

Participatory Folk Theater with Listeners of an Entertainment-Education Radio Soap

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by

Devendra Sharma

Saumya Pant

School of Communication Studies

Ohio University

Athens, OH 45701

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Participatory folk theater, on its own, is an effective entertainment-education strategy that provides opportunities for a community to have dialogue with itself. However, when conducted with listeners of an already popular entertainment-education radio soap opera, participatory theater can help create novel sites of resistance against oppressive social forces, and construct new, liberal social knowledge. This paper examines the above thesis in light of the authors' field experiences with a participatory theater workshop in the Indian state of Bihar.

There have been many attempts of using theater for activist purposes, particularly for political goals. Political theater done by Safdar Hashmi's "Jan Natya Manch" in India is an example of this type of theatre. Similarly Augusto Boal's attempts helped to start "Theatre of the Oppressed"- a world-wide movement using theatre to give voice to the oppressed. But it is rare to find the instances of doing indigenous folk theatre to highlight local problems. Folk theatre workshop conducted in July 2004 in the Indian state of Bihar villages was one of the pioneering efforts of such kind. Based on our experiences during this effort, we believe that the strategy of using indigenous face-to face communication strategy like folk theatre can create effective opportunities for communities to make sense of their world and resist and change oppressive practices in their societies.

50 young people (from age of 9 years to 27 years) took part in this workshop. These participants belonged to four villages- Abirpur, Kamtaul, Madhopur, and

Chandrahatti. All of these four villages are in Bihar, which is one of the poorest states of India. Abirpur is situated in Vaishali district, while Kamtaul, Madhopur, and Chandrahatti are in Muzzaffarpur district. These were the villages where the listeners clubs of *Taru* radio serial were formed in February 2002. *Taru* (named after the woman protagonist) was a 52-episode E-E radio soap opera, broadcast in the northern, Hindi-speaking region of India from February, 2002 to February, 2003. The purpose of *Taru* was to raise consciousness about gender equality, the value of small family size, reproductive health, and caste and communal harmony (Singhal, Sharma, Papa, & Witte, 2004).

Participants in the workshop created three separate plays, and a number of folk songs, dances and poems in the workshop about the issues relevant to their lives like: Dowry, Child marriage, Caste system, Substance abuse, Equal treatment of boys and girls, Family planning, and Women empowerment. Duration of the workshop was of 5 days, from July 24 – 28, 2003. Participants daily met from 9 am –5 pm in the village Kamtaul. First three days of the workshop were spent in the idea, plot, script, costume & property development, and doing rehearsals. The last two days were used for the performances in front of village audience ranging from 300-500 people approximately, in each of the four villages.

Challenges

The process of preparing and conducting an attempt unheard of before in these Indian village communities was not easy. We faced many challenges and difficulties along the way. Some vignettes from our experiences in the field are illustrative of these challenges. For instance, the following excerpt from Devendra Sharma's field notes

relates to the most serious challenge for our workshop: ensuring the participation of girls in the workshop, a revolutionary concept in Bihar:

When I visited Bihar a month prior to workshop for preparations, the parents of the girls in the villages were not supportive of the idea of sending their daughters to participate in a public event. It seemed to me as if my worst fear had come true. I always anticipated that ensuring female participation in the workshop would be a little difficult in rural Bihar, or for that matter anywhere in rural India. But I had also firmly believed that it could be made possible. When I reached villages and had discussions with villagers, I noticed that parents were very supportive of the idea of the workshop and also very enthusiastic about letting their boys to participate in it, but whenever I talked about the girls' participation, they became hesitant and unsupportive. According to them, they could not let their daughters and sisters perform in public, because they thought that decent females do not act and dance in public. So they were not willing to allow their daughters to participate in the workshop. I tried to persuade them in different ways but was not very successful. Though they were very respectful of my ideas of boys-girls equality and other similar ideals, they would not give their willing consent of their daughters' participation in the workshop. But there was also one positive thing that I noticed in the villages. The young women themselves were very enthusiastic to participate in the workshop, and wanting to express themselves "in public"! This positive support gave me confidence and enthusiasm for my work. While returning to Patna (the capital city of Bihar) after my first day in the field, I was thinking hard how to ensure females' participation because without their participation, the very purpose of the workshop of bringing young men and women together to think about their society in a

fresh way (stimulated by *Taru*) would fail. Suddenly an idea flashed in my mind. In their conversations, parents of girls had raised one major objection to their daughters' participation in the workshop that it is not decent for girls belonging to good families to perform to entertain "public". I got an idea from this point. I knew that in Indian high schools, functions are organized on certain days of national importance like Independence Day, Mahatma Gandhi's birthday, and similar days. In these functions, students perform in front of their whole school, and sometimes in front of their whole village. The important point for my purpose was that boys and girls usually *both* participate in these kinds of functions. I asked myself the question: if parents can allow their daughters in those functions to perform, why can't they allow them to participate in the theater workshop? Next day I went back to villages again, and this time I positioned my request of girl's participation in the workshop to their parents in a totally different way. I started comparing our workshop with the cultural programs that happen in schools where both boys and girls participate. I asked the question that if they can do it in the schools why they couldn't do it in the workshop. I also explained to the girls' parents in detail that the purpose of the workshop would be to discuss local problems facing youth and their society, and how young people, particularly girls, can improve their future. I also invited the elders and parents of these girls to visit us in the workshop and see from their own eyes what we would do there. The positioning of the workshop as an "educative cultural program" with a high moral and social purpose, and comparing it to the functions in schools (which are among the legitimate sources of knowledge, and are given respect in the villages) where girls also "perform", changed the attitude of villagers remarkably (Field notes, Sharma, July 2003).

Another excerpt from Sharma's field notes talk about the logistical challenges faced in the field:

Getting a good sound amplifying system is a challenge in remote villages anywhere in India. But a good sound system was absolutely crucial for the success of our shows culminating from our theater workshop. A bad sound system would have spoiled all the hard work of the participants because nothing would have reached the audience ears. So we wanted to hire a very good sound system. Shailendra Singh (local rural health practitioner) and me, hunted from village to village for a good system. I drove his motorcycle and he sat on the rear seat giving me directions. Whatever sound shops we found did not have a good system. It seemed as if we would not be successful in our mission. Finally in one distant village, we found a system that seemed promising. But the person who owned the sound system was not willing to send his system on hire to a distant village, due to the problems like transportation, that too, to a stranger like me. He also did not have ready batteries to power the system. It was only because of Shailendra's presence and his popularity (Shailendra was also an active in local politics) that he agreed to give his system on hire to us. He also promised that he will try to arrange batteries and asked us to come again the next day. We got a little worried because our performances were starting after two days, and we were not sure whether the sound person would be able to arrange batteries in time. But then, we could not avoid these difficulties if we had to do theatre in remote villages! So I got prepared for any eventuality. I also started to ask our participants to throw their voices louder in the eventuality of not getting microphones. Fortunately that situation did not come! Next morning, when we again went to that village early in the morning, the sound person had arranged batteries. I

wanted to be sure about the effectiveness of the sound system by actually testing the microphones, and requested the person concerned to set up the system. He was of helpful nature, so he set up the microphones inside his house, and speakers outside in an open ground. I stood outside to listen to the quality of sound. But someone had to speak continuously on the microphones to enable me to do it. This seeming small thing became a big problem. The sound person was too shy to speak on the mike. We asked some other villagers to speak, but they were also hesitant to do it. Finally Shailendra again came to my rescue. He sang a patriotic song on the mike inside the house, and I checked the sound quality outside in the ground! Later I appreciated his singing skills, and we had a hearty laugh!!

What I want to illustrate through this incidence is that our shows could not have been successful without this team spirit, and hard work offered by the villagers at the local level. In fact this workshop was more of the local people. We “outsiders”, acted just as facilitators. My stay in the village during the duration of the workshop helped me immensely to achieve this target (Field notes, Sharma, July 2003).

The presence of two female facilitators; Saumya Pant and Yogita Sharma in our team proved to be immensely helpful for us to ensure women participation from the villages. Saumya built an excellent rapport with Abirpur villagers. In fact she became the *didi*, or the “elder sister” of the village girls, and her presence aided their parents to feel comfortable in sending their daughters to the workshop happening almost twenty miles away from their homes, which was a revolutionary thing to happen in Bihar. Same thing happened in Madhopur and Chandrahatti where Yogita used to go with the bus to pick up participants. On more than one occasions, Yogita’s presence and her discussion with the

female participants' parents helped to dispel their last minute fears and hesitation to send their daughters to the workshop.

The Process

The participatory nature of the workshop did not just mean giving suggestions by rural people or “sharing” their problems with a “professional” theatre team coming from outside. In this case, everything was done by the villagers themselves from selecting issues to be focused in the play, to developing plot, writing script, selecting roles, arranging costumes & properties, making the stage & finally enacting the performances. Rather than offering tailor-made solutions to actual problems of villagers in plays, theatre workshop worked as a *platform*, giving participants space to continuously discuss issues, and question the *status quo* regarding these issues in their society. There were several disagreements, heated debates, and even arguments among participants regarding the nature of the problems being raised in the plays developed by them in the workshop. One specific incident is illustrative of this process of script development in the workshop. It so happened that the end of one of the play's plot highlighting the dowry and child marriage issue was not coming out realistic. Father of the groom demands dowry from the bride's family when the marriage is arranged but at the occasion of wedding, his son refuses to take dowry. His father meekly surrenders to his wish and does not take dowry. For some young women in the group like Gudia and Meenakshi, this solution seemed too unrealistic. They argued that in the real life situations, groom's father in Bihar would not surrender so easily and will try to extract as much as he can from the bride's family. Everyone in the group realized the truth in this objection. The whole group debated the end of the play for hours and after many revisions of the script reached found an end of

the story that was agreeable to all. In this version, a separate scene was added between the groom and his friends prior to the wedding to establish groom's character as idealistic and sympathetic towards women. Another scene was added highlighting the confrontation between groom and his father at the wedding, which ends in a complete revolt of the son. The son warns his father during the confrontation that he would break all relationship with his family and will never marry if the father remained adamant to take dowry. As a result, father becomes panicky because his prestige was at stake. All the guests had arrived for the wedding and now if his son refused to get married, it would be a big insult for him. After much loud thinking and dilemma, father agreed to his son's demands and decided to not take any dowry. This end satisfied everyone in the group, and finally the rehearsals started after a whole day of brainstorming! This incident was not an exception, but many such incidents happened during the development of scripts of all the three plays.

Thus, scripts were changed and revised continuously throughout the workshop, till all participants agreed with the script. Additionally, during the performances, many times it happened that scripts were modified extemporaneously, and participants expressed their thoughts to the audience which were not part of the script! For instance, in one of the performances, Vandana, a young woman participant of the workshop who was playing the role of the narrator in the play based on the problem of dowry, became so excited and agitated about this issue that immediately after the end of the play, she addressed the audience directly and appealed them to not to take dowry, and not to torture their bridegrooms!

Implications and lessons learnt

1. *Understanding “development” is a “multifaceted process”*: An incident happened during our stay in Kamtaul with one of the facilitators- Devendra Sharma that helped us to understand the process of social change and development in a humbler way. Following is an excerpt from his field notes:

One evening, I was having a conversation with Vandana, the teenaged daughter (around 17 years) of Kamtaul’s rural medical practitioner (RMP) Shailendra Singh, and an enthusiastic participant of our workshop. We two were the only ones sitting in the living room of the house discussing about her studies and the career she wanted to choose in future. The sun had set and it was quite dark outside. Suddenly there was a power outage, which was not an unusual thing. Everything became dark in the room but Vandana kept talking to me. I felt a little uneasy in continuing the discussion with her in the darkness. There was a reason for my feeling uncomfortable. In rural India, it is not considered “good” for young women to talk to men, other than their brothers in privacy even in their own house, and even during the day. Sitting alone with a newly acquainted man in darkness is just out of question and normally family members of a young woman would frown upon any such activity. Vandana and I were sitting quite close to each other. Suddenly I saw that Vandana’s mother passed through the corridor in front of the room, saw us sitting together, and then went away. I felt all the more uncomfortable. I asked Vandana whether her family members would not mind her sitting alone with me in the darkness. Her answer was remarkable! She told me that her mother was a very liberal woman, and in fact, she would support her having discussion with me! She also asked me why I am thinking like that, given

that I had come to her village to do participatory theatre to “change” social attitudes. She said: “Why are you thinking that? My parents are not narrow-minded. You should continue the discussion with me without feeling uncomfortable.” I felt so glad to hear Vandana’s thoughts and after that we continued our discussion freely in that darkness! This incident sensitized me towards the fact of how liberal and progressive some villagers already were! It also made me enthusiastic to take discussions about the social problems in the workshop to a deeper level than a superficial and beginners’ level. The incident also cautioned me about the pre-conceived notions that “development - communicators” might have about the people among which they work like my own presumption for that Vandana’s mother would be conservative in her thoughts. This incident strengthened my belief that villagers can teach city dwellers many lessons, and that “development” is not a one-way process, but a multi-faceted one.

2. *Empowerment:* As a result of the workshop, there developed a strong feeling of empowerment among the participants, and they started to believe that things can be changed, or at least they can be modified by human effort. They realized that traditions were not needed to be taken as given. There was a newly born awareness about issues like the equal treatment of girls and boys, and dowry.
3. *Development of participants’ ability to question older generation’s decisions.*
Two of our participants - Meenakshi and Gudia who have been regular members of Taru’s listener club did not come initially to the workshop, as their parents refused them the permission to participate. When the other participants from their

village (Madhopur) returned after participating in the first day of the workshop, they told them about the “fun” they had, and the constructive activity they did in the workshop. Meenakshi and Gudia again went back to their parents, and after long discussions, persuaded them to allow them to participate in the workshop from the next day onwards.

4. *Development of strong friendship and team spirit among the participants from various villages.* In our opinion, forming of a strong network among young men and women from the four participating villages was one of the most positive results of the workshop. By the end of the workshop, these forward looking youngsters were not fighting alone for a change in the rigid traditions of their society but felt that they were parts of a strong team, and were efficacious to take on many wrong social practices like unequal treatment of boys and girls, child marriage, substance abuse and dowry. Many of them exchanged each other’s contact information, and promised to remain in touch, and keep doing activities like this workshop in future on their own. One of the participants, Jyotish from Abirpur threw a party after the performance in his village for his fellow participants from the other three villages!
5. *The immediate impact of the workshop & performances:* The positive impact of this theatre workshop can be studied from various points of view, but there were some immediate developments after the workshop that give an idea of the nature of the impact the workshop had on its young participants and their audience. After each performance, participants made vows against taking dowry, child marriage, use of tobacco, caste system, and in support of giving equal opportunities to boys

and girls, and adopting family planning. Not only they themselves took the vows but also appealed the audience to repeat these vows after them. One can easily imagine the impact of young women shouting, and making their voices heard against the outdated traditions of their society in front of the leaders of their own villages (many of whom, themselves responsible for perpetuating these traditions). There were many instances during the performances where tears could be seen in the eyes of older women in the audience when they heard these young women singing, dancing, and acting in public against the issues like dowry- an opportunity they had never got. Another immediate outcome was that after the workshop, there came a realization by the workshop participants that the awareness created by this effort could be sustained by organizing similar workshops in future from time to time. More importantly, it was recognized by the participants that instead of depending upon outside stimulus for these workshops, they could organize a workshop like this on their own. Participants formed their own dramatic clubs in their villages and have done many performances in their villages since the workshop.

Uniqueness of folk theatre and music as communication tools

Could the young workshop participants have expressed their anger, hope, and frustrations about the various issues affecting their lives as effectively as they did, if they had not used music, theatre and dance to express themselves? Many workshop participants told me that they could not have done so if they did not have the opportunity to use the platform provided by theatrical performances. In usual life, it was rare for them to talk frankly to their parents and elders about the touchy issues like “family planning”

or “dowry”. The competitive edge of communication for social change through local forms of theatre and music lies in these forms’ ability to create a relatively *free space* of discourse with local people in their local *language*. This free space can be understood in many ways:

- a. Theatre and music provide people a platform that is unreal yet real. Participants of our workshop could express their radical opinions about the local bad practices like dowry in front of their society, mainly because of this “unreal yet real” platform. They had not found this opportunity in their real lives. Though participants expressed their concerns through imaginary characters of a story, the issues they were commenting on were real. Also real was the effect of these comments on the faces of audiences.
- b. Theatre and music are entertaining media. We all know, (particularly in India after long years of government’s boring communication strategies for development) how ineffective, preaching about social issues can be. Local forms of theatre and music make development *discussions* (not readymade messages) very enjoyable, and audiences develop a positive attitude about the messages that come out of these discussions.
- c. Most importantly, creating a theater script is a continuously evolving process. It is a process through which we understand the nuances and details of the problems on which we create our scripts. Many times, our attitudes about a problem change during this process of script development. This happened frequently in our workshop. In the beginning of the workshop, many of us thought that we knew everything about a particular social issue or a problem but when we started to

- develop a script on that issue, we realized how little we knew about that issue. For instance, when we started to create the script on dowry, many young men were not whole-heartedly against taking dowry and thought they do not need to know or discuss anything about the issue. But these young men became the “enemies” of dowry after long debates and interaction with the young women of their group. In fact we incorporated these debates between young men and women in a scene of the play itself.
- d. The proceedings of the workshop themselves acted as agents of change. In the beginning, some young men were very aggressive, not letting their women counterparts to express their opinion. We had to attract, though very subtly, these men’s attention to the irony that they were creating a script on men-women equality but were not giving equal opportunity of self-expression to their women friends. They quickly got the point and from then onwards gave women equal opportunities to speak in the discussions. Similarly, in the beginning of the workshop, usually men ordered women of their villages to bring water or tea for them. But by the end of the workshop, sensitized on men women equality, they started doing their work themselves. In fact some of them even started bringing tea and water for their women friends!
 - e. One of the biggest advantages for the people doing socially relevant theatre is that doing theater gives them the opportunity to connect with other people of similar thinking. Before this workshop, many our young participants felt relatively isolated due to their “different” ideas on many issues, but now they have a “team”

of similarly thinking friends, and they feel more empowered to implement change in their society!

Overall the participatory theatre workshop in Bihar was a great learning experience for all concerned. We believe that the strategy using local theatre and music and providing a safe space for youngsters to reflect upon the social conditions around them can be a very effective tool for constructive social change in all community based societies, such as those found in India and Africa.

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