THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT: CONTACT BASE

In Chapter 4, we discussed the process of Forum Theatre as practiced by Jana Sanskriti. In this chapter, we similarly describe the process of Theatre for Development as practiced by Contact Base and how it affects community organisation and mobilises community action. These findings are based on interviews with a senior representative Contact Base, and various individuals and groups engaged in social theatre as practiced by the organisation.

5.1 DESCRIPTION OF CONTACT BASE, ITS STUDY AREA, AND RESPONDENTS

The subsections below detail out the profile of the organisation, respondents and the actual study areas. Primary data was collected through interviews and secondary data was collected in the form of reports, audio visual recordings of Contact Base’s theatre shows, articles and publications which were accessed to support primary data.

5.1.1 About the Organisation

Contact Base is a non-government organisation specialising in using street theatre for community education, capacity building of grassroots service providers (health workers, sanitation coordinators, community leaders, panchayats, etc.), and community based participatory research. The idea of the organisation was conceived by its Founder Director Amitava Bhattacharya, an IIT Kharagpur engineer with a background in IT. The organisation was founded in 2000 with a team of around ten non-theatre professionals (with backgrounds in engineering, journalism, management, literature, and social sciences) who were passionate about community theatre based social development inspired by Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. The organisation has worked in 2500 villages across twenty three states of India on various social issues and has successfully established community action groups.
and networks, which continue their activism for their own social development. The organisation works on a project basis supported by the government, UN agencies, European Commission, and International NGOs. Currently the organisation has a seventy member team led by a core team consisting primarily of those who started and built the organisation in its early years.

The organisational work is run and managed by non-theatre professionals along with a small group of theatre specialists or experts who are engaged for specialised theatre inputs for shows and capacity building workshops. The actual theatre shows are performed by local rural folk and community theatre teams in the areas of its interventions. The organisation has a large network of local theatre teams across India who participate in its campaigns and theatre based interventions in addition to carrying out their own performances and theatre based activism. Though the organisation’s work spreads across India, the focus of this thesis is on its work in West Bengal, and specifically the district of Malda.

Amitava Bhattacharya, the Founder Director of the organisation, was interviewed for this study. Details about the organisation were also drawn from my own experience as an employee of the organisation for over ten years.

The community respondents who were interviewed as part of Contact Base’s work in Malda were identified by Contact Base. Among them were theatre actors from two local folk theatre teams who practice the traditional theatre forms of Domni and Gambhira, women respondents from an all women’s theatre team, and an adolescent girls’ group. The demographic profile of these respondents are given in Appendix A. In addition to the primary data collected through the interviews, secondary data was collected in the form of reports and audio visuals of their theatre shows.

5.1.2 Field Visits

Visits to Malda district were facilitated by Contact Base. The specific areas visited were Bamongola, Chanchol I, and Manikchawk, for interviewing the different respondent groups of women’s community theatre team, local NGO team, adolescent girls’ theatre team cum action group and the folk theatre actors respectively. These interview locations and the respondent groups were chosen in consultation with Contact Base. Malda town is situated about 360 km away from Kolkata and an overnight train
was taken to reach Malda. A field coordinator from Contact Base accompanied me throughout the journey. Once we reached Malda town, we hired a car to travel to Bamongola, Chanchol I, and Manikchawk for carrying out the interviews. All the groups were informed beforehand over the phone about the interviews and consulted about their convenient timings during the day. The interviews were held accordingly. No actual show was viewed in Bamongola as no show was scheduled at that time. An audio visual of the shows that were organised in Malda was collected from the organisation.

5.1.3 Domni and Gambhira Actors

Two theatre actors were interviewed from a Domni theatre team from Manikchawk, and one theatre actor was interviewed from a Gambhira theatre team from Kutubpur in Malda. Both teams have performed shows for Contact Base on various social themes. Both Domni and Gambhira are satirical folk theatre forms of Malda traditionally performed on day to day life events or social events.

Of the two members of the Domni group, one was a very senior Domni actor and script writer who has practised Domni for more than 35 years. The other younger team member was exposed to Domni from his childhood and learned it from his father. The interview with the Domni respondents were carried out in the senior respondent’s house. It was a cemented house with electricity, which indicated that they were better off compared to many other villagers who lived in mud houses and did not have many basic amenities including electricity. The interview lasted for about an hour and was based on the interview schedule. The interview was recorded on an audio recorder after informing the respondents and taking their permission. The respondents interacted with a lot of enthusiasm especially when they narrated stories about their theatre shows. Though they reiterated their authority over the Domni art form which was used for social campaigns, they also showed respect and appreciation for Contact Base for giving them the opportunity to take part in large social campaigns using their traditional folk theatre. The respondents were committed to their work and were sensitive to the social issues they addressed and reinforced the power and popularity of Domni. They answered all the questions completely and patiently and contributed significantly to the understanding of the folk theatre-based process of the campaigns.
The respondent from the Gambhira group was a young actor who had learned and practised Gambhira from his childhood. Though he seemed a little cynical about changing the format of Gambhira to fit the needs of social campaigns, he narrated their experience of using Gambhira for anti-child marriage campaigns. He explained in detail the various parts of a Gambhira performance and the nuances of the ‘Duet form’, which they used for social interventions. The interview was about an hour long and was carried out in our hotel room in Malda town where the interviewee visited us. The interview was also recorded on an audio recorder with his permission.  

5.1.4 Local NGO Members

Members from a local NGO, Jana Kalyan Samity, which engaged in street theatre shows for Contact Base in Malda were interviewed. The cultural unit of the organisation, which performs social theatre, is called Dishari and was started in 1981. The NGO was registered in 1997. The cultural unit originally performed proscenium theatre mainly for cultural purposes. After it got introduced to Contact Base, the group learned about social theatre and started practising it themselves. Since then they have carried out many campaigns on various social issue and continue to engage in social development work through the NGO. They mainly work in six blocks of Malda, namely Chanchol I & II, Harishchandrapur I & II, and Ratua I & II. Three members of the organisation were interviewed. The interview was carried out in the NGO’s office space, and took the form of a discussion which lasted for about two hours. Their office was located in the urban area of Chanchol I block. All the members were educated and culturally sensitive. Their intellectual interest in theatre dated back to their younger days when they regularly performed proscenium theatre. The interactions clearly established their motivation, love and passion for the work they do and they were happy to explain their work to us in detail. They seemed completely engaged and involved in their social development interventions and their area of work expanded beyond just theatre. The discussions were rich and fruitful with a lot of insights on the social theatre processes from the point of view of an educated urban group of respondents who participated in it.

1 A video recording of a traditional Gambhira performance is available at https://archive.org/details/Gambhira.
5.1.5 *All Women’s Theatre Team*

A theatre group of tribal women who participated in Contact Base’s campaign against child marriage was also interviewed. A group interview was carried out with four women from a team of twelve members. They belong to the Adibasi Charcha Kendra Self Help Group (SHG) of Bamangola. The group already existed and was also involved in theatre shows when they got introduced to Contact Base. Before joining Contact Base’s campaign, they had performed shows against witch problems and related women’s oppression. They wrote their own scripts and developed their own productions. When Contact Base had approached them in 2009, their theatre team was just one year old. They performed street theatre for Contact Base for two years, and have continued their grassroots activism against girl child oppression till date. Among the respondents, Sonali who explained most of their work had studied till class VIII. Others were non-literate. A group interview was carried out which was about two hours long. All the women respondents had gathered in Sonali’s house. Sonali was the most articulate of the group, and she guided the other members to narrate their stories. Other villagers, some from the family of Sonali and the children of the house had gathered around to watch our interactions. A local health worker who has supported this group locally for carrying out their activism was also present at the discussion. Not all the respondents could answer questions clearly and most of the stories told were common and shared stories of the team as a whole. They were very enthused to know that I would be writing about their work and actions and explained their interventions with a lot of interest. They showed a lot of confidence in their own selves and their capability to make a difference in their village about stopping child marriages. An audio recorder was used to record all the discussions, which were guided by the interview schedule. The respondents were informed and their permission was taken for recording.

5.1.6 *Adolescent Girls’ group*

A group interview was carried out with nine members of a 27-member Adolescent Girl children’s group of Shankarkhola, Motiharpur Panchayat, Chanchol I. All the girls were engaged in Contact Base’s campaign and constitute an activist group that continues to stop child marriages in their villages. They were all around fifteen to sixteen years in age and studied in school in classes IX and
X. They have been engaged in theatre-based activism for three years. The interview was carried out with the group in a local village community centre. When we reached the centre, the girls had already gathered and we sat on the ground in a circle for our interactions. Some of the interviewees were more vocal, articulate, and expressive than others. Some of the others who seemed shy and hesitant at first soon joined the interview actively when they found their friends speaking clearly about their experiences. They were confident and expressed strong opinions about their own future and how they want to shape it. The interview in the form of a group discussion was about two hours long. They were well informed on the issue they campaigned on, that is child marriage, and believed in all that they expressed through the theatre shows. The problem was real in their lives. They had themselves overcome it and wanted to eliminate it for others. They were sincere in their efforts and expressed their seriousness and commitment about their activism. They felt responsible for the improvement of the lives of other girls of their village and interacted on the issue in an informed manner. Their stories were recorded with an audio recorder after taking their permission.

5.2 UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESSES OF SOCIAL THEATRE

In this section, we describe the processes of social theatre as practiced by Contact Base. The section deals with the ideologies and objectives that inspired the organisational initiatives, and outlines the actual processes of production development, performance and intervention, outcomes, and interaction with local folk theatre forms. The interviews with representatives of Contact Base, as well as with community members who engage with Theatre for Development have been analysed here. Specific shows that were organised during the Malda campaign were observed through the audio visual documentation shared by Contact Base, revealing the actual process as well as the immediate impact on the audience. The different sources of data help present an in-depth description.

5.2.1 Ideology and Background

Contact Base specialises in the use of Theatre for Development methodology for community empowerment. The format of their theatre is street theatre integrating local folk theatre forms. The
objectives of this form of theatre include creating awareness among rural marginalised communities on various social issues and rights, as well as mobilising them to take action against social vices and problems in an informed way, through participation, involvement, and capacity development.

At the time of its inception in 2000, Contact Base created a portal on theatre in Bengal after eleven months of in-depth research. This research was done with the objective of preparing an online database of the different types of theatre forms of Bengal. This research initiated the idea of engaging local folk theatre groups in building community awareness and creating local champions for advocating social change, which was philosophically inspired by Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed.

Contact Base uses Theatre for Development methodology for three distinct purposes. The first use is for community education and mobilisation, where theatre is used as a product, that is, as a show or a production. The marginalisation and deprivation of remote rural communities are aggravated by lack of effective information and communication about various rights, laws, schemes, and programmes supporting their access to improved living. Conventional mass media that is used for generating awareness and disseminating information, such as newspapers, leaflets and brochures, radio, and television, often have very low reach and influence on remote rural communities. This is partly because of remoteness of the geographical areas, lack of electricity, illiteracy, etc., which make mass media components comparatively less effective. More importantly, mass media involves a passive, indirect, and generic style of communication which does not involve its audience in an active way and therefore fails to mobilise communities to act on the new information or knowledge they receive on various social issues, the way theatre does, reaching out to communities, localising content, taking on board local cultural forms, and breaking cultural barriers, making communication effective. In contrast, Theatre for Development reaches out directly to the intended audience by performing a production in their own backyard, involving them in the play and establishing a relationship with the viewers which enables participatory communication and discussions. The opportunity of direct participation of the audience in voicing out their own stories, feelings, and grievances helps Contact Base coordinators identify community members who could be inspired and mobilised to come forward and take action on social problems. Subsequent to the theatre shows, these members are invited to community meetings for discussions to identify ways in which the community can organise to address the issues. For example, to tackle issues of child trafficking

---

2 A version of this portal is still available at [http://www.banglanatak.com/theatre.asp](http://www.banglanatak.com/theatre.asp)
and child marriage, local community watch groups may be formed to keep track of vulnerable children and get in touch with the Childline if the need arises, or report unfamiliar persons in the village to the Panchayat. Often the community members point out gaps in the system. For example, they might point out that the local Childline does not always respond to requests for help. Contact Base may get in touch with the Childline, and realise that they do not respond because the police, on whose resources the Childline depends, is not always able to provide vehicles to respond to help requests. Contact Base then communicates this feedback to stakeholders in the local administration for appropriate action, and when necessary propose new development initiatives. Thus, the process initiated by Theatre for Development enables the participation of the community planning and mobilising community action, as well as their participation in planning and implementation of developmental programmes that are meant for them, addressing an important lacuna in conventional planning approaches that often results in failure to achieve the targeted goals.

Contact Base also uses theatre for capacity building of community groups, where theatre is not used as a product, but as a process through which rural marginalised, uneducated, and non-literate communities are empowered to take social action for improving their own lives. Here, theatre based activities are used to build capacity of poor and marginal groups like non-literate slum residents, child labourers, and marginalised women in interior villages to become active stakeholders in the development process, and in fostering sustainable well-being of the society. Use of theatre based methodology in this context creates a participatory and non-threatening environment where learning and communication is easy and comfortable.

Lastly, the organisation also uses Forum Theatre for social research, especially on socially and culturally sensitive issues such as HIV/AIDS or trafficking of women and children where a community may deny reality or put a social taboo prohibiting all discussions. More conventional research tools such as interviews, group discussions, and questionnaires do not work in such situations. Instead, actors present situations to the audience that depict the issue at hand and with which the audience can identify. Street theatre generates a very high level of emotional involvement with the issue, mobilising community members to share their stories, problems, perceptions, etc. The structure of a forum is used, inspired by Boal, wherein sensitive issues are raised through the play, and then members from the audience are called upon stage to play the role of the protagonist in the play. Community stories lead to evidence building on real case studies.
Contact Base has worked with many local folk and community theatre groups across India for community education, training, and participatory research over fourteen years. The essential components of its work include:

- using traditional local theatre forms for social campaigns, provided they have a street theatre format and not a proscenium theatre format,
- engaging local theatre groups, both folk and non-folk, in these campaigns after training them on the social issue to be addressed,
- training and engaging local community groups in the absence of a suitable local theatre group, and
- organising and supporting campaigns only for a specific duration of time, although the trained groups may continue to perform beyond that point.

The organisation has worked in the area of social communication using social theatre across India and has developed a network of social theatre groups. Through their campaigns they have also created livelihood for the local folk theatre performers who find it difficult to sustain themselves with a meagre income from their art form.

In this study, we will deal in detail only with the street theatre approach for community education and empowerment and not with the other initiatives of Contact Base.

5.2.2 Design of Theatre for Development

**Structure**  Traditional theatre and street theatre productions are entertaining and non-threatening forms of communication which easily captivates the audience. Shows are performed in villages as part of a theatre-based campaign. The street theatre shows are usually of 20–25 mins duration and draw the direct attention of the rural audience on any social issue that is addressed. The depiction of stories from real life scenarios and problems that the audience can relate to, and use of local dialect and cultural symbols or nuances enable easy comprehension of the play and its social messages. Strong familiarity with the local folk theatre forms create an intimacy and involvement of the audience with the actors. For example, as explained by the representative of Contact Base, during a particular show when a field coordinator asked a woman viewer in a North
Indian village about the theme of the play, she said, ‘it is about our village.’ In case of anti-child marriage campaign in Malda which has been studied in detail as part of this research, the rural audience identified with the play and narrated several incidents of twelve and thirteen year-old girls in their villages who had been married to grooms in their thirties and forties who were from distant areas in Delhi and Bihar and have remained untraceable after marriage till date. They realised that those could be cases of child trafficking and became aware of its risks after watching the play. By design, this form of theatre creates a platform of interaction between the theatre group members and the audience thus giving them an opportunity to voice out their feelings, opinions, and thoughts as well as discuss possible solutions and local actions to address the social problems.

An integral part of Contact Base’s campaign design is a situation analysis research before campaign conceptualization and script development to understand local communication needs, mapping vulnerabilities, and identifying the key messages to be delivered. This requires skilled team members to go to the field initially and identify the concerned stakeholders and talk to the community people to understand the local situation. This kind of study involves building relationships with local youth or seniors as well as administrative stakeholders of the villages and then carry out discussions with them about local needs, gaps and possible usefulness of a campaign. These kinds of discussions are usually initiated at local tea stalls, paan shops, common community meeting places, local markets, etc., where people naturally gather. Through discussions the broad purpose of the visit of Contact Base is explained and discussions around the issues are generated to gather community opinions, understand the local scenario, local superstitions, cultural barriers to change, etc. It is during this study that possible local theatre groups or community groups interested in social theatre campaigns are also identified. This pre-campaign engagement with the local community even before the campaign and scripts are designed is critical to the success of the campaign as this enables integrating community feelings, opinions, and thoughts into the communication plan of the project. The learning from the field is thus integrated into the campaign.

Moreover, when the theatre groups are oriented on the campaign objective, issues, and messages, the local cultural barriers, superstitions, and local situation are also studied carefully through a two way learning process. This is critical for designing a non-offensive, sensitive communication plan which addresses community feelings and at the same time delivers messages supported by logical reasoning related to better health, improved well being, safety of children, and legal requirements. As a rule, Contact Base does not try to counter local cultural nuances and norms, and takes a
strategy of generating informed decisions by the community through post-campaign discussions in a rational manner.

After the situation analysis research is completed and an initial communication plan is developed, local folk theatre groups or community groups composed of youth, women, and men interested in street theatre are identified and trained to carry out the campaign. The rationale behind using local folk theatre or community groups is that the members of the local communities themselves become advocates of social change and betterment within their own communities, thus strengthening the factors of trust and acceptance, essential for mobilising community participation. In contrast, an urban external theatre group performing in front of the rural audience may provide better entertainment, but will fail to develop association and intimacy due to strong cultural and social barriers.

In every show, one or two field coordinators from the NGO are present who coordinate and manage the post show interactions and record community feedback systematically in order to plan and strategise local community actions. The process of community participation and documentation of community feedback along with the names and details of the active members is an in-built process of assessing the immediate impact of the theatre shows and developing a cadre of possible future leaders for social action.

**Themes** Contact Base’s Theatre for Development interventions deal with diverse themes depending on the local problem to be addressed. The specific themes are not directly generated by the community, but are identified either based on community feedback received during the initial local study carried out by the organisation, or are suggested by the government stakeholders, officials and even other funding organisations based on their agenda and mandate. In the latter case, the need and relevance for such thematic interventions are matched with the local scenario during the study. If the themes are not found relevant, the organisation negotiates with the funders to make the intervention relevant based on evidence collected through their study including community consultations. This approach has been taken by the organisation to avoid a completely top-down strategy for social development, which mostly fails because it is too generic, lacks relevance in the local context, and is planned without the participation of the community. The local community-based research is often supported by surveys carried out by the government or other NGOs which establishes the severity or the extent of the problem to be addressed.
AUDIENCE  The potential audience for each campaign is identified by Contact Base’s campaign
designers. Plays are developed depending on whether the show is taken only to the women viewers
in the villages or adolescent girls of the villages and their mothers or audience at large. The show
schedule is also planned depending on the type of audience targeted. If the primary intended
audience are women, shows are held usually in the afternoon inside the villages, a time when
the men are out on work and the women are free after their household work. In cases where the
public at large are the intended audience, shows are held during the day in the market places,
road side corners, in front of shops, etc., to capture the attention of the public through the 20–25
minutes show. In case of children, shows are held in the evenings after school hours or at schools.
Understanding the audience is a critical part of campaign design in order to make the shows and
the campaign most effective.

CHOICE OF THEATRE FORM  When feasible, Contact Base engages local groups practise
traditional folk theatre forms. However, although there are various traditional theatre form all over
India, only a few meet the specific requirements of Contact Base and are considered suitable for
social theatre campaigns. Every folk theatre form has its own grammar, format, and tradition.
Contact Base chooses forms that fulfill some essential requirements: it should be script-based, it
should have scope for two-way interaction, it should use local folk songs and dances in the play,
and should not use more than 5–6 characters in a play. Malda has two indigenous traditional forms
that meet these requirements, namely, Domni and Gambhira, although traditionally Gambhira
is not entirely script-based and involves a significant amount of improvisation. In the absence of
suitable folk theatre forms, Contact Base tries to engage local professional theatre groups, which
are not uncommon in West Bengal due to its rich history of theatre practice. When even such local
groups are not available, Contact Base forms new groups consisting of local community volunteers
and trains them to perform street theatre.

SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT  Once theatre groups are chosen and trained in performing street
theatre when necessary, social messages are intertwined in a story-line and script jointly developed
by Contact Base and the local theatre groups, which is used by the theatre groups to develop the

3 Contact Base works with a much wider spectrum of traditional theatre forms, as well as various other art forms,
as part of their ‘Art for Life’ project, whose aim is to create sustainable livelihood for practitioners of declining
traditional folk art forms.
The script is sometimes written by the editor of the organisation based on an initial study in the field, community feedback, and consultations as well as briefing from the client. In many instances, the community or specialised theatre groups also write their own stories and scripts based on their understanding of the social issue and key messages to be delivered. Thus, this form of street theatre is essentially script based to ensure that every show is identical and that consistency is maintained in the messages being given out to the rural audience. This consistency is a requirement of Contact Base’s theatre campaigns for community education and mobilisation to ensure that their message is not diluted and that the analysis of data collected during the post-show interactions are valid.

Script development for traditional folk forms is not always easy. Because of the lack of any other mode of entertainment in rural and remote areas, rural viewers like to watch long shows after their day’s work in the evenings. Consequently, traditional folk theatre formats are usually of three to four hours in duration, are performed in the evening and aim only to entertain the audience with no explicit intention of education. The structure of Contact Base’s campaign differs from this: New characters and messages are introduced to suit the campaign needs. Four or five shows are organised each day and the shows are ideally of 20–25 minutes duration followed by community interactions, the total length of engagement in each show being about 45 minutes to an hour. This is due to the fact that the shows are held in different locations within a village such as village haats and market corners, Panchayat office areas, village courtyards, in front of a local temples, and so on, to be able to address different sections of the village population. This mismatch between traditional practice and Contact Base’s requirements may lead to conflict, and often a middle path is reached in consultation with the traditional theatre groups. For example, the Domni group I interviewed said that they found the initial script Contact Base had given them unsuitable because it did not fit their traditional form. The Domni team then proposed to develop their own script and play with the messages provided, and Contact Base was open to the idea. The Domni team scripted and developed their own play based on message provided by Contact Base. Although some Gambhira teams also participated in Contact Base’s child marriage campaign in Malda, the Gambhira group I interviewed did not engage in it because they were not willing to modify the Duet form, which was traditionally performed impromptu, to a scripted theatre-like format for Contact Base’s campaign. However, the team did carry out child marriage campaigns for another UNICEF campaign using their traditional format. The folk theatre groups’ perspectives are discussed further in Section 5.2.6.
Planning

As part of conceptualising the campaign, the total number of shows to be organised in a village or locality and route chart (with broad show locations) are also planned by the organisation in consultation with the theatre groups and local people. The organisation believes that for any campaign to succeed it has to reach out to wide audiences in order to create the buzz about the campaign and therefore the issue. It is also important to give the local theatre groups the opportunity for carrying out enough shows so that the payment they receive from Contact Base per show totals to a satisfactory amount. Keeping both the factors in mind, the campaign is designed to carry out four or five shows a day and such a campaign can run for a number of days depending on the issue and the area to be covered. Because the shows are organised throughout the day, short productions are effective in retaining maximum interest and attention of the audience who watch these shows in between their household chores or daily work.

Post-show Interaction

Post show interactions are dynamic, and several issues regarding the social problem being addressed are discussed and community feedback is recorded. The first level of mobilisation of the audience to come up and speak in these post show interactions is initiated by a quiz where questions are asked about the social messages communicated through the show. For example, if a street theatre show has been performed on stopping child marriage, the quiz may start with questions about the names of the characters in the play and go into questions on the legal age of marriage of the girl child, availability of free school education, health related issues related to early girl child marriage, etc. Villagers are encouraged to come forward and answer and every ‘right answer’ as disseminated through the play is applauded by the entire team and the audience. This is a preliminary step to enthuse the audience to speak which lead to community interactions. The quiz and the post-show interactions not only reveal how much the audience has actually understood and internalised the social messages but also open up the platform to the audience to share their opinions, feelings, and grievances and clarify myths and misconceptions. Typically, only a few members of the audience come forward at first to interact, but if the show is able to emotionally affect the audience, more members from the audience come forward to speak to the theatre performers as well as the Contact Base coordinators. This often leads to discussions around the existing gaps and challenges, community feelings and opinions, and how things should be addressed in the local context. Among the members who stay back even after the show is over and participate in discussions, some community persons are identified who may be able to
lead community organization and action. Their contact details are taken at the show. After the shows, separate community meetings are organised with them for planning a way forward. Thus, an inclusive platform is created for knowledge sharing and joint consultations about the actions that the community can take to address their local problems. The creation of this kind of space for open discussion with the community is a critical part of the process.

Sometimes, if the community level grievances are strong regarding the issue being discussed, and the systemic gaps are serious, then the post show community interaction also gets heated with community level complaints and expressions of mistrust about the local administration. For example, when child education is highlighted as important in an argument against child marriage in the play, often it brings out community grievances at the end of the show about lack of school infrastructure, lack of teachers, lack of classrooms, and laxity on the part of the local administration. It sometimes takes skilled and strong local coordinators and theatre performers to close the discussion on a positive note and mobilise them to participate in community meetings to plan and take part in community action.

5.2.3 Follow Up to Street Theatre Shows

In order to mobilise the communities further, after the shows have been performed, the field coordinators carry out meetings and workshops after the shows when the local community people share further stories of community action or their vulnerabilities and ask for support. Contact Base believes that theatre shows alone cannot lead to social change and continuous meetings, workshops and development of local resource / action groups for creating local leaders to bring about social change is very important. The organisation also carries out meetings and workshops with the local administration, that is at the panchayat, block and district levels and link the community action groups or community network members to these respective officers or agencies so that a collaborative initiative can be undertaken at the local level.

The process of tracking actual social change which is a long term process is however not structured within the intervention which is why community-led action groups are formed and activated as part of the intervention strategy. The period of time for which the organisation works in any particular community is time-bound based on the campaign duration or the period of
intervention. Once the project team moves out of an area, personal contacts and relationships developed during community interactions help to gather information on social actions and changes taking place in those areas. Though the process of tracking social change in a campaigned area is not structured, the organisation sometimes continues to work in the same areas with other social issues and therefore does not lose touch with the local communities. Sometimes the level of involvement of the mobilised local communities with the theatre groups and the organisational coordinators becomes so high that they themselves continue to be in contact and request for any legal or social support that they may require in their social activism.

5.2.4 Illustration of Actual Theatre

The nature of the actual show varies from one place to another because different local theatre forms are used in different campaigns. Locations and timings of shows are usually predetermined and pre-announced. Typically, before a show starts, the performers play their instruments or use drums to attract and gather the audience. When the audience gathers around them the theatre show starts. The show always takes place at a location inside the village or the local market and is always a street performance. No stage is made. The audience gathers around the performers in a circle. It is a scripted show with a story that builds up to a conflict and a climax. The social messages are intertwined in the entire story and are embedded in the dialogues of all the characters. There is also a protagonist who is usually depicted as the senior person of the village, or a local health worker, or an NGO person or a Panchayat officer who is in a socially responsible role and is trusted by the villagers. Local gimmicks, masks, song and dance are used in the play for entertainment purposes. The audience often gets very involved and when the show ends, they start interacting freely with the actors. At the end of the show, field coordinators from Contact Base who accompany the theatre groups, along with the theatre actors ask questions to the audience about the show. A person from the audience who raises his or her hand is requested to come forward and say the answer. Correct answers are applauded thus increasing positive participation of the audience. Once audience members are motivated in this way to come forward and speak, the platform is opened up to interact with the audience and hear their problems, doubts, and grievances and discuss the solutions. Where relevant and feasible, Contact Base requests local stakeholders such as Anganwadi
workers, the Panchayat Pradhan, doctors, school teachers, etc. to be present to answer technical questions. The names, addresses and contacts of the active participants are also noted down for following up on forming action groups in future.

An audio visual documentation of an actual show on stopping child marriage, carried out by the tribal women’s SHG group of Bamongola, was observed. The play started with an announcement on the issue of child marriage and the names of the organisations supporting the campaign such as local government of Malda and UNICEF. Once audience gathered the play started with a tribal song and dance. The first scene was that of a village where a man, his wife and his daughter were levelling their field and another woman was attending to her field. As they continued to work in their field a woman on a cycle with a basket was passing them and stopped to ask about their well-being. She carried a basket of vegetables on her bicycle that she grew in her small field for sale to the villagers. While speaking to the couple, the bicycle-woman asked them about their daughter and expressed a lot of happiness upon hearing that she goes to school. When she asked the daughter why she was working in the field instead of going to school she replied that it was a Sunday and so school was closed. The bicycle-woman turned to the audience and mentioned that it was very important for the girls to go to school and study in order to build their futures. After her short speech, as the bicycle-woman rode away, the villagers working in the field also realised that it was noon and they ought to go home.

In the next scene, the man and the woman who were levelling their field was shown in a household setting. They were casually talking when the man informed his wife that there was a marriage proposal for their daughter from the village match-maker which he is seriously considering. His wife upon hearing this opposed the idea saying that their daughter is very young and she is supposed to study. She also said that she is ignorant and illiterate and she does not want her daughter to be like her, that her daughter should study and build her own future. Her husband became angry hearing this argument and told her that it is not important for girls to study and they should concentrate on household work. He would never let go of a good marriage proposal because that is what will define his daughter’s life in future and that is how the society expects women to be. Their argument heightened when their daughter came in. When her mother told her daughter about the marriage proposal her daughter started crying saying that she would not marry because she wanted to study till college. When her mother said that there was nothing that could be done she went away crying. In the next scene, the daughter is found narrating her situation to
the bicycle-woman from the first scene. The bicycle-woman after listening to her story said that she was not at the right age to marry. She turned to the audience and said that it was a mistake to marry a girl child. The right age for marriage for girls is 18 years of age and for the boys is 21 years of age before which it is illegal to marry them. She told the young girl to go home and promised that she would come to her rescue.

The next scene shows the marriage day when the girl is being prepared for marriage. Her parents are present along with other village women and the match-maker. At this moment the bicycle-woman enters the scene and asks about the marriage. Everybody becomes very happy to see her and the girl’s father told her that she should not leave without eating. She said that she had other guests who were standing outside and if he allowed she would call them. The girl’s father got very excited and told her to bring in her other guests. At this point the Panchayat Pradhan and the local police officer comes in. Everybody gets a little tense to see the police. The Panchayat Pradhan then accuses the girl’s father of child marriage and wanted to know who had fixed this marriage. Upon hearing that the village match maker and the girl’s father had decided it, he says that both of them are guilty and could be charged with 2 years of jail and 1 lakh rupees fine for carrying out this illegal act of child marriage. The local police officer also adds that he will immediately arrest the match-maker and the father and put them into jail. The match-maker and the father become very afraid to hear this and agree to stop the marriage immediately. The young girl and her mother were very happy to hear this. The Panchayat Pradhan then again turns to the audience and reiterates that young girls below 18 years of age should not be married off because their minds and bodies are not mature. Hence they would not be able to cope with married life. It is also a life risk for the young girls to get pregnant wherein both the mother and the baby can die. Finally the act of marrying young children is illegal, subject to jail and a huge fine. Then the bicycle-woman, police officer and the panchayat Pradhan leave the scene. This is where the actors froze and the play ended with another Santhal song and dance.

Immediately after the play ended, the NGO coordinators came forward to request the audience to stay back and answer a few questions from the play that they just watched. They also said that whoever would give the right answer will receive a small token gift from the group. The first question they asked was who had stopped the marriage of the young girl. A young lady from the audience raised her hand. She was requested to come forward to the centre of the stage. She came forward and answered that the person who stopped the marriage was the bicycle-woman. The
audience clapped at her right answer. The coordinators then asked about the right age of marriage and another woman from the audience came forward to answer it. Her answer was also right. The third question was about the issue that one should keep in mind when arranging their daughter’s or son’s marriage. Another woman came forward and said that the right age of marriage was the issue they should keep in mind and should not marry their children at an early age. The next question was about the punishment that one would suffer if he or she was found to marry their children at an early age. Two young ladies came forward again. One of them said that it was 2 years jail and 1 lakh rupees fine. The coordinator then asked the other lady what would she do if her marriage was arranged. She confidently said that she would refuse to marry because she wants to study in college and have a bright independent future. The audience applauded the response. All the women who had come forward to answer were given small jute key rings. After this, the coordinator announced that if anybody had any questions or would like to discuss anything, they could. Some of the audience members came forward to thank them for hosting this show. One person told them that this was a very important issue they were raising through their theatre campaign and that this kind of campaign was necessary. Then the audience dispersed.

It is interesting to note that the structure of the play is in many ways different from that of the show put on by Jana Sanskriti described in Chapter 4. Other than the street theatre format, the play has a more or less conventional and simple narrative structure. Unlike Jana Sanskriti’s play which explored the consequence of the actions of the antagonists and then came back to explore how the audience felt about the issue, Contact Base’s play is linear and designed to convey specific predetermined messages and information. The characters depicted in the play represent easily recognisable stakeholders, and usually include characters that are conventionally trusted within the community. For example, in the play described above, the police and the village leaders are portrayed as saviours, thus reinforcing relationships of power mandated by the political administrative structure. The girl and her mother show little agency and are represented as helpless victims until they are saved by the bicycle-woman and the authorities. The reasons given for delaying the age of marriage are more to do with health considerations rather than choice and freedom for girls to actualise their dreams. Audience feedback is taken mostly to ascertain that the message was successfully communicated, and identify interested audience members who could be potentially mobilised for further community action. Jana Sanskriti on the other hand is less
interested in providing information or solutions, and more interested in getting the audience to collectively think about and analyse the issues.

5.2.5 Theatre for Development Training process

The training process for the local folk theatre groups or community groups consists of two parts. One part of the training is about knowledge building of the performers on the social issue or problem to be addressed. This is done through participatory workshops where the participants share their own understanding of the problem and the ground realities and exploitations related to the problem. The trainers, who are usually members of the organisation, train them on the various dimensions and complexities of the issue at hand including the social, legal, psychological, physiological implications. Thus the problem is understood not as something local and personal but as a larger socio-cultural issue thus establishing the importance of the issue. The participants also learn about specific and relevant rights, laws, helpline numbers, etc., to be able to interact with and mobilise the audience in an informed way. Specific messages to be delivered through the campaign are also discussed and learned by the performers.

The second part of the training is about developing the actual theatre production. This is usually done in a workshop carried out by theatre specialists from the National School of Drama and other nationally acclaimed theatre schools, some of whom already work for the organisation, and some who may be hired for specific assignments. In the case of specialised folk theatre forms or community groups, the story-line and script are developed jointly in order to make the script relevant to the local audience. Then the script is refined and finalised by the editor of the organisation. The theatre development workshops focus on building capacities for initiating and managing community interactions after the play, and also train or improve the skills of the performers on body language, eye contact, and other theatrical qualities. Often, in case of professional theatre groups the final script is given to them and they are asked to develop the production on their own based on the script. The theatre groups have the freedom to use the script as a guideline and modify it to suit their own format keeping the social messages intact. When they are ready with their final production, the theatre specialists from the organisation review the production to finalise it for the campaign. Sometimes revisions are suggested and discussed keeping in mind maximum effectiveness
of the shows. Interactivity of the shows is also strengthened as needed. The folk theatre groups are specifically trained on developing short productions, which is often a major shift from their traditional formats. This is a challenging task for the trainers, and with folk theatre teams, the length of campaign productions may exceed the twenty five minutes that is considered ideal by the organisation.

When training community groups who are participating in theatre for the first time, the training process is lengthier, wherein they are capacitated in communication skills, life skills, and various theatrical aspects. First, workshops are held for two to three days with the community groups (of women, youth, children) to break their shyness and inhibitions and build their confidence, self-esteem and basic communication skills (listening, voice modulation, eye contact, body language, etc). Theatre based activities such as games and storytelling are used to train the group members on the complexities of the various social issues and problems and participants are encouraged to voice out their thoughts, concerns and feelings regarding these social problems and oppressions. Through participatory activities, the participants are also made aware of their rights and the need for their active participation in addressing the social problem. Self-introspection and analysis of the problem in their personal lives are important components of this training. Activities are also held to nurture team spirit so that the individuals are able to work as one group for the same cause. After the first two or three days of training on the social issue, communication and life skills, the actual theatre production development starts. Another workshop of four to five days is held to actually train the groups in interactive social theatre. In this workshop they are trained to develop a story-line and script. Based on the final script as edited by the organisation and the key messages to be delivered, the production is then developed. Various theatrical skills are developed, such as image building, character development, development of the scenes, as well as initiation and management of audience interaction. These scenes are then put together to develop a complete theatre production.

In cases of both professional folk theatre groups and community groups, after the performance is ready, coordinators from the organisation along with theatre specialists check the final performance to see whether messages are being delivered correctly before taking the show to the field.
Contact Base often uses local traditional folk theatre forms in their theatre-based campaigns. The rationale for using a local folk theatre format is that the rural audience is familiar and attracted to this mode of entertainment and therefore cultural barriers can be overcome easily. Folk theatre is an integral part of village life entertainment and therefore attracts the rural audience. Folk theatre enables easy comprehension of the social messages and the villagers are easily mobilised to participate because of their acceptance of a form, cultural expression, and dialect that is their own. Contact Base tries to maintain the traditional format of the productions as much as possible. What is new is the platform for community interactions after the shows on the issues being depicted in the play itself. Also, traditional folk productions, which are more than an hour long, and sometimes even goes on for three to four hours, are redesigned to be 35–45 minute performances including scope for community interactions. To serve their purposes, Contact Base needs folk theatre forms that are traditionally interactive, dialogue based, and deals with social issues from day to day village life. It also requires the productions to be scripted and not improvised. These requirements mean that not all folk theatre forms can be adapted for use in social campaigns, and in fact Contact Base has been able to engage traditional folk theatre groups in very specific regions. Examples include Ramlila in Bihar and Jharkhand, Kala Jattha in Rajasthan, and Daskathiya and Pala in Orissa.

Malda is home to two such folk theatre forms, Domni and Gambhira. Both forms have been used by Contact Base in their campaign against child marriage in Malda, as well as in other projects. As part of this study, I interviewed one Domni team and one Gambhira team to understand their perspectives.

Domni is a satirical rustic folk theatre form of the Malda district in West Bengal and a popular entertainment for the local villagers. There are no female artists, and men dress up as women and play the role of female characters when necessary. The script is developed locally by the artists, and songs and dances are important parts of the show. Traditionally Domni was performed as small skits mainly on day to day social events, but over time the form evolved to be a longer production. It is traditionally performed in the Khotta language (a mixture of Hindi and Bengali), which is the primary language of the villages where it is popular, though it is often translated into Bengali.
or Bhojpuri when performed outside Malda. In the usual Domni theatre format, the play starts with a song and dance in order to attract the audience. Once the audience gathers, the main play starts. The duration of the actual play is usually 30–45 minutes and the entire show including songs and dance is one to one and half hour in duration. For Contact Base campaigns they needed to shorten their entire production to 20 minutes, with the post show community interactions taking up another 15–20 minutes. The Domni group that was interviewed said that Contact Base had initially given them a ready script, but they could not use it as their traditional form could not be suitably adapted for it. Instead, they proposed to develop their own script and play with the messages provided by Contact Base. Contact Base was open to the idea, and so they scripted and developed their own play. They said that as Domni traditionally deals with social issues they felt good to reach out to people with useful information, and appreciated Contact Base for giving them the opportunity to take part in a large social campaign using their traditional folk theatre. They reported that their shows against child marriage have been very popular, and the audience not only came forward to discuss the issue of child marriage after the shows but also suggested more vulnerable and problematic areas and communities where such shows could be performed. The play on child marriage was so popular within the community that even beyond the campaign when the Domni team got calls to do professional entertainment shows they were often asked to perform the same show.

The Domni group members were asked whether they felt that they had to compromise their creative desires to work with Contact Base. They said that they did not, as Contact Base had very little involvement in developing their script, apart from checking that the content of the messages remained intact. How the messages are delivered through the Domni songs or through interactions between the characters in the play were decided solely by the group. As the group is a local group and Domni is a local popular form of entertainment, they felt that they were in the best position to understand how to make the play stronger and more attractive with a local flavour so that it can involve the local audience fully. Contact Base recognised this potential and gave full freedom to the group to develop their production.

Gambhira is another satirical folk theatre of Malda, traditionally consisting of several parts. One part of the entire production, called the ‘Duet’, is most effective for social campaigns. This is because the Duet is a conversational form, where two actors argue and debate on a social issue. In Duet, a conflict arises because there is one actor who speaks in favour of the issue and another who
speaks against it. The argument continues and at one point of time the person who is saying the ‘right’ thing wins. In the case of social campaigns, through this argument, messages are given out to the audience. Traditionally, this Duet form continues for 30–40 minutes, and is an impromptu form with no prior written script. The messages are delivered through impromptu conversations and arguments. So, in every show the conversation or dialogues may differ from the previous show. Even the jokes and the comedy acts change from one show to another. When asked about the degree of audience involvement, the Gambhira artist I interviewed explained that while the Duet is going on it is difficult to involve the audience because the entire argument, dialogue and the resulting conflict and resolution are all part of the performance which has a rhythm, tune, and theatrical aspect and involving the audience in the middle breaks the flow. So, the solutions or the right messages are always given out from within the performing group. He also added that in a theatre form it is easier to interact with the audience but in Gambhira it is difficult. The group has performed shows on child marriage for UNICEF from 2010–2012, and for Contact Base on campaigns related to reproductive child health. Speaking about shows as part of their social theatre campaigns, he explained that their audience in general could identify with what was shown in the Gambhira performances, and reported that after some shows parents came up to them and cried and asked for help to get back their daughters who were married off at an early age but have not been heard from since.

Addressing the question of whether they had to compromise in order to work on social theatre, he said that their group was not willing to compromise on tradition, and pointed out that they chose not to work on Contact Base’s anti-child marriage campaign because they did not agree to the requirements of a certain number of characters and a predetermined script. Instead they suggested that Contact Base should use a proper theatre group and not a Gambhira group because the original form of Gambhira could not be maintained in such a campaign. For the UNICEF campaign on child marriage that they worked on, only the songs which were scripted beforehand were reviewed by UNICEF, and not the rest of the performance.

It is interesting to note that four other Gambhira teams did participate in Contact Base’s anti-child marriage campaign in Malda. As they were not interviewed, their perspective on this issue is not known. It is possible that they were more open to change, or perhaps agreed because of financial necessities.
5.2.7 Challenges in Theatre for Development

As Contact Base works in concert with local administration, it does not face any particular opposition to the performance of shows. However, getting sufficient participation by women audience when addressing women’s issues is often a challenge. Especially in the case of sensitive social issues which have strong social sanctions, the organisation sometimes faces challenges in mobilising the community to participate in actual theatre performances. Sometimes, when women’s issues such as reproductive child health and child marriage are addressed, women get involved and respond actively to the shows by asking more questions and interacting freely. In such a situation, often their husbands stop them from coming to the shows and even beat them if they defy them and go out to watch the shows. It takes a long time to mobilise the men, make them aware of the issues which contribute to the well-being of the society as a whole. Thus breaking myths and misconceptions embedded in social practices is difficult and is a challenging task requiring long term interventions.

In addition, specific projects may have particular challenges associated with them. Contact Base mentioned two such instances. One was a project on the Jan Kerosene Pariyojana (Jaiswal and Singh 2008), where the plays specifically targeted corruption by kerosene dealers who did not implement the provisions of the scheme. As these kerosene dealers were a powerful interest group in the villages, they forcibly stopped several shows. Another example was Contact Base’s pulse-polio campaign carried out for UNICEF. Working in Muslim areas in Kolkata, where opposition to vaccination programs was particularly high, the theatre teams faced resistance. Although the shows were not interrupted, the resistance came in the form of complete rejection of the campaign messages and the issue, which made it almost impossible for the theatre team to initiate even the first level of dialogue that is required for a rational discussion of the problem.

5.2.8 Malda Project

Contact Base specifically identified their intervention in Malda for our study and discussed it in detail in the interview with respect to our goal of understanding the process of women’s empowerment through social theatre. Discussions were held about the specific project on stopping child marriage and child exploitation in Malda carried out by the organisation during 2009–12. Community women
respondents who were part of this campaign were also interviewed in this study to understand how theatre for development affected them.

As explained by the representative of the organisation, the project was funded by UNICEF, and its goal was to empower children, their parents, and the larger community to create an alert and informed society with knowledge of child and human rights and laws protecting children, and mobilise them to stop child marriage and child servitude. The respondent explained that the strategy has been to mobilise and build capacity of the most vulnerable adolescents to enable them to seek their rights and to advocate against child marriage in their own communities. This initiative was, as termed by the organisation, to ‘Sensitise- Motivate-Capacitate-Network-Initiate Action.’

The key messages addressed in the campaign were:

- Child marriage is legally prohibited for girls under 18 years and boys under 21 years.
- Physical and social problems posed by child marriage. The following problems of child marriage were highlighted:
  - Severe health problems: anaemia, etc.
  - Early pregnancy affecting health of newborn/ increased risk of mortality
  - Many children adding to number of mouths to feed and leading to a vicious cycle of poverty.
  - Domestic violence/ Sexual violence.
- Community needs to be proactive to stop child marriage and dowry. District and Block Social Welfare Office may be contacted for support.
- Boys and girls are equal.
- It is the parent’s duty to provide the girl child with educational opportunities. Marrying off the daughter is not their sole responsibility.
- Children are trafficked under the guise of marriage to grooms in distant states. It is important to check the credentials of the prospective grooms.
- Contact Panchayat for availing of various schemes for girls and children from poor and deprived communities.
• Importance of registering marriage.

The intervention of Contact Base had started in 2009 in Malda. From July to December, the communication and mobilisation programme was undertaken across all the blocks of Malda district covering 30 villages, two in each of the 15 blocks. The campaign team worked in close coordination with UNICEF and the District Social Welfare Department, Malda.

Hindus, Muslims, and tribal communities such as the Santals and Pahanas live in the thirty villages. Child marriage is common especially among the poorer sections of the population, and there is also high vulnerability to trafficking. The communication plan for the project was prepared after a need assessment study across all the blocks. Workshops were held to train fifteen local theatre teams, of which three were Domni groups, four were Gambhira groups, and the remaining were theatre teams. The teams were trained in theatre-based communication on problems of early marriage. Around 150 interactive theatre shows reached out directly to more than 33,000 villagers across fifteen blocks sensitising villagers on problems of early marriage, schemes available for education and skill development of girls, and laws against child marriage. Seventy five sensitisation meetings were held covering around 1500 villagers in 30 villages including SHG women, Anganwadi workers, ASHAs, Moulavis, Panchayat members, teachers, parents, and local NGOs. Thirty sensitisation workshops have been held with nearly 900 schoolgoing as well as out-of-school girls to make them aware of their rights and the problems of early marriage, and to encourage them to take a leading role in sensitising their peers.

In late 2009, UNICEF and the Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, Govt. of West Bengal held a State Consultation with officers and NGOs to draw up an action plan. The NGO also facilitated a workshop with children from across the state where they shared their thoughts.

In early 2010, a state level festival was organised with adolescents and children from across the state who presented their manifesto on stopping child marriage. In April and May, 2010, a more intense campaign was undertaken in two blocks of Malda, namely Englishbazar and Manikchak to build awareness on the prevention of early marriage. Sixty street theatre shows were held at various locations in Englishbazar and Manikchak. Adolescent girls were trained in theatre based communication to build awareness among their peers through meetings and shows.
The theatre show schedule was prepared in consultation with Panchayat Samity Sabhapati, Block Welfare officers and Village Panchayat members and staff. Folk artists actively participated in planning the campaign schedule. The overall plan was then shared with the District Social Welfare Officer. The shows reached out to more than 13,400 people across twelve Gram Panchayats. The average audience per show was 200–250. Twelve workshops were held with both school-going children and out-of-school girls. After the theatre shows the local club members, SHG members, members of CBOs and GPs were consulted to mobilise them and arrange workshops with adolescent girls and boys. In some cases teachers were enthused to participate in the workshops held in their locality after watching the shows. 420 participants attended the workshops. The objective of the workshop was to make the girls aware of their rights, problems of early marriage, vulnerability to trafficking and HIV/AIDS, and to encourage them to take a leading role in sensitising their peers. Discussions were also held on the various laws against early marriage, dowry, domestic violence, etc. Participatory activities were held to bring about attitudinal orientation to work together for prevention of child marriage. Flip charts were used to sensitise them on problems of child marriage, sexual harassment, dowry and also women’s health issues.

During 2012, between June and October, Contact Base again undertook an intensive campaign on prevention of child marriage and promotion of safe motherhood and newborn health in four blocks of Malda. The communication interventions focused on the most vulnerable blocks with high prevalence of child marriage. The campaigns were carried out by local theatre groups. Children’s workshops were also conducted in each of the four blocks with the objective of training ‘child champions’ to monitor the situation of adolescent girls and building their capacity for sustaining advocacy and communication against child marriage. In the month of July, forty seven street theatre shows were performed by the local theatre groups in thirty GPs of the four blocks with a total reach of 6,600 people. In the month of August, thirty nine shows were held across thirty one GPs of Kaliachak-I, II and III reaching out to 6,800 people. In September, fourteen street theatre shows were held in one block reaching out to a total of 1,700 people.

Contact Base’s representative stated that an assessment study they carried out after the intervention through interviews and group discussions with the project participants indicated that the campaign had had a considerable impact. According to their project report, there is improved awareness on problems of early marriage, trafficking, rights of the girl child and laws for her protection, opportunities for education and skill empowerment. After the campaign and
sensitisation, villagers have been able to stop early marriage of girls in their village. Village girls, PRI members, and SHG members have provided leadership. In some cases villagers are taking care to check credentials before marrying off the daughters. Parents have approached Panchayats to avail of Book Grant facility for SC/ST girls. Youth Clubs and Gram Unnayan Samitis (Village Development Society) in some villages have started mobilising against early marriage. Two-way communication channels helped in identifying problems and needs at the grassroots level. Block level meetings have been held with BDOs, BWOs, ICDS supervisors, PRI members, etc., to share the learning from the awareness campaign, community meetings, and workshops. The villagers have stressed on building up a system where villagers can seek support of law enforcement authorities. It was observed in 2012, when a new set of street theatre shows started, that the adolescent girls’ groups formed during the 2009–2010 campaign had expanded by their own efforts. Several new members had been added to the groups. The groups developed new productions and planned their own shows. They mentioned being regular at school and making lists of out-of-school adolescents in their villages. It was also found that they had stopped child marriages in a few blocks of Malda such as Mahendrapur at Harishchandrapur-I and Daulatpur at Harishchandrapur-II.

5.3 PROCESSES OF COMMUNITY ORGANISING AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

The community groups who engaged with Theatre for Development of Contact Base have organised themselves to undertake collective action and lead social activism at the grassroots level. Such community driven activities have tended to take the shape of theatre campaigns and shows to generate awareness and activate the minds of the rural communities on various forms of oppression and social problems. In addition to such shows, the sensitised and active community groups have also organised themselves to take collective action against the social vices and exploitations. By the design of their interventions, the community or folk theatre groups who engage with Theatre for Development carry out massive campaigns with the mentorship and support of Contact Base. As Contact Base works on a project basis funded by government or non-government sources, funding for the shows stops after a certain time. However, it has been found that the community members, having been capacitated by that time to run their own campaigns and take ownership of the social problems and oppressions, often continue and sustain the activism on their own.
Specifically in Malda where the interviews were carried out, a number of community groups have become active and organised, and in addition to performing social theatre also act as community watchdogs and lead social activism. For example, the local NGO, Jana Kalyan Samity, had started performing social theatre only after getting trained by Contact Base. The social issues on which they performed include reproductive child health, prevention of child marriage, and protecting rights of consumers through consumer forums. Once they learned the theatre for development method they started developing their own productions on many other issues pertaining to their own locality related to sanitation, dignity of women, etc. They continue to perform regular social theatre campaigns in Malda, and the NGO as a whole works for local community development. Similarly, the folk theatre group of Domni continues to perform the theatre shows on anti-child marriage to sustain awareness generation and community mobilisation in the villages. However, none of these shows take the form of the systematic campaign executed with Contact Base. When they go to the villages to perform their usual Domni shows, sometimes they perform the anti-child marriage shows. There are times when they are also invited and hired by local community organisations to perform the anti-child marriage shows in their villages.

The women’s SHG of Bamongola and the Adolescent Girls’ Group who were trained on social theatre perform such shows only upon invitation as they do not have the financial resources to carry out such shows regularly in a campaign mode. But they continue social activism to stop child marriage and bring more and more girl children to schools with the help of local police, health workers and the administration. They carry out meetings with parents who are prone to marrying off their young daughters and sensitise them about the importance of their daughter’s education. In many cases, they are able to stop child marriages by advocating with the family members and in many cases they use legal force to threaten the parents and stop these marriages. Some of these incidents were narrated by the adolescent girls of the theatre cum action group members and the women’s group members.

A girl in the Adolescent Girls’ Group from Chanchol I refused to go ahead with her own marriage. Inspired by her, 3–4 other girls of the village refused their marriage proposals too. The girls’ group also stopped 3 marriages. Through their continuous activism, the environment of their village has changed as all the adolescent girls are better informed and are more confident. With the support of this empowered adolescent theatre cum action group, many of the girls who are still out of school and therefore more vulnerable have continued to resist pressure for marriage. Contact Base
mentioned that another adolescent group from Kaliachak who were also trained in theatre based activism staged a play called ‘Think a bit’ about a story of a girl who refused to get married. It influenced the girl children of that village so much that 12 girls in that village said ‘no’ to marriage proposals. The mothers after watching the show also became better informed about how their daughters can be harmed, and stood up against their husbands and other village elders and stopped under-age marriages of their daughters.

As a result of long and intense campaigns in different areas of Malda, many other action groups have been formed who are also taking action to create a community safety net within the villages to ensure safety of their children and stop trafficking of girl children under the cover of marriage or job proposals. In many areas of intervention the adolescent girls who watched the shows and became aware that child marriage is an illegal and punishable offence are stopping potential child marriage cases with the help of local police or Social Welfare Officers of the district and the block. They also continue to create awareness about the risks of human trafficking and the need to register marriages among their friends and neighbours. The informed and aware villagers are also particular about checking the credentials of the potential groom before marrying their daughters. Local youth clubs have become alert about people who come to their villages with marriage proposals and also help the villagers to check credentials and provide support to the more vulnerable poor villagers. Parents have approached panchayats to avail Book Grants facility for SC/ ST girls which shows the proactiveness of the parents about education of their daughters. The campaigns of Contact Base consciously involved multiple stakeholders during the shows in order to facilitate local support to community action groups. School teachers, health workers, Gram panchayat members, and local youth clubs were involved in facilitating the activism of the community groups. For example, the Head Masters of local schools started discussions on the ill effects of early child marriage and dowry, laws against domestic violence, and child marriage in life skill education classes in schools. The local health workers started holding monthly meetings with adolescent girls about health and hygiene issues and the risks of child marriage. The District Social Welfare Officer of Malda started sensitising the Gram Panchayat people and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) supervisors, who are not directly linked to child protection work, in order to create stronger local vigilance. The police also started a help line and the district started a local CHILDLINE in partnership with the CHILDLINE India Foundation (CIF), the nodal agency of the Union

\[4\text{http://shelterofmalda.in/child%20line.html}\]
Ministry of Women and Child Development responsible for implementing setting up, managing and monitoring the CHILDLINE 1098 service all over the country. With the help of such facilities and sensitised local stakeholders, the community / children’s action groups could stop girl child marriages with the help of Block Development Officers, Sub-divisional officers and District Social Welfare Officers.

Beyond local activism, the need was felt to proactively reach out to the policy makers and funders with the voices of the grassroots to influence policies and address the problems of top-down development approaches that are often delinked from actual realities in the field. With support from Contact Base, 170 girl children from the intervention areas came together and participated in a youth festival where they performed theatre shows, drew posters on stopping child marriage and continuing education for girl children, and themselves prepared a manifesto which they presented to the district officials (DM, ADM), the Child Protection Officer of UNICEF (the funder of this programme), and voiced their needs and feelings at a state level celebration of their achievements in the field. Though Contact Base organised and facilitated the programme, the girl children received a wider platform to share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. They received recognition for their courage from a wider group of people which gave them a boost to continue their activism with more confidence. This also mobilised and enthused more adolescent girls in the surrounding villages who were not directly part of the intervention to take action against the exploitation of the girl child, thus generating a movement against child marriage and child exploitation run by a larger and a more independent network of adolescent girls.

5.4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented the process of Theatre for Development and how it creates awareness and mobilises community action. The different stages of the theatre production have been outlined in detail to demonstrate how it creates a participatory and interactive platform at the end of each theatre show for generating dialogue and discussion with the audience. The production process of Theatre for Development is also an important aspect which starts with knowledge enhancement about the issues to be dealt with through theatre and capacity development in communication, theatrical skills, and actual production development. The chapter also highlights the challenges
faced in performing such theatre within the community, and explains in detail the project in Malda which was the specific intervention studied as part of this research.

In the next Chapter, we provide a comparative analysis of the two forms of theatre practised by Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base, namely Theatre of the Oppressed and Theatre for Development, particularly in terms of their ideological underpinnings, organisational structure, relationship with the community, theatre formats, expected outcomes, research and documentation, and funding of the interventions.