ABSTRACT

The use of theatre beyond entertainment on stage has a long history. Through changing times, it has been used to mobilise social change through community education and empowerment, raise consciousness, voice concerns, and take actions towards one’s own development. Following the pioneering work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal in the 1970s, strongly participatory forms of social theatre emerged as an effective instrument of social development overriding the overarching importance of state over its people. This research study explores how two organisations in West Bengal, both inspired by Boal’s philosophy and methods, use Theatre for the Oppressed and Theatre for Development methodology to bring about positive changes with respect to rights-based issues in their fields of action. The research has delved into the analysis and comparison of the two processes to understand their similarities and differences and how that affects social development work. An important focus of the study has been the analysis of women’s empowerment through the use of social theatre, especially through the lens of Foucault’s notions of power relations and resistance. As Boal’s methodology has been the main inspiration for the two cases under study, the study has also explored conceptual intersections of Boal and Foucault’s work. The analysis of how theatre has affected women’s empowerment includes a discussion of the more nuanced post structuralist analysis of ‘agency’ as well as the more simplistic framework which explains empowerment through the three stages of resource-agency-outcome. The research has also tried to identify factors that have eased and promoted developments happening through community-led action mobilised by theatre-based approaches and factors that have hindered such movements, noting that theatre as a tool for community education and empowerment is helped by a conducive state-supported environment that supports community-led actions. Through an in-depth case study approach, this research has laid out the scope for furthering research in this sector in India to create an increasing body of knowledge on this important area of work that has not yet been adequately explored.