INTRODUCTION

Social theatre explores the use of theatrical forms for social development, drawing on the potential of theatre to involve and transform its participants. Social theatre evolved during the 1960s and 70s and underwent various experimentations and creative nurturing to develop it into a tool for participatory development communication for alternative learning and community dialogue to bring about collective activism at the grassroots. This evolution of social theatre was in line with new alternative development theories which emerged around the same time that challenged the then prevalent theory of development that equated progress with modernisation and industrialisation, based on the historical experience of the West, and established the need to involve local people in the design and process of their own development. Social theatre is also used by proponents of the more recent theory of post-development, which rejects any externally imposed agenda of development on principle and believes that change can only happen through community-led grassroots activism within a society that is achieved through endogenous discourses that shape the realities of the community and empower them to act.

Theatre in India dates back to the early first millennium or perhaps even earlier, when it flourished under the patronage of Hindu kings in their courts and temples. After the tenth century, state patronage of theatre declined particularly in North India following successive Muslim invasions and subsequent Islamic rule. Theatre traditions reemerged in the villages of India, nurtured in part by Vaisnavite Bhakti movements, in regional forms and languages throughout the subcontinent and developed many isolated but rich traditions from the fifteenth century through the nineteenth century. British colonisation gave rise to another tradition of theatre, largely disconnected from indigenous theatre, that took deep roots particularly in the metropolitan cities of Calcutta and Mumbai. Imitating the proscenium structure of the English theatre of the time, professional theatre flourished for the larger part of a century. A concerted effort to utilise theatre as a political tool to popularise communist ideologies and expand the works movement began in the 1940s under the auspices of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), initiating a new direction in Indian
theatre. Although the IPTA did not survive in its original form for long, its ideology lived on the
group theatre movement in Calcutta as well as other parts of the country, eventually leading to
the rise of street theatre, which rejected the Western proscenium format in favour of the structure
of indigenous theatre formats which were much better suited to performances without elaborate
setups. In particular, Badal Sircar’s Third Theatre was conceived as a confluence of the urban
proscenium theatre and indigenous rural folk forms, and was influenced by international theatre
personalities such as Jerzy Grotowski, Julian Beck, Judith Malina, and Richard Schechner.

The aspect of folk theatre that most attracted the street theatre movement was its lack of
ornamentation, and indeed its willingness to obviate the need for ornamentation by appealing to the
imagination of the audience, an aspect that had also influenced Rabindranath Tagore, and one that
is missing from traditional Western theatre. However, another aspect of folk theatre is its essentially
participatory nature that admits space for dialogue with the audience. This is the aspect that
is more relevant for social theatre practitioners, and when Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base, two
NGOs in West Bengal, introduced social theatre in rural Bengal to initiate and sustain community
education and empowerment through theatre, it was well taken by the rural communities as they
were already exposed to this kind of theatre. Thus West Bengal’s rich history of theatre and an
encouraging environment for its growth enabled the two organisations to introduce theatre based
activism at the grassroots.

The social theatre based work of these two organisations, Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base, is
the subject matter of this thesis.

1.1 Scope of the Study

Variations of the idea of using social theatre to bring about social change have been applied in
various parts of the world. These approaches have handled the various concerns and problems
associated with social theatre in their own ways, changing and adapting the methodology to specific
cultural contexts and social settings for creating acceptance, problem identification, and inspiration
to participate in the process of one’s own development. This study concerns two such approaches
as implemented by two very different organisations working in the Indian state of West Bengal:
Jana Sanskriti working with Theatre of the Oppressed, and Contact Base working with Theatre for
Development. These applications are based on different theoretical perspectives, and in this study, we critically examine the work of these two organisations and analyse how they apply theatre as a tool for social development for securing community rights through community-led collective action as well as for catalysing the process of women’s empowerment.

Jana Sanskriti is an organisation that builds upon Augusto Boal’s concept of ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’. It was formed in 1985 by a group of dedicated individuals with the goal of using theatre for social change. Jana Sanskriti aims to empower oppressed people by stimulating their analytical thought processes and encouraging them to initiate constructive plans on their own. Through theatre, they try to open up dialogue, which they believe can create a space for rational thinking and community leadership in the social development process.

Contact Base, a social enterprise established in 2000 in West Bengal, also known popularly as banglanatak dot com after their website (www.banglanatak.com), uses theatre for community education to bring about social change and empowerment of the marginalised through community-led action.

This study tries to identify how these two forms adapt existing social theatre models, and also try to understand the factors that make social theatre effective in bringing about community-led action at the grassroots. The two applications will also be compared to understand the differences in their processes and their outcomes.

Theatre is at times a form of didactic communication which contains the risks of being designed and organised by the ‘learned’ for the ‘ignorant’, with the former and not the latter deciding what to communicate and how much to communicate. In this context, the case studies of Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base will explore the bottom-up and inclusive approaches used in their methods vis-a-vis the traditional top-down approach towards development.

1.2 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The study will delve into the dynamics of the various processes used in theatre of the oppressed and theatre for development methods, which will contribute not only to the academic understanding of how social theatre works, but also strengthen the work of practitioners in the social development sector using participatory communication methods. There are university courses on development
communication, and UN bodies and NGOs have an increasing interest in using social theatre. The study will contribute to the understanding of the processes and practices of social theatre and the way it affects participatory initiatives.

Women’s empowerment is increasingly being considered as a major area of theoretical and empirical study as well as in policy work and intervention strategies by the government and developmental agencies working with development issues.

It is not only considered a goal in itself but also a critical factor in improving the conditions of rural marginalised women as well as their wider community, reducing poverty, and bringing about overall social development. This study explores the methodology of social theatre with a particular focus on how social theatre affects women and contributes to their process of empowerment. The topic is also of personal interest to me because I have worked in the area of social theatre for ten years and have gathered hands-on experience on how theatre affects social action. This engagement motivated me to study the methodology of social theatre in a systematic manner and add to the existing literature by highlighting the distinctiveness of the practice of social theatre in West Bengal, its effects on the participating communities and their reactions and actions. I feel that concrete case studies will enable future practitioners to understand the process of social theatre better and consider it as a potential tool for social empowerment.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to answer the following questions.

- How are different forms of social theatre such as theatre of the oppressed and theatre for development being practiced through organisational interventions in West Bengal?

- Has social theatre empowered the rural marginalised women communities to organise and negotiate for their rights, and if so, how?

- What are the ways in which social theatre has mobilised rural communities to take social action?
1.4 OBJECTIVES

There are three broad objectives of this study that are related but separate. The first objective is to understand the processes of social theatre, specifically Theatre of the Oppressed and Theatre for Development, as practiced by Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base in West Bengal. A second objective is to understand if and how social theatre interventions have affected the process of empowerment of rural women, and how these women negotiate and integrate traditional practices and value systems with new messages and practices. A third objective is to understand the process of community-led action initiated by social theatre.

1.5 CONCEPTUALISATION AND OPERATIONALISATION

In this section, we give operational definitions of the key conceptual terms used in this study. See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of the nuances associated with these terms.

**Social Theatre:** Social Theatre is the type of theatre where the issue of social development is given more importance than theatrical aesthetics. It is ‘theatre with specific social agendas’ and may include the following characteristics: It is performed in different spaces depending on the participant communities, but typically not in spaces where theatre is usually performed. Its aim is to build self-esteem, confidence, and the capacity to manage emotions, and create new approaches to learning. It facilitates participatory community development and creates leaders at the grassroots level to take charge of their own development. It accommodates ‘non-performers’ from among the audience into performances.

**Theatre of the Oppressed:** The Theatre of the Oppressed, developed in the early 1970s by Brazilian director and activist Augusto Boal and described in his 1979 book ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’, is a participatory theatre that fosters democratic and cooperative forms of interaction among participants and initiates a ‘rehearsal of life’ through theatre designed for people to collectively evolve ways of fighting back against oppression in their daily lives.\(^1\)

**Forum Theatre:** Forum Theatre is a particular form or branch\(^2\) of Theatre of the Oppressed which presents a scene or a play that must necessarily show a situation of oppression that the

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\(^1\)http://brechtforum.org/abouttop
\(^2\)Other forms include Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre, and Newspaper Theatre.
Protagonist does not know how to fight against, and fails. The audience is invited to replace this Protagonist, and act out — on stage and not from the audience — possible solutions, ideas, and strategies. Those who do so then become ‘spect-actors’ (a term coined by Boal). The other actors improvise the reactions of their characters facing each new intervention, so as to allow a sincere analysis of the real possibilities of using those suggestions in real life. All spect-actors have the same right to intervene and play their ideas. Forum Theatre is thus a collective rehearsal for reality.3

Theatre for Development: Theatre for Development is a type of social theatre used in certain Asian and African countries. It is a participatory and interactive community education technique designed for bringing about social change and community empowerment.

Marginalised rural women: Marginalised rural women are those women who live in villages and who suffer social inequality, by virtue of their gender, caste, class and other social markers, and are excluded from enjoying social and human rights in a society. In our study, these villages are located in the Indian state of West Bengal.

Women’s empowerment: Empowerment is a nuanced concept that is difficult to define precisely. As an operational definition, we consider empowerment to be the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. However, more than a fixed outcome, it should be thought of as an ongoing process of resisting and redefining existing relations of power, both individually and collectively, in order to give women greater voice in their families, communities, and the larger society.

This thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter 2, we review literature and establish the context for our study. In Chapter 3, we discuss the theoretical framework and analysis methodology used. In Chapters 4 and 5, we describe our findings on the two organisations under study, Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base, and analyse how their interventions lead to collective organisation within the communities they work with/impact. In Chapter 6, we present a comparison between the theatre processes of the two organisations. In Chapter 7, we specifically address the role of these forms of social theatre in empowering women. Finally, we conclude with a discussion in Chapter 8.