

Theatre of the Oppressed: A Step towards a Conscious Society

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Using the powerful medium of theatre, PRADAN has been able to stimulate a re-thinking on age-old limiting beliefs and traditions, and is bringing about change in the behaviour and attitudes of the villagers on issues related to their women and empowerment.

"I enjoyed playing the role of a man in the forum; it gave me a sense of power," says Anita Devi, with a spark in her eyes. She is a troupe member of one of the three operational theatre groups in Hazaribagh. She admits that being involved in theatre has been inspirational for her because she has become more outgoing and is able to face others without any hesitation. She is not the only one. There are 30 other women, who feel the same, and see themselves as significant contributors in the process of social change.

"What contributed to this changed self-view?" Coming out of their comfort zones and experiencing the freedom to express themselves has contributed immensely to this change, which they are now trying to inculcate in others, by having 'forums' at various places. They believe that things will change when people stop being resigned to situations, break their 'culture of silence' and engage in a dialogue process for mass social change.

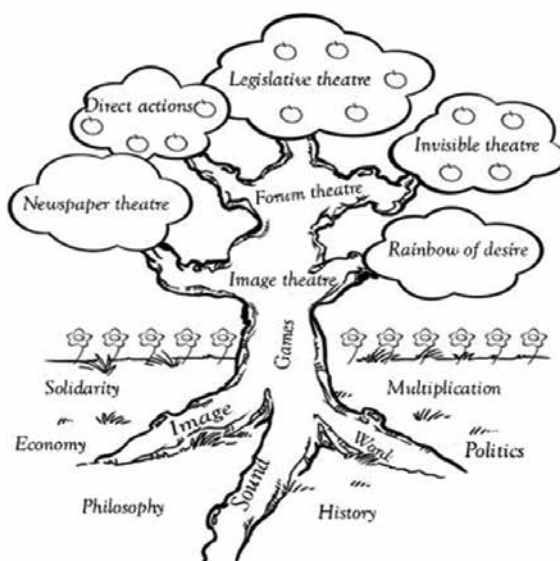
Here, it is relevant to explain the concept of 'Theatre of the Oppressed', which is derived from the philosophy of 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. In 1968, educator and theorist Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, proposed a *pedagogy* depicting a new relationship between the teacher, the student and society. This was translated by Myra Ramos into English as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970. In the book, Freire calls traditional pedagogy the 'banking model' because it treats the student as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge; in contrast, he advocates a pedagogy that treats the learner as the co-creator of knowledge. Freire explores how oppression has been justified and how it is perpetuated mutually by the 'oppressor' and the 'oppressed' and, during the process, how the balance of power remains relatively stable.

Freire admits that the powerless in society can be frightened of freedom. He writes, "Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an idea located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes a myth. It is, rather, the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion." He points out that freedom is the result of praxis-informed action—when a balance between theory and practice is achieved. He recommends dialogue as a device to free the oppressed, through the use of co-operation, unity and cultural synthesis, in contrast to anti-dialogue, which uses conquest, manipulation and cultural invasion. Freire suggests that populist dialogue is necessary to revolution; that impeding dialogue dehumanizes and supports the status quo.

Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal developed a theatrical form called 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. First elaborated in the 1960s, initially in Brazil, and later on in Europe,

the Theatre of the Oppressed is a series of theatrical analyses and critiques, developed in the 1950s. During the development of the Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal worked with many populations and tried many techniques and eventually different theatrical styles came to the fore, each using a different process to achieve a different result. Boal, in his philosophy, looks at the structure of the Theatre of the Oppressed as a 'Tree' with ethical roots that develop into direct and tangible actions. The roots of the tree are represented by the cultural synthesis and discourses in history and philosophy as well as economics and politics. The bottom of the tree has elements such as images, sounds and words, which form the aesthetics of the Theatre of the Oppressed modus operandi. The trunk is made up of the main techniques such as 'image theatre' and 'forum theatre' whereas the branches represent variations on these methods, viz., 'newspaper theatre', 'direct actions', 'legislative theatre', 'invisible theatre' and 'rainbow of desire'.

Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed



In all these theatre forms, games and exercises form an integral part. These help to inspire the people to take the character of a partaker rather than remaining just an onlooker. Forum theatre came into being in Peru, in the 1970s, as part of a literacy programme, which is now one of the most effective means to reach out to people. Theatre of the Oppressed, like any other form, is principally based on the idea of dialogue and interaction between the audience and the performer. It is a means of

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igniting a process of social and political change whereby the audience becomes active, such that as 'spect-actors' they explore, analyze and transform the reality in which they are living. This theatrical process requires a neutral party to be at the centre of the proceedings and this individual is usually called the 'facilitator'.

In Boal's literature, the role of the facilitator is referred to as the 'joker', in reference to the neutrality of the joker card in a deck of playing cards. The joker takes responsibility for the logistics of the process and ensures a fair proceeding, but must never comment upon or intervene in the content of the performance, because that is the territory of the 'spect-actors'. This form lays emphasis on the significant need to prevent the isolation of the audience. The term 'spectator' somehow makes the participants mere recipients of the knowledge and advice which, in fact, is dehumanizing; hence, this form places the onus on the participants to feel, think and act and it restores the capacity for action in all its fullness.

The audience must also be a subject, an actor on an equal plane with those accepted

as actors. The actors, in turn, must also be spectators thereby eliminating the peril of them only portraying ideals while the audience remain the passive victims of those images. In this manner, the spectators no longer delegate the power to the characters, either to think or act in their place. They free themselves; they think and act for themselves and this process puts forward a proposition that, "theatre is not revolutionary in itself but is a rehearsal of a revolution".

When the Hazaribagh team became involved in the Gender Equality Programme (GEP), the one thing that was clear was that it cannot be treated just as a programme but needs to make a pragmatic impact and, therefore, it must be adopted as an approach. GEP was launched by PRADAN in 2011, funded by the UN Women-Fund for Gender Equality, with a goal that 'by 2020, rural women from marginalized communities and their collectives, in nine districts of four states of Central India, will be able to raise their voice against violations and access their political and economic rights, as mandated under the Central and State government policies'.

Hazaribagh was one of the districts under the programme and, as envisaged, the outcomes of the programme were directed towards enabling women, who are amongst the most oppressed. Whatever the means, the programme needed to act towards giving voice to the unheard. The voiceless must rise against injustice and bias, and have an understanding of all forms of discrimination—be it social, economic or political. It seemed to be a daunting task. In fact it is.

The team came up with many ways to reach out to the people, viz., by designing small modules on gender, patriarchy, governance, livelihood and rights, to be presented at the SHG level through conducting workshops, organizing campaigns, etc. It was also realized that there needs to be a process whereby thoughts for the mass consciousness could be triggered and a discourse started at the village level.

This was when the team came across the 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. For PRADAN, this methodology to bring about change came to the fore when a 'Theatre of the Oppressed' workshop was conducted with a batch of apprentices of PRADAN in their foundation course in Kesla in Madhya Pradesh. The response was fairly enthusing and it prompted the idea of adopting this form of theatre as one of the methodologies to bring about the change envisaged under the GEP.

From the onset, it was evident that the energy of this form could impact the larger society. During the initial meeting with Jayamala Iyer (called Jaya) at Karanjia, in Odisha, to formulate a plan of action, involving three teams of PRADAN—Hazaribagh, Karanjia (Mayurbhanj) and Koderma—the Women's Federation of Karanjia, 'Sampoorna', with whom a discussion was held regarding the possibilities of theatre as a medium to bring about the anticipated change under GEP, was very animated by the concept. In an hour, the Federation leaders came up with a play, depicting a case of discrimination in the area.

The enthusiasm of the women further strengthened the belief of the team that this process would go a long way in bringing about the change required. In fact, even its philosophy was quite in tune with what the

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GEP intended to achieve. It was decided to include the theatre form as one of the processes in the programme. This process to bring change was initiated by inviting Jaya, a trained 'Theatre of the Oppressed' exponent, and Lokesh Jain, a trained theatre artiste, to conduct a workshop with some women leaders from SHGs and the associative tiers of the Federation. Their brief was to chalk out plans to create theatre troupes, capable enough to stage forums on relevant social issues.

Realizing that the team too should have a fair understanding of the underlying philosophy and beliefs of the form, a workshop was designed by Jaya for the team members. She pointed out, "Our body has a language and a memory too, and until and unless we channelize the energy of our body to come out of the shackles, in which we have been tied it till date, we will not be in a position to engage others for social change. We cannot reach out to people through verbal communication alone."

Easier said than done! The workshop became a challenge because the team had no experience in acting or in performing before the community. It took time but the team accomplished this difficult task. The members not only participated in the workshop but also created some forums and staged them at various places. They came out of their comfort zone and also got hands-on-experience. It was important for the team to understand the fundamentals of 'forums' before preaching them to others or inviting people to become involved in the process. Participating in the workshop, the team realized that theatre was a very effective means of communication, wherein the mind, body and soul can be used to stimulate awareness and social consciousness in a community.

Another challenge was to form theatre groups from among the SHG members and enable them to create and stage forums. It was decided not to restrict the theatre performances to just the GEP but to make these an engagement tool of the 'Damodar Mahila Mandal Sangh, Hazaribagh' Federation. The team shared this idea with the Federation, the response to which was encouraging. However, one concern was that this form was not a normal message delivery play, which anyway the Federation performed every year at their annual general meeting called the 'Mahadhiveshan'.

The earlier practice of conducting plays was in a formal setting, on stage where the troupe members needed to perform and leave. This new form, in contrast to the experiences so far, required the community to engage in a dialogue with the actors. A two-day workshop was organized with the Federation to introduce to the people the idea and concept of this theatrical form, with its focus on ushering in change. The Federation, at the end of the workshop, decided to form three theatre troupes in each of the three block-level Federations of Barhi, Chouparan and Padma.

The block-level Federations sent the interested women from the SHGs and the associative tiers of the Federation to attend the two-phase 'Theatre of the Oppressed' workshop, conducted by PRADAN. These selected women leaders went through the process of training their bodies, because the main focus of this form is to use the body, its movement, its flexibility and its reflexes, as a means of communication. The other aspects of the workshop were understanding theatre and its forms, learning the skills of creating plays on relevant issues, training for the joker role and

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These groups were involved in mobilizing people in the villages across class, caste and gender, around issues such as education, property rights of women, gender discrimination, etc. However,

the journey towards these performances was not smooth. The first obstacle was the reluctance of some of the members to stage a forum, in which the actors were in costumes and outfits and that too before a crowd in the village. The women were afraid of disapproval by their family members. To overcome this apprehension, the theatre groups chose to act in places where they were not known. The strategy adopted by them fell into place and after staging quite a few forums, these groups gained enough confidence to stage forums anywhere, including in their own village.

The groups were encouraged by the response they received to their performance. People, both men and women, gathered in large numbers, and the support, especially from the SHGs in the villages, boosted their confidence. However, there were occasions when it became difficult for the group to deal with the comments of the audience. Some people laughed at the women dressed in men's attire, making the troupe members uncomfortable. The groups, therefore, decided to meet every month and review their process of conducting events, their preparations, the learning and the probable steps to be followed to stage the forums smoothly. They also realized the importance of taking the SHGs and the Federation members from the selected village into confidence, to ensure the smooth functioning of the events.

The premise for the adoption of this methodology is the belief that 'when the deprived and downtrodden get together, they can bring about change'. They can become agents to trigger awareness and can mobilize opinion about socially relevant issues. The team formed three groups, one in each of the blocks, under the guidance of the block-level Federations of Barhi, Chouparan and Padma. They also decided that these groups must function under the supervision of the Federations so that the performances do not become merely an activity but a part of the process to reach out to the masses.

These 30 members are also active in involving other women from their vicinities into this process so that the pool can be increased, and each Cluster can have one such group. Hopefully, along with other methodologies, theatre can become an effective means to engage people in the process of change.

The theatre groups, in consultation with their block-level Federations choose the venues of their performances on the basis of the accessibility of the hamlet, the relevant issues of the village, the presence of the SHGs. They then create a forum on a relevant topic. The theatre group usually comes to a village where the villagers have already been informed of the venue and the time. After reaching the village, the group invites people of the hamlet by singing songs and raising slogans to gather the audience to the venue.

The group stages a 'forum', which is actually an incomplete scripted drama. The action freezes at a point showing the oppressor tormenting his victim. The spectators are not just meant to be watching, they are expected

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to participate in the 'forum', by reacting to the situation. They are supposed to take on the role of the oppressed. Usually, a member of the audience completes the story: thus, the spectators are also called 'spect-actors'. The interested people are persuaded and invited by

the 'jokers' to come to the 'forum' one by one and give their opinion, more often than not, generating a heated discussion on the issue, on the probable actions that can be or need to be taken. The main purpose of the opinion-generation exercise is not to arrive at a solution but to trigger questions, which are again put forward to the audience for discussion. The idea is to involve the people in a dialogue rather than find remedies.

As already pointed out, 'Theatre of the Oppressed' is one of the many approaches adopted by the team to move towards the stated outcomes under the GEP. Other events of engagement such as games and exercises at the SHG level, issue-based rallies and campaigns are, therefore, supplemented or rather complemented by the 'forum theatre'.

The aim of these events is to trigger thoughts and actions, and to alter the set norms and attitudes. The three theatre groups are within the purview of the Federation, which plans and reviews these events so as to track the progress to the desired direction. Till September 2013, these three groups staged 106 shows in 108 hamlets of 54 villages across the three blocks. More than 13,300 spectators participated in these events and more than 550 people have come to the forum to state their views publicly. On an average, in each of the forums, about 125 people gathered in the audience and the average number of responses as 'spect-actors' was about five.

People across various sections, sex and age articulated their beliefs, and a comprehensive dialogue process has been initiated in the villages. These three groups have also promoted six new groups, which have staged 30 shows during the last year's Cluster *adhiveshan*, and plan to increase the number of theatre groups, which can initiate the journey towards a just and conscious society.

The theatre performances, training and workshops have helped create an environment of dialogue in the villages of Hazaribagh. The issues raised at the theatre events were later discussed in public forums such as the *gram sabhas* and other informal gatherings of the villagers. There have been instances when the people of the village, both men and women have, inspired by the thought-provoking theatre events in the villages, engaged in serious dialogue to alter set practices of society.

In Sonpura village, on the fringes of the forest, in Padma Block of Hazaribagh, people are trying break taboos and attempting to send their daughters and daughters-in-law for higher education.

In October 2012, two forum theatres were staged on the subject of education for girls in two hamlets of the village. Being a far-flung village, until then, the idea of sending girls for higher education was not even thought of. Even brides who came to the village were barred from completing their studies because education for women was considered worthless. The theatre group, with the help of the Padma Federation, identified this village as one of the many villages where such discrimination was prevalent and planned a forum theatre about the education of girls.

Before these theatre events were staged, exercises on the discrimination between girls and boys were conducted at the SHG level in the village. Because of the awareness created, as many as 250 people gathered to participate in the performances.

The theme of the forum was that a daughter-in-law is discouraged from pursuing her education and when she objects to it, her wishes are dismissed and her in-laws force her to forego the dream of education. During the staging of the play, action was frozen at a point when the husband is about to slap the woman and abuse her physically. The audience is stunned, some recognizing their own attitudes and behaviours reflected on stage. At this point, the people of the village were invited by Neelam, the 'joker', to take on the role of the daughter-in-law and respond to the situation; No one responded.

The joker continued to ask, "Do such situations arise in your village? How do you feel about this? Are you okay with it? Do you want to change it?"

There was not a single reply to these questions because the villagers were appalled at the representation of their own behaviour. A woman named Kanchan Devi, finally rose from her seat and came to the forum and simply said, "This is wrong. I will send my daughter-in-law to complete her education."

This one person's response encouraged the others to express their views publicly. It was the beginning of a discussion and a sharing of views about the problems of sending a girl child to study beyond the primary and secondary levels. People voiced their concerns around the safety of girls. This led to further dialogue about the issue of early marriage of girls.

These issues were brought up in the *gram sabha* meeting. The SHG members also began discussing the need for educating their daughters and daughters-in-law. Kanchan Devi sent her daughter-in-law to a higher secondary school. Another four women from the village followed. The SHG members even decided to convince the parents of those who were not sending their girls and daughters-in-law to pursue further education. People from all sections engaged in this discourse, taking a small step to tackle one of the many forms of discrimination.

The question that is often asked is whether these theatre performances have actually had any realistic impact in the villages. There are anecdotes of women, who have started discussing the forums staged at their villages, and there are instances where women have taken concrete action of sending their girl child for higher studies. Women and men of the villages have also started discussing the prevalent discrimination, but visible change has not really taken place. In fact, immediate change was never the expectation.

What these events aim to achieve is to trigger thoughts so that an environment can be created in the village for a dialogue to begin on the subject—an environment in which each person can put up their views and a comprehensive discussion takes place; where people can come up with solutions and actions against the discrimination.

A major challenge that the team is facing in the last two years is that the number of theatre troupes has not increased to what was planned in its initial phase. Moreover, the forum was supposed to be followed by Focussed Group Discussions (FGDs) at the village level, to

actualize and track the changes. This required concerted engagement, which the groups were not able to initiate.

However, the enriched understanding that the team and theatre groups have acquired will go a long way in bringing about the real changes that are envisaged. The theatre groups recently took the responsibility for building more theatre groups in their respective blocks so that the pool could be increased. The intention is that the forums do not simply remain events, but rather, take the shape of a movement.

A plan has been chalked out to organize the FGDs, in which forums have been staged, and to form and groom other theatre groups to expand to new areas. Above all, the learning and the experience of the women involved as actors and jokers have been invaluable. The vigour with which they design their forums and conduct themselves as performers is truly appreciable. As Neelam Devi, a joker from a theatre group, said, "In all other activities, the energy seems to fade by the end of the day but while doing theatre, the energy keeps on soaring; I don't know from where such energy comes."