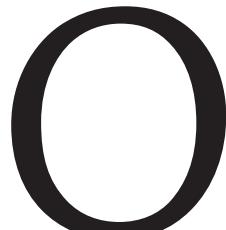


NEERAJ JOSHI

CHANGES THROUGH PARTICIPATORY THEATRE

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Using themes that address issues alive in the community in street plays, the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' gives the villagers the opportunity to observe as well as act, making spectators 'spect-actors'. Entertainment and education go hand-in-hand, creating a powerful impact and heralding change



NE EVENING, DURGAPRASAD, A CONTRACTOR from Mohgaon, came to visit Kumharra village to discuss matters with the *sarpanch* of the village. As he entered the village, he heard a voice resounding in the village: "*Bhaat baad mein khabo, natak dekhan jabo* (Have your food later, come to see the play)"; "*Aao aao natak dekho...natak dekho...bin paise ka natak dekho* (Come, come to watch the play...watch the play....watch the play for free!)"

Puzzled, he approached the *sarpanch's* house. As he interacted with the man, the calls outside became louder. His curiosity got the better of him and he stopped his conversation with the *sarpanch* mid-way and went out to see what was happening.

Durgaprasad followed the sound and came to a well-lit verandah of the *panchayat* office, which was filled by community members. Seeing such a large gathering of people at such an odd time surprised Durgaprasad.

Durgaprasad was stunned by what he saw. For the first time, he was witnessing a street *natak* (play), which engaged with the spectators and required their participation to take the play to its conclusion. The actors were not talking down to the spectators; instead, there was a dialogue with the spectators, to generate critical thinking

He approached one of the community members to inquire about the gathering.

“*Saheb, natak dekhan aayen ne,* (We’ve come to watch a play, Sir)” was the response.

His conversation was interrupted with someone calling out, “*Jai Sewa, Ram Ram, Sita Ram*” and the crowd of people reciprocating in similar manner.

Durgaprasad saw a young person asking the crowd, “*Kya aap natak dekhan chahabo?* (Do you want to watch a play?)” With this began a dialogue between him and the members of the community.

A group of performers then acted out a situation where a husband abandons his wife and brings home a new partner. The performers highlighted the plight of the women and asked the community members whether or not such a situation was acceptable; and whether anyone from the community would be willing to change the situation. The community members proclaimed that the situation was, indeed, not acceptable because this was unjust for the woman (being abandoned by her husband). Some of the community members approached

the stage and confronted the husband (the Oppressor).

This was followed by another performance by the group, which focussed on the adverse consequences of alcoholism. The performers highlighted how the regular consumption of alcohol could break families, divert students from engaging productively to enhance their future, fatal aftermaths and how alcoholism could act as an obstacle to the growth and well-being of society.

The performers paused mid-way with an image: of liquor being prepared in a village, the men spending time drinking alcohol, the women worried about the preparation and consumption of alcohol in the villages, the youth being attracted towards alcohol consumption and gambling. Again, a few questions were put to the community members and the members were asked whether the situation presented before them was acceptable or not. “*Aap joh yeh natak dekho, kahin samaj mein aais? Yeh jo aap dekhav, woh sahi hai ki galat?* (What did you understand by seeing the performance? What you have seen, is it right or wrong?)”

Again, some of the community members came forward and attempted to change the picture. The woman, who was preparing alcohol, was handed a *tasla* (pan shaped instrument used in construction work to carry stones or cement) and *fawda* (hoe), indicating that instead of preparing alcohol, she could work under MGNREGA, to strengthen her livelihood. The youth, who were enjoying drinking and gambling, were given books and bags, symbolizing that instead of wasting time, they could read to improve their future. Alcohol mugs were taken away from the men, who drank alcohol, and they were united with their families (grieving women). The community members transformed the scenario from one highlighting the problem of alcoholism and its fatal consequences, to one that presented happiness and prosperity.

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dialogue with the spectators, to generate critical thinking. With many questions in his mind, he approached the group of actors comprising young, dynamic and energetic people.

Hirdesh, one of the actors, revealed that they were members of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TOTO), the objective of which was to primarily capitalize on the energies of the youth, to address issues of villagers and to generate an interface with community members/stakeholders, to trigger changes. Other group members joined the conversation and proudly shared about their journey. "So far, we have performed in 44 forums and generated self-empowering processes of dialogues with the community around issues such as the menace of dowry, the value of MGNREGA, the evils of corruption, the problems of discrimination against the girl child, female foeticide, inequality, alcoholism, and drudgery," Hirdesh said.

Durgaprasad was in awe of these dynamic and energetic young performers. He enquired about the group's inception, spirit and journey to achieve the desired goals.

Nidhi, a group member, said that they were members of the Yuwa Shaastra Programme, initiated by PRADAN, in collaboration with Budhner Narmada Mahila Sangh (BNMS).

"The Yuwa Shaastra Programme helps youth to identify and articulate their aspirations, which then empowers them to make informed choices. The Programme has been structured in a way that it creates collaborative spaces for the Collectives and the Youth to be oriented on nutritional, governance and gender attributes, thereby ameliorating their village society. Of the 630 youth mobilized, overtime 24 of them expressed interest in

acquiring theatrical skills and in using these skills to bring about change in society. PRADAN organized a series of workshops to help us understand the concept of the TOTO and in how many ways villagers are oppressed.

Intense discussions were carried out in the presence of PRADAN professionals, to highlight the importance and advantages of having a vision. Through activities such as micro-lab, image-making and identification, trust fall, the baby kangaroo game, the mapping of feelings and the aspiration mapping exercises, we enhanced our ability to identify issues relevant to the self and society, empathise with self and others, process our feelings



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and develop understanding and trust within the group. Such workshops led to some of the youth being able to firmly decide to take up the path of theatre, to bring about the desired change. We were 14 in number and we decided to devote our energy and time in the self-empowering processes of dialogue; we organized ourselves into a group and pledged to generate critical thinking among the masses.”

Shayam, another member, joined the conversation. “Our first performance was in the village of Sakri, where we highlighted the issue of dowry and female foeticide; after that, there was no looking back. What followed was a series of performances touching upon sensitive issues and, thereby, generating empowering dialogue within the community. By being part of brainstorming sessions organized with PRADAN professionals, we were able to identify issues in respective villages. With time PRADAN professionals connected us through the village leadership to collectively identify issues prevalent to the village or area. We are now more confident when performing, selecting issues and preparing the script. Further, we have also evolved, with respect to attracting more crowds

(through *pheri*-group members moving about in the village with instruments, raising slogans and songs to invite community for the theatre) and have also experimented with image theatre (depiction of relationships, emotions and realistic situations through images as developed by Augusto Boal). Initially, the group members required support for mobilization in the village and someone from PRADAN for the role of the Joker. Because we are new to the concept of TOTO and Joker, we were not confident to play the role of the Joker. The Joker’s role becomes very crucial in the act as it is the Joker who initiates the theatre, bridges the gap between actors and spectators and concludes the theatre. However, now we are confident and we have performed in locations other than Mohgaon and also at a function organized by the block administration. Through TOTO, we aspire to change society and gain recognition.”

Many questions arose in Durgaprasad’s mind. Why was PRADAN developing such a group? How would the group sustain itself? What was the larger objective for such an engagement? How long would PRADAN support this group?

These questions forced him to enquire about the people behind all this. The group members directed him to a PRADAN professional, who was, by then, helping some members of the group to pack the props.

Hesitantly, Durgaprasad approached the PRADAN professional, introduced himself and praised the act showcased by the youth. A friendly response from the professional provided him a window to explore the questions running through his mind. Durgaprasad shared his experience of the evening and the thoughts that arose in his mind. With a smile, the PRADAN professional took a pause from the packing and shared PRADAN’s vision with him and how it aims to create a ‘just and equitable society’.

The intervention in Mohgaon began in July 2009, he said: “Over the years, attempts have been focussed on building an understanding of the community and their strengths. This exploration has, in turn, led to community members claiming public spaces as citizens, defining development for themselves and enhancing agricultural productivity. However, more needs to be done to help the

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community to take charge of their own lives. Thus, it is imperative to engage with the community to restate and ground their sense of agency, that is, 'I matter'. Consequently, there were thoughts about utilizing the energy of the youth, in collaboration with the women's collectives, to bring about empowering changes. Further, in Mohgaon, theatre was seen as a form of engagement, which would encourage a democratic interaction in the community, resulting in analyzing the root causes of the situation and the collective exploration of solutions. At present, in Mohgaon, there are certain issues as gender-based violence, exclusion of youth from village functioning, issues with respect to education that need immediate attention and action. Introducing TOTO to the youth will sensitize them with issues of discrimination and generate new opportunities to connect with the masses for well being of the area."

He continued, "Therefore, the youth who were enrolled under the Yuwa Shaastra Programme were offered the opportunity to acquire theatrical skills and mark a change. Those who were willing were educated about TOTO, a form of participatory theatre. It

gives a spectator the opportunity to observe as well as act and, hence, the spectators become 'spect-actors', forming a popular, community-based education, grounded on the vision of Paulo Freire, in the book '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*'.

"Young people willingly volunteered to be part of this initiative and set the norms themselves, with respect to the frequency of meetings and the gatherings post sunset (that is, to gather after completing work for the day). Seeing this group's engrossed engagement in TOTO, and their motivation, we (the PRADAN team) thought of popularizing this group and providing them an alternative livelihood option, along with their becoming change agents (like PRADAN professionals). With this spirit, we organized a series of workshops, comprising a mix of theoretical and theatrical understanding and performances in villages—the idea being to learn by doing. Over time, the group members were introduced to the art of facilitation and they learned how to design a script and connect actors to the issues of the village. Group members enhanced their ability to create and facilitate the forum and realized the importance and role of the

Joker. Witnessing such a young group enacting such issues has been appreciated by the members of the women's collectives too. In Mohgaon, we perceive this group as a powerful medium to trigger critical thinking among the community members and find real solutions. This requires constant engagement with the community; at present, the focus of the group is to select a cluster of villages and embed with the community for a considerable period to discover the real issues and their solutions. We believe that the joint venture of the BNMS, PRADAN and the TOTO group will result in awakening the critical thinking process of the community, leading to social action for a 'just and equitable' society."

Durgaprasad was amazed at what he had witnessed and at being introduced to an alternative form of engagement, which encourages the community itself to analyse and introspect rather than being preached to by some outsider. So far, he had viewed theatre as a source of entertainment or as a medium to propagate issues/ideas in the society. However, that day, he witnessed a form of theatre that bridged the gap between the 'actor' and the 'spectator'. He saw the spectators engaging in self-

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empowering processes of dialogue and learning the ability of critical thinking.

Involving the youth in this forum and viewing them as change agents seemed to him a fruitful approach. Through this, the youth would also develop critical thinking and could partner with the women's collectives, to move closer to a just and equitable society. On visiting villages in Mohgaon, for work or otherwise, he himself had observed youth whiling away time. TOTO could certainly bring out the best in the youth and initiate the desired changes through collective action. Duragaprasad was overwhelmed by the performances and the interaction with the youth group. He liked the confidence and

spirit of young individuals who have been volunteering, taking time from their daily schedule to come together and creating such empowering forums. He found these youths are empowered as they themselves are fighting against the social odds at the home front. Nidhi, a woman member of the group, has to bear the family's anger for reaching home late. Most of the forum meetings take place late in the evening and there are times when she reaches her village very late. Boys in the group have become gender sensitive and accompany the girls to their homes post performances. Boys also have to face anger from their families because this activity is not viewed as a productive one. However, given all these odds,

the group has so far performed in 44 forums voluntarily. Members have convinced their family members to embark on the journey to become successful entrepreneurs. Durgaprasad became aware of a group of youth who were different from the rest he had known. They were vibrant, energetic with a vision for themselves as well as society. He was convinced of better days ahead where communities will oppose the policies that violate the principle of equality and inclusiveness. Wishing for more such forums, he left on his bike for Mohgaon.

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