change I can see is that boys and girls are increasingly being treated as equal. People's attitudes have changed, with many villagers stopping the practice of child marriage and encouraging girls to not only go to school, but also get involved in activities like sports and theatre, which were taboo earlier. Now girls are allowed to make a choice, to make their decisions. Discrimination has certainly reduced. (Adolescent Girls FGD, Digambarpur)

Other girls in the discussion claimed that a greater number of their peers are now getting married late, without their parents getting taunted for it by the neighbours. Another indication of changing social norms could be sensed from an incident narrated by one of the theatre team members. At the end of a play that they performed in a village, one couple approached them and told that they had refused to pay dowry for their daughter's marriage. The groom's family had walked out in a huff, but returned later agreeing to their terms.

That some of the girls came to our meeting after taking part in a football match nearby itself seems to stand testimony to the change that is being alluded here. Seventeen-year-old Tahera Khatoon, one of these football players, spoke about how she had initially faced resistance at home to her playing, but gradually as her academic performance improved alongside her sporting achievements, her parents had yielded. Of course, that this change is neither evenly spread nor is it transformative became obvious when we heard the story of Nibedita Jana, a class 10 student, who broke into tears sharing how her aunt and uncle (with whom she stays) went along with her tuition master to prevent her from participation in JS activities as it disrupts her studies.

It is also important to note the personal transformations that individuals associated with the JS work have themselves undergone in the process of bringing about social change. Women members of the theatre teams of JS shared with us their own stories of empowerment. One woman, who suffered domestic violence and torture at the hands of her in-laws, says:

We have thrown out our veils. I used to be a shy woman, but after joining JS I have become confident. I was abandoned by my husband, but I struggled hard to have my financial independence. I am now invited by the government to stage plays and be on

committees. Earlier, people used to taunt me about taking part in plays and attending meetings, but now I travel by trains, and organize rallies and processions. (Theatre Teams FGD, Digambarpur)

To our question on how they manage to overcome patriarchal family attitudes and get involved in activism, one of the women at our meeting in Gangadharpur GP said that they are able to convince their families that they are working for a good cause. She also said that she always 'takes permission' from her husband to go out for meetings and performances. Through this, it was also apparent that positive changes in gender relations are not always an outcome of radical and revolutionary acts, but a product of, often invisible and slow, processes of complex negotiations by women to earn their independence and freedom and to be able to participate in the public sphere.

Another woman, Aloka Bera started small in JS, but now grew into playing supervisory roles and writes poetry, the recitations of which have earned her well-deserved reputation. Yet another woman, Niroda Jana shared her experience working for JS:

In other organisations, people may require skills to enter, but in JS many of us entered without any skills. We picked up the skills and JS helped us grow. Earlier we used to be confined to home, but now we are in all kinds of social spaces and speak up without fear. (Personal interview)

At a macro-level, even the government officials acknowledge the work of JS. For example, the president of the Patharpratima Block, Mohd. Abdur Rezzak claimed that the incidence of child marriage in the Block has come down from about 40 per cent to about 10 per cent due to the contribution of JS.

Forum Theatre in Action: 'Rehearsing for the Revolution'

The communication for social change that takes place through the Forum Theatre plays of JS can be understood not only in terms of the inherent structure and dynamics of the specific theatre genre, but also from the vantage point of social norms. It is fascinating to observe how norm change is triggered off at the very site of the play as it unravels into a forum for debate and discussion among the members of the community.

Our research team had the opportunity to witness a few plays of JS during our fieldwork. The plays we watched were related to the issue of child marriage and child trafficking. These plays were part of the project mentioned earlier that was under evaluation. One play, which we describe and analyze below, was performed in a village called Baddimod, in Dakshin Raypur GP of South 24 Parganas district, where child trafficking was reportedly on the rise. It is a predominantly Muslim village, where JS was performing for the first time.

By the time we reached the village one early evening, there was a buzz of excitement with a few people gathered in a small clearing of 40' × 40' space. There were children, young women, boys, girls and parents with babies in their

arms. Initially, most of the audience were women, with the men joining in slowly. There was a sound system erected on a 'motor machine' and two loudspeakers booming out to the village. They were about to start when there was a call for the evening *Azaan* (Muslim prayers) and the women performers waited for it to be completed before they started. They set up simple props, with two live musicians accompanying. One person in the team was ready with a notebook and pen to note down any interventions from audiences that might happen later.

A team member announced the topic of the play—child trafficking—and the significance of the play to the community. There were a few songs, including what was apparently the JS anthem, and a stick dance (Indian folk dance) before the main feature started. Children sat in the first two rows, followed by adolescent women and mothers. Men formed the last layer of audience. We noticed that several very young mothers were carrying at least one child in their arms. The play was performed by the Ramnagarabad Theatre team, one of the local Forum Theatre teams of JS. All the performers, except for the 'Joker', were women. Women also played the roles of men in the play.

The protagonist of the play was a young girl, daughter of an alcoholic rickshaw puller and a mother who works in people's homes as a maid. The drunk father wastes away all his income in drinking. The family is struggling to send the girl to school and barely able to afford her books and other essentials. Two unscrupulous traffickers from a neighbouring state tempt one of the women in the village with a job offer for her son and in exchange ask her to find a young woman for a 'suitable job' in their state. The woman then goes to the rickshaw puller's wife and, taking advantage of the family's poverty, she and the two traffickers persuade her to send her young daughter for 'work' outside the state. The girl ends up in a brothel with a 'madam' who seems to be getting a regular supply of sex workers through trafficking. At this juncture, the 'Joker' interrupted the play and invited audience participation.

It was quite exciting to watch audience members, many of them women, who got provoked by the play and responded to this invitation. They were then welcomed into the performance space and asked to raise questions, give their opinions and enter into a dialogue with the different characters. It seemed that most of the older women who came up to speak were quite agitated about the drunk husband and berated him for wasting all the money on alcohol and neglecting his family. Not much attention was paid to the trafficking aspect. It seemed like they traced the root cause to alcoholism and attacked it. This is what Ganguly calls as 'aesthetics' in Forum Theatre, the intellectual journey that the individual and the collective go through during the critical reflection ignited by Forum Theatre (Ganguly, 2017, p. 136). At a discussion our team had with the JS Theatre teams, Bandana Bera Biring, one of the actors in this play, explained: 'The focus of the play became alcoholism because that is the reality in their villages'. She suggested that people were quite conscious that the mother is also a victim of strong patriarchy that exists in families and communities and they wanted to bring out that aspect in the play.

One young woman from the audience vehemently argued that the family should not have let the girl just go away with some strangers without verifying their identification and credentials. Another woman from the audience said the

parents should focus on educating the girl child so that she can get married at a more mature age. 'Suitable boys will come for her sooner or later', she reasoned. One articulate young man came up and spoke of the illegality of the whole thing—underage girls being married off against their will. He also mentioned government schemes and social institutions that play a role in addressing such problems. Another tall, bearded man came into the performance space and chided the drunk father character for using poverty as an excuse for his 'irresponsible behaviour' towards his daughter.

The play clearly functioned as a trigger for dialogue and incited critical thinking among the villagers. Anirban, a theatre graduate who accompanied us to the performance, said that he was very impressed with the audience participation. According to him, while the traditional proscenium performances only elicited passive responses from the audiences, this was different because audience members themselves engaged in role-play. This follows Freire's concept of 'praxis' where dialogue for understanding one's social reality is accompanied by actions that seek to transform the oppressive environment, in a cycle of action–reflection.⁷

The woman who performed the role of the alcoholic father played a crucial role during the intervention period by raising a lot of issues that were not dealt with earlier in the play. The character brought up the need for exercising collective responsibility of the community toward their neighbours and for showing greater alertness to things that are happening in their neighbourhood, state politics and policies that affects their lives, thereby sowing the seeds of 'spectactivism'.

Those who empathized with the oppressed or may be oppressed themselves, came up and enacted their opinions. The dramatic scenario was rapidly transformed for many of the village participants into a real-life situation. As they came forward to ask some tough questions of the girl's parents, they were actually directing the entire community to reflect and find answers to those questions. It was clear that drinking excessively with loss of income and domestic abuse were no longer accepted social norms. The play, thus, succeeds in not only initiating dialogue and critical reflection, but also serves to weaken the links that make existing social norms survive.

One of the key characteristics of Forum Theatre is that the community setting provides a safe environment for the oppressed to assume various role positions and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. By providing a voice to those who have been silenced, the play creates opportunities for the entire audience for learning and draws them into empathizing with the situation of the oppressed. This emic response from both the ordinary people and the authority figures could potentially lead to social and political changes.

Conclusion

Mamani Halder, a member of one of the JS Theatre teams, in a coherent exposition of Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientization*,⁸ explained to us the purpose of Forum Theatre:

The purpose of Forum Theatre is to provoke people into thinking. Every person has the capacity to think and come up with solutions. We only provide a space for them to speak their minds. If you impose something on people, change will not happen. Jana Sanskriti is not into solving people's problems, people have to solve their own problems. (Theatre Teams FGD, Digambarpur)

This study of JS suggests the strong possibility of changing regressive social norms by harnessing the potentialities of Forum Theatre. It shows that this form of theatre can expose oppressive social norms prevailing in a community by replaying the lived experiences of the oppressed, and, by sparking off debate and discussion, hold out the promise of emancipation. Augusto Boal had once described Theatre of the Oppressed as a 'rehearsal for revolution' and others have called the spect-acting as a 'rehearsal for reality.' Sanjoy Ganguly of JS likes to call it a 'rehearsal for the total revolution', both internally, in terms of individuals' intellectual growth and critical thinking on issues, and externally, in terms of actually overthrowing oppressive social relations. He insists that the former must precede the latter (Klement, 2017, p. 87).

Another important learning that emerges from our study of Forum Theatre in action in West Bengal is that social change that is often reduced to individual, behavioural terms by development agencies has a clear collective, communal dimension. This comes out starkly from the way in which these theatrical events are experienced by the audience, responding both at an individual level and as a member of a community. There was adequate evidence during our fieldwork that the participatory communication approach to social change adopted by JS has led to personal transformations of women from marginalized backgrounds, who overcame oppressive conditions at home and assumed leadership roles in the theatre teams. They have now become more confident, experience greater self-esteem and feel empowered to question authority figures; and their public activism has gradually gained acceptance both within the family and in the community.

This case study suggests that there is great potential for using Forum Theatre in several areas of communication for social change, especially where one is seeking to incorporate participatory techniques in one's overall strategy for change. It has been established that greater community involvement in change processes would allow for self-motivated drive for change. In Forum Theatre, as has been shown here, after some initial training, control over issues chosen, scripting and the production process, all rest with community members. It is not our claim that a Forum Theatre intervention alone would bring about social change in all settings and at all times. The larger social and political context, local circumstances and prior existence of other change agents and elements constitute the conducive environment for Forum Theatre to be successful. More than anything, it is our contention that Forum Theatre certainly sparks off critical thinking among people and allows them to embark on a common search for solutions to their problems.

Jane Plastow (2015, p. 123), in her work on theatre for development in Africa, pointedly articulates this critical aspect:

What I think these experiences show is that dialogic performance work has at its heart an engagement with people that promotes a heightened awareness in participants of their

rights and thoughts, emotionally and intellectually. This, I would argue is the essential precursor to challenging individuals and societies to make meaningful change. If we do not value the self-reflected and considered interaction between individual and collective humanity, there will always be room for manipulative and not-interrogated oppression.

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1. Disclaimer: Our evaluation was conducted independently and not funded by Jana Sanskriti. We have received more than adequate cooperation from the organisation at the ground level.
2. Census Organization of India (2011). Also, Government of West Bengal data in https://www.wbhealth.gov.in/other_files/2006/1_10.html
3. Official website of the district: <http://s24pgs.gov.in/s24p/page.php?nm=Message>
4. In the three-tier local governance system in India called Panchayati Raj, a Pradhan is the elected representative at the block level. It is below the district level (Zilla Parishad) and above the village level, the GP.
5. GP or Gram Panchayat is the village level local governance system.
6. JS has formed various community-level groups such as the Responsible Citizens' Committee (RCC), mothers' forum, etc., which include some of the spect-actors, mothers, non-governmental organizations, self-help groups and social workers. They conduct follow-up meetings regularly after a play.
7. See <http://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>
8. Freire used a Portuguese term, *conscientização*, to describe 'the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action'. <http://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>

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