

Entertainment or Enlightenment?
Role of Participatory Theatre in Development

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Certain pre-existing social norms can contribute to persistence of bad behaviour and customs in society - domestic violence against women, the practice of dowry, ostracism of minorities, etc.. Changing such social norms is not easy. Promulgating laws to contravene such social norms are often ineffective.

Recent evidence suggests that small interventions that induce more critical thinking, keeping in mind the local socio-cultural fabric, may have positive and substantive long-term impact on communities.



Entertainment by *JS*

Participatory theatre – Theatre for Development (TfD) – is one such intervention. This form of theatre is practiced “by, about, and for the oppressed people, to help them fight against these oppressions and to transform the society that engenders these oppressions”. Because of their interactive nature, these theatre programs (unlike information campaigns) can have a psychological impact on their audience that may help change bad social norms.

Jana Sanskriti (JS), a non-governmental organization, has been engaged in Theatre for Development since 1985 in West Bengal. The organisation uses participatory plays to encourage viewers to “think about, re-imagine, and reconstruct ‘development’ and ‘democracy’ in India”. The plays of JS highlight social oppressions like patriarchy, domestic violence, alcoholism, dowry, exploitation of workers, and problems in local governance. The vision of JS is to encourage viewers to protest against social ills. In repetitions of scenes, a viewer can step onstage, play the role of a character, and construct a new response. Afterwards, the audience discusses the play and the “spectator’s” way of unmaking and remaking the critical scene.



A domestic violence scene from a *JS* play

We examine the impact of *Jana Sanskriti* – active in the villages of South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal – on attitudes, behavior, and implicit associations. We have surveyed about 4000 women and their husbands in 35 villages where JS has been active and in 78 villages where JS has not been active.

Our findings suggest that in villages exposed to JS's Tfd, as compared to other villages, a husband is less likely to physically torture his wife, humiliate her in public and verbally abuse her with respect to different social issues. He is more likely to allow his wife to visit her friends. The wife, in general, has a greater voice in household decision-making.

The results have implications for the role of participatory theatre in fostering social change. There is a reflexive relationship between individual ways of thinking and feeling and social patterns. Social patterns shape perceptions which, in turn, shape decisions that may replicate the social patterns. If Tfd can change attitudes, it may be able to cut into this replication and create a better society.



A spectator participating in a *JS* play

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