RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents details of the research design of this study including its philosophical underpinnings, theoretical framework, and the actual research strategy as well as the empirical techniques applied. In particular, the case study approach which has been used to carry out the research has been discussed in detail along with research methods, research setting, sampling method and size, methods of data analysis, and limitations of the study.

3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL WORLDVIEW: INTERPRETIVISM

Interpretivism is a branch of epistemology wherein social scientists study the subjective meanings of social actions (Bryman 2012). According to interpretive researchers, social reality is constructed through language, consciousness, and shared meanings. The philosophical base of interpretive research is hermeneutics and phenomenology (Boland Jr 1986). In an interpretivist framework, studies aim to understand a phenomenon through the interpretations of the people involved in it. Interpretive research does not define dependent and independent variables from beforehand but tries to capture all the complexities of meanings that people generate within a context (Kaplan and Maxwell 2005).

Immanuel Kant put forward the idea that knowledge of the world is not only based on direct observation and from particular experiences of the people but on how these are perceived, interpreted, and understood by the people who are reflecting on what happens. Therefore, it is valuable to consider the human interpretations of the social world and give importance to both the respondent’s and the researcher’s interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. Another proponent of interpretivist thinking is William Dilthey who upheld the importance of people’s ‘lived experiences’ which always happen within a particular historical, social, and cultural context and helps to understand particular actions within the relevant context (Ritchie et al. 2003).
This study tries to capture the lived experiences and participants’ own interpretations of how social theatre has affected their lives, and in what context their lives have undergone change facilitated by social theatre. Social theatre itself is a phenomenon that is grounded on human interpretations of what they see, experience, and observe and how they reflect on their collective experiences to take social action.

3.2 Theoretical framework: Social Constructivism

The theory of Social Constructivism as described by Berger and Luckmann (1991) starts with the basic idea that ‘the world of everyday life is an inter-subjective world’ which is presented to an individual as an ‘objective reality’. Society is characterised by an ever-ensuing ongoing process, generating and furthering subjective meanings for social beings in a dialectical manner. The relationship between individuals and the social world, both in its subjective and objective aspects, remains dialectical, involving a never-ending, ever-recreating social consciousness. Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by individuals and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world. Individuals, not in their isolation, but in their collectivities, interact with others and act upon their social environment, which in turn acts back upon them.

The pre-given objective reality of the world presented to an individual contains common sense knowledge of the world that is an interpretation of everyday life already ordered in patterns. It is a shared reality with ‘others’. The most important knowledge of the ‘other’ takes place in the face-to-face situation, which is a prototypical case of social interaction. The interaction with others in everyday life is constantly affected by the common participation in the available stock of knowledge. The language used in everyday world continuously provides an individual with the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which everyday life has meaning for the individual. It is through primary socialisation that the ordered reality is internalised and apprehended as inevitable and maintained through conversation. Language not only objectivises the shared experiences and makes them available to all within the linguistic community but also provides the means for objectifying new experience leading to their incorporation into the already existing stock of knowledge. It is the most important means by which the objectivised knowledge is transmitted in the tradition. This objectification or externalisation constitutes moments in a
continuum of a dialectical process in the relationship between humans and their social world. The process of ‘externalisation’ is rooted in man’s biological necessity to externalise itself in activity. The social order is produced by man in the course of his ongoing externalisation through habituation, institutionalisation, and building up of traditions. ‘Internalisation’ is the moment in the continuum of the dialectical process by which the objectivised social world is retrojected into consciousness in the course of socialisation, and society is presented to an individual as subjective reality, enfolding subjective meanings. Internalisation is the immediate apprehension or interpretation of an objective event expressing meanings. Internalisation is the basis for understanding one’s fellow men and apprehension of a world as a meaningful social reality. This apprehension of the social world does not result from autonomous creations of meaning by isolated individuals, but begins and continues with the individual’s ‘taking over’ the world in which ‘others’ already live and this world already ‘taken over’ may be creatively modified and recreated. In the complex form of internalisation, ‘I’ understands the world in which he or she lives and the world becomes his or her own — a process of identification. Individuals not only understand each other’s definitions of shared situations through participation, but also define them reciprocally. In this way, the social world as objective reality gains ever-renewed meanings. The formation of human self is to be understood in relation to both the ongoing organismic development and the social process in which the natural and human environment are mediated by others by way of signification and relevance. Therefore, the theory reiterates that social order exists only as a product of human activity.

Thus, from the Social Constructivist viewpoint, society is viewed having two aspects, the objective and subjective, in its ongoing developmental process. Both these aspects form an integrated continuum through the dialectical processes of externalisation and internalisation. Human choice and interpretation of externalised typifications of human intersubjectivity unfold ever-renewed subjective meanings, thus furthering the dialectical process. All socially constructed universes change and the change is brought about by the concrete actions of human beings. Thus, social change must be understood in the light of intersubjective human activity, which underlies a dialectical movement.
3.3 STRATEGY OF INQUIRY: CASE STUDY APPROACH

A case study approach has been undertaken to do this research. This approach is based on the assumption that social reality is a result of social interactions within particular contexts and histories (Somekh and Lewin 2005). A case study approach is particularly useful for small-scale research. According to Denscombe (2003:32), ‘Case studies focus on one instance (or a few instances) of a particular phenomenon with a view to providing an in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences or processes occurring in that particular instance.’ Willis (2007) defines case study as an approach which is used to examine specific phenomena such as a programme, an event, a process, an institution, or a social group. Case studies deal with real life situations and through inductive reasoning help the readers to understand a phenomenon. The unique characteristic of a case study approach is that it focuses on individual instances or ‘cases’ as against a wider population and broader horizon. This approach helps to achieve a rich description of phenomena, institutions, social programmes, or policies and enables one to describe it as it is from the participant’s point of view. It captures the lived experiences of real people in a holistic way contributing to in-depth understanding of human behaviour in a social setting. The case study approach is applied within an interpretivist framework (Willis 2007).

The case study method is therefore suited to carrying out an in-depth inquiry and understanding of the social reality and describing it. The rationale of a case study is that in-depth knowledge is gained by looking at particular cases. Such a detailed study can provide valuable and unique insights. Also, the inter-linkages of various social processes and relationships within a social setting are complex and can only be revealed by a case study approach. Case studies ‘deal with the case as a whole, in its entirety, and thus have some chance of being able to discover how the many parts affect one another’ (Denscombe 2003:31). A case study is carried out in a natural setting and there is no artificial control of variables.

The case study approach encourages investigation based on varied sources of data and usage of different research methods, such as observation, collection of documents and reports from official meetings, informal interviews with people involved, focus group discussions, and questionnaires to derive specific information. The ability of the case study approach to reveal a rich description of a phenomenon from the participants’ perspective is also advantageous, especially when studying
institutions, social programmes, and policies in terms of the complexities of implementation processes (Somekh and Lewin 2005). Another advantage of this approach is its ability to compare and contrast the different cases being studied in order to investigate the varied experiences within the cases or a social programme. However, a weakness of this research approach is that it cannot generalise statistically from a small number of cases to the population as a whole. Case Study is a research strategy that depends on the size and scope of an investigation, number of cases that need to be studied, and how these are to be selected (Denscombe 2003).

The case study approach was chosen for this research because the phenomenon of social theatre is being studied in-depth and in detail within the context of the social situation of marginalised rural people and their empowerment processes. The aim of the study was to do an in-depth study of the specific and detailed processes of using theatre as a tool for social change, in order to understand how two different organisations, Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base in West Bengal, apply theatre to bring about social empowerment at the grassroots, and to compare these organisations in terms of their objectives, methodology, and impact with respect to women’s empowerment programmes. Here, the case study approach seemed useful to explore the range of various experiences within the ongoing initiatives. With this research approach it was possible to take up these two organisations as two ‘cases’ and understand the complexities of their strategies, processes, and learn the similarities and differences in their processes with respect to women’s empowerment initiatives.

Moreover, this study views individual women as cases demonstrating the processes of empowerment. It also studies in depth the processes of collective community-led action by the empowered community groups which are also treated as cases of social activism or social action. Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base are two similar but separate and comparable cases of the same phenomenon of social theatre. The study details in depth the opinions, experiences, feelings and interpretations of the respondents which form individual cases of study within the case study approach which helps to capture in detail the phenomenon of social theatre and how it is affecting the people engaging with it. Thus, this study did not intend to make generalisations but aimed to study the specific dimensions, processes and effects of social theatre. This approach also helped not only to understand the two types of social theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed and Theatre for Development as practised by Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base, but also compare and contrast the two cases for studying their convergences and divergences.
The case study approach has helped to reveal a rich description of the field level interventions and initiatives from the participants’ perspectives, thus enabling understanding of how these interventions are affecting the grassroots communities. The various respondents studied as cases represented different groups of population such as women, adolescent girls, professional theatre groups and local NGOs whose lived experiences and descriptions of how social theatre has affected them differs and give insights into diverse issues and aspects of personal and social development. The case study approach also helped to reveal the dynamics of the social theatre processes as practised by the community members in its real setting and directly from the participants’ points of view, in addition to the viewpoints of the organisations which use this social theatre. Owing to the in-depth case-based study, complexities of the processes and their consequences could be analysed with respect to the specific implications for the different categories of the participants.

3.4 Research Methods

The different research methods used in this study include semi-structured face-to-face interviews, group discussions, and participant observation for collecting primary data, and secondary materials such as reports, documents, and audio-visuals for secondary data.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the help of an interview schedule, which helped to channelise the discussion in the required direction with the respondents. Specific questions were asked about the demographic data of each respondent. Open-ended questions helped the respondents to freely narrate their understanding, opinions, perceptions and experiences regarding particular aspects of social theatre phenomenon and the process of their participation in it. The interview schedule enabled discussions on concerned areas in more detail beyond the limited scope of structured questions only. An audio recorder was used during interviews after informed consent was obtained from the participants. These face-to-face interviews were carried out with the representatives of the two organisations under study, marginalised rural women and a rural adolescent action group engaging in social theatre, professional/ folk theatre team members who carry out social theatre campaigns, and members of a local NGO engaging in interventions through social theatre. Group discussions were carried out with the women’s groups to gain information about their collective and lived experiences and attitudes regarding social theatre and their perspectives on the processes
of training, field work, community interaction and activism and the effectiveness of social theatre in their collective lives. Group discussion was particularly effective not only in gaining insight into the collective strength, motivation, and activism of the women’s groups but it also enabled richer interaction since the women felt more comfortable and did not feel threatened to narrate their experiences together, with each member supporting the other in their articulation, which would have been difficult to capture on a one-to-one basis owing to possible discomfort with an outsider.

Ethnographic methods such as participant observation were used to observe theatre shows in a real setting and in their totality along with audience interactions and community dialogues to evolve the solutions of a problem from within that audience. Observation helped to gain a first-hand experience of the process. A camera and video recorder were used to record the show and the village settings upon informed consent from the local theatre group who also represented the local village community.

Document study was used to gather background information and data that have already been recorded with respect to interventions that have happened, coverage, success stories, etc. Document study also included studying the theatre scripts used, for understanding content and types of messages given out to the community.

3.5 Research Setting and Universe of the Study

The research was carried out with the two organisations, Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base, based in North 24 Parganas and Kolkata respectively, which practice two different forms of social theatre. Community level respondents interviewed were located in the different villages of South 24 Parganas district and Malda district of the state of West Bengal and were all engaged in social theatre activities.

The state of West Bengal is situated in the eastern part of India and is the country’s fourth most populous state with over 91 million inhabitants (Census 2011). It is bordered by the states of Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar, Sikkim, and Assam, and the countries of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. It is a major agricultural producer, being the sixth largest contributing state to India’s net domestic product (Handbook of statistics on Indian economy, RBI, September 2011). The state is culturally and politically very active. It was ruled by the world’s longest running democratically
elected communist government for 34 years, from 1977 through 2011. The current ruling party is the All India Trinamool Congress party. There are 19 administrative districts of West Bengal, of which South 24 Parganas is one of the southern districts bordering the Bay of Bengal, and Malda is the southern district of North Bengal (Figure 3.1).

South 24 Parganas stretches from Kolkata to the remote riverine villages of Sundarbans up to the Bay of Bengal. The Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forests in the world, are spread over thirteen of the twenty-nine development blocks in the district. Due to its peculiar geographical features the means of transport and communication in this region are not well developed, and floods leading to breaches in earthen embankments and cyclonic storms regularly cause of loss of life and property. As per the 2011 census, South Twenty Four Parganas had a population of 81,61,961. Three quarters of this population lives in rural areas, and of these, around 34 per cent belong to scheduled castes. Scheduled tribes at less than 2 per cent are not a significant part of the rural population. According to the 2002 BPL census, around 37 per cent of the rural population fall below the poverty line.

Malda is adjacent to Bangladesh and South Dinajpur in the east, Santal Parganas of Jharkhand state in the west, Uttar Dinajpur in the north, and Murshidabad in the south. It was home to important administrative centres during the reigns of the Pal and Sen dynasties that ruled from the seventh to twelfth centuries AD, and several centuries of subsequent Muslim rule. After independence, a large displaced population from erstwhile East Pakistan settled in the bordering areas, particularly Bamongola, Habibpur, Malda, and Kaliachak. In the Barind tract areas, largely occupied by a Santal population, where the ground is high and agriculture is the sole occupation, people tend to remain in small hamlets. Some areas have considerable population of silk weavers, and villages here are more like small townships, for example Kaliachak, Manickchak, Ratua, Chanchal, and Harishchandrapur. Although Bengali is the majority language, a significant proportion of the population in the West and North is of Bihari origin, and speak Hindi or Khotta, which is a mixture of Hindi and Bengali. There are also some settlements of Maithili Brahmins who speaks Maithili. As per the 2011 census, the total population of the district is 39,88,845. Around 86 per cent of the population live in rural areas, of which 22 per cent belong to scheduled castes, and 9 per cent to scheduled tribes. Among the scheduled castes, there are 59 sub-communities of which Rajbanshi, Namasudra, Polia, Tiyer, Keet, and Poundra are the main sub-castes. Among the tribal population there are 38 sub-communities of which Santal, Oraon, More, Munda, and Malpaharia are the main
Figure 3.1: Map of West Bengal
ones. About 88 per cent of the tribal population is concentrated in the Barind areas in the four blocks of Gazole, Bamongola, Habibpur, and Old Malda.

West Bengal has an age-old history of folk and rural theatre and there are many different forms performed in many different dialects across the state. Domni and Gambhira, two forms we will encounter in this study, are practiced primarily in Malda and some areas of Bangladesh. Theatre in Bengal has also had strong associations with ideological movements of the state, as outlined in Chapter 2.

3.6 Sampling Method and Sample Size

The two organisations were identified for the research based on their long-term and intensive social theatre work in rural West Bengal. Both organisations are well known for their work locally, nationally, and internationally.

The community respondents were identified in consultation with these two organisations based on two criteria: those who were directly engaged with social theatre and specifically women’s groups who engaged with social theatre, as the objective of the study was to understand participant perceptions, understanding, and interpretations and lived experiences in terms of their participation in the two types of social theatre. The specific areas of interventions were also selected by the organisations based on the research objectives of this study and relevant interventions that could be studied. The representatives of the organisation identified the groups and community members to be interviewed. A number of factors were taken into consideration such as the language they spoke, their capability of responding to interviews in terms of articulation, and their availability and willingness to participate in the interviews and discussions.

The total sample distributed across different categories of respondents included the following:

- Two representatives of the two social theatre organisations: Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base.
- Five theatre performers from the core team of Jana Sanskriti.
- Three representatives from two professional theatre groups working with Contact Base.
- Three representatives from a local NGO who took part in Contact Base’s interventions.
Eleven village women (seven from Jana Sanskriti and four from Contact Base) and nine adolescent girls (Contact Base) who directly engaged with social theatre.

The study respondents were spread across different districts of West Bengal. The representative of Contact Base was interviewed in their head office in Kolkata. The representative of Jana Sanskriti as well as the organisation’s core team members were interviewed in their central office in Badu in North 24 Parganas. The community members interviewed were spread across two villages of South 24 Parganas (Kulpi and Basar Uttarpara) and three villages of Malda (Bamongola, Chanchol I, and Manikchawk). A Forum theatre performance on the issue of dowry, carried out by the Kulpi theatre team, was also observed in Kulpi during the interviews. As I have worked with Theatre for Development for over ten years I have watched more than a hundred shows in the field across India on various social development issues. In addition, four specific shows, two on women’s oppression and two on child marriage issues, organised in South 24 Parganas and Malda districts respectively, were observed through audio-visual documentation shared by the two organisations.

3.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Lack of time and financial resources limited the study to a small number of respondents, and those living in the more accessible villages. The respondents interviewed were identified by the two organisations under study, which may have introduced some bias. However, it was important to select those respondents who had participated in the organisation’s social theatre interventions and were articulate enough to narrate their experiences and perceptions. Even then, some village women were less articulate than the others, and not all their expressions could be fully captured in their own words. Instead, other women narrated their experiences and feelings on their behalf in the group discussions.

Moreover, my professional background in communication for social development, specifically theatre for development, may have biased my analysis to some extent as I have worked directly with this form of theatre for ten years in rural India as an employee of Contact Base. However, I was not involved with any of the interventions discussed in this study.
Data analysis has focused on themes and patterns describing the phenomenon being studied, and has yielded a detailed and thick description of the social theatre phenomenon and cases of community empowerment affected by the phenomenon. A comparative analysis of the two cases of social theatre under study has also been carried out. The analysis discusses various themes, issues, cases, and implications of the processes of social theatre. It also provides a rich description of the social setting to contextualise the cases analysed. The analysis has been laid out in a narrative format.

The process involved qualitative content analysis. The steps included transcribing interviews, organising field notes and secondary data, arranging data into different types depending on the sources of information, coding of the data, categorisation of the data into major and minor themes, and merging relevant themes to generate broad thematic description of the data, enriched by thick description.

Qualitative content analysis is a form of analysis which summarises the informational content of data collected through interviews and observation (Sandelowski 2000). Data is organised with the help of codes, which are derived from the data collected during the study. After identifying major and minor themes in the data, these are compared and contrasted, and merged or broken up into sub-themes if necessary. The analysis involves reflection of the researcher on the data and modification of the analysis through inclusion of new data and new insights. Qualitative content analysis also brings out the patterns and regularities present in the data by studying the number of occurrences of a particular response.

‘Thick description’ as a methodology was first used by Geertz (1973), who adopted the term from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, who ascribed to it the characteristics of understanding and absorbing the context of the situation or behaviour being studied. According to Denzin (2001 :100), thick description

presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another . . . . In thick description the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard.

Thus, thick description involves description and interpretation of a social action by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, and motivations behind the particular action.
It is the interpretive characteristics of description rather than just details that makes it ‘thick’ (Schwandt 2001).

The process used in this study involved thick description of the setting of the study and the respondents / communities including their relevant demographic characteristics, locations of the interviews and the way interviews were recorded, the context, the intentions and meanings of the social theatre initiated action described, and the emotions, thoughts, and perceptions that the research participants experienced while participating in social theatre. Thick description was used to explore and interpret Theatre of the Oppressed and Theatre for Development methods as well as the social theatre initiated action led by the direct participants of this social theatre. The interpretation includes the motivations and intentions of the respondents that led them to undertake social theatre and social actions. The emotions and thoughts of the respondents are also captured and described as a critical part of the interpretation of the social action. Details and specifics of the processes of social theatre and social actions as well as the context have been described with the intention of making the readers feel that they have been a part of this experience themselves while reading.

3.9 Analysis of Women’s Empowerment

One of the research objectives of this study was to analyse the process of empowerment of marginalised rural women and how they negotiate traditional practices / value systems with new messages and practices as an outcome of social theatre interventions. As discussed in Section 3.3 the case study approach is especially effective to understand the process of empowerment because this process is inherently qualitative and subjective, and therefore best captured through the women’s own narratives, life stories, and self-analyses of the changes in their lives. In our analysis, we contextualise this process within the power-resistance framework of Michel Foucault. We also critically examine the women’s narratives and self-analyses of their process of empowerment in the context of the three components of women’s empowerment outlined in Chapter 2, namely ‘agency’, ‘resource’ and ‘achievement’. At the same time, our analysis focuses on marginalised rural women in patriarchal societies, a context which is well studied and in which various concrete indicators of
empowerment have been previously suggested (see Table 2.1). These indicators have also been used to analyse empowerment in a manner that permits comparison across different settings.

3.10 **VALIDITY**

The research included a method of triangulation wherein data were collected from different sources including the organisation designing and practising social theatre, the perceptions, opinions, understanding, and experiences of the impacted communities who directly engage in social theatre in the villages, as well as project reports and audio visuals of past theatre and field work of the organisation. Theatre shows were also observed. The different sources of data were analysed into coherent themes to establish the research findings. Moreover, rich and thick description has been used to describe the research settings as well the processes of social theatre and community organising work studied in order to enable the readers to get a sense of the real setting and shared experiences. All these steps add to the validity of the study. The possible bias which may have affected the study owing to my professional background in the field of communication for social development, specifically theatre for development, has also been explained in the section on limitations of the study.

3.11 **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we have presented details of the research design of this study, discussing in particular the case study approach which has been used to carry out the research. We have also discussed the research setting, sampling method and size, methods of data analysis, and limitations of the study.

In the next two chapters, we describe our findings concerning the two organisations under study, and analyse how their interventions lead to collective action. The subsequent chapters present a comparison of these two theatre processes and what role they play in empowering women.