In this chapter, we address the question of whether and how social theatre leads to women’s empowerment. We start by outlining a theoretical framework drawn from the work of Michel Foucault to develop an understanding of how social theatre affects various relations of power and resistance and the role that discourse plays in shaping such resistance and power relations. The subsequent sections deal with a qualitative description of the relevant findings, and an analysis of these findings in terms of the components and indicators of empowerment described in Chapter 3.

7.1 Theoretical Framework: Technologies of the Self, Power Relations, and Resistance

Our theoretical framework draws on Foucault’s concepts of technologies of the self, power relations, and resistance. But before we delve into the concepts of power relations and resistance to understand the process of women’s empowerment, it may be useful to explore the connections between Foucault and Boal.

Foucault describes his concept of ‘technologies of the self’ as techniques which ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ (Foucault 1994:225). This is analogous to Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, which uses processes of theatre to change the self with the objective of reaching a certain state of sensitivity, consciousness, and understanding. Both Foucault and Boal state that habit limits knowledge. The betterment of one’s own self lies in training the body, which Foucault refers to as ‘technologies of the self’ and Boal calls ‘de-mechanisation’, the process of ‘retuning’ or ‘detuning’ of the actor who ‘must relearn to

---

1 The findings presented in this chapter also form the basis of Dutta (2015), published in the Journal of Creative Communications.
perceive emotions and sensations he has lost the habit of recognising’ (Boal 2002:30). Foucault says that knowledge should not be accepted at face value but should be analysed through different techniques provided by one’s culture, which enable them to understand themselves. Theatre of the Oppressed essentially builds upon the cultural component of theatre — a physical expression of knowledge, understanding, perceptions, which enables the actors and the viewers to break free from their habitual understanding of the self and analyse knowledge that would affect their self.

Foucault’s discussions on how power is exercised in a certain space and what brings in possibilities of resistance has a direct correlation with the ideological basis of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. Foucault refers to a ‘micro-physics of power’ (Foucault 1995:26) which is a set of disguised systemic regulations that generates, influences, and normalises people’s way of thinking and acting. He states that the prevalent and widespread use of disciplinary technologies of the administration create fear and control human social relations. In order to resist these controls, the critical aspect is how we comprehend the space that is within. The central idea of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed is to reflect on the self and the space within to make sense of the social relations and disciplinary technologies that limits and controls the lives of the oppressed. Self-reflection and critical analysis of the knowledge about the self enables the oppressed to challenge the power relations outside.

Foucault’s theoretical model of space and spatialisations states that space is not heterogeneous and not homogeneous. As Foucault (1986:23) describes it, ‘we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another’.

In his book The Rainbow of Desire, which discusses how theatre as a method has the therapeutic ability to liberate individuals and change lives, Boal (1995) explains the development and coming into existence of a ‘third space’ which is ‘the space of possibility, the space of multiplicity and practical actions’ (Popen 2006:127). It rejects the creation of a dialectical space within a play, which presents situations or relations within social space as either/or. It instead promotes the dialogic space in theatre for bringing together all possible meanings and understanding and not reduce those to one. According to Boal, different spaces and meanings that are not homogeneous or compatible with one another can be juxtaposed within a single real place.

Foucault’s concept of power and resistance also provides a theoretical base for understanding how theatre addresses power relations and resistance within varied social relations. His concept of power provides a framework to analyse power and resistance as diffused in day to day relations.
between people and institutions, establishing a strategic, bottom-up approach to power relations, countering the juridical, top-down model of power. According to him, power is not only repressive but can also be productive, leading to the constitution of subjectivity, which has embedded in it the idea of resistance that produces new actions and behavior challenging that power. Power is therefore not a linear concept but is spread throughout a society. Individuals are the sites where power is enacted and countered and their identities are formed through this matrix of flows of power and resistance (Foucault 1982). In the rural societies studied here, power and resistance are found to pervade the relations of husband and wife, son and mother, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, father-in-law and daughter-in-law, the local government and the villagers, the politicians and the youth, the labourers and their masters, and so on. What are important to us for this study are the various relations of power and resistance that the woman experiences within the society, enacted through her relationships with her husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law, neighbours and elder men of the village society.

Foucault also considers types of resistance as a starting point to understand power relations and how that power operates. He mentions that in order to analyse power relations it is important to understand the types of resistance against this power and the struggle to cut off this power. As we will see in the next section, when patriarchal power is exercised, the women studied here resist that oppressive power through the power of social theatre activism thus making power productive in new ways for them. These constitute the anti-authority struggles where women deploy their resistance to highlight the repressions of the daily conditions of their lives, thus criticising ‘the immediate conditions of their lives and the way that certain people, groups or institutions are acting on their lives’ (Mills 2003:38). Through social theatre, the women enact how the men in the society, their husbands and fathers-in-law, neighbours and male members of their village exercise power over their freedom and choices and deprive them of a life of their choice. Through Forum Theatre and Theatre for Development, therefore, the resistance of the women against this form of power is manifested. The women capacitated in using social theatre use it as a means to voice out against and oppose this form of power relation and the consequent plight of women. As the power relations are analysed through these plays and its various dimensions are presented, it invites women viewers and participants to think critically about their lives. Thus through this process of analysis, further struggles arise. This process of application of power and the struggles against it is a continuous process.
It is interesting to understand how power relations and associated anti-authority struggles work according to the framework provided by Foucault, and compare it with the struggle against patriarchal domination by the women studied here. The power relations analysed by Foucault have a number of characteristics which I have used to study the power relations of men and women. Firstly, the differentiations between men and women permit men to act upon the actions of women wherein these differentiations are determined by tradition. Secondly, men use this power to maintain their privileges and economic and social superiority. Thirdly, the means of power is socially sanctioned and rationalised by economic, social and physical disparity that exists between men and women. The authority of men is therefore socially accepted and promoted and is not statutory. Different means of control are exercised through social rules which are not written or explicit but are defined by tradition and custom within institutions such as the family. Lastly, this power is organised as per the need to control the women. The application of this power varies and is adjusted to the type of society where it is being applied.

In Foucault’s framework, the common features of anti-authority struggles are that these struggles are transversal; the objective of these struggles is to protest against the power itself and not necessarily the abuse of power; these struggles are immediate, that is the protestors rise against the occurrence of power closest to them and these struggles are anarchist in nature; these struggles try to establish the identity of the protestor and emphasise everything that make her/him different as an individual, but at the same time they also protest against all that differentiates them and ties them to their identity in a limiting way; these struggles are resistance to the effects of power that arise from the strengths of knowledge, competence and qualification (Foucault 1982). These characteristics also explain the nature of struggles initiated by the empowered women against the patriarchal power and the institutions supporting it. For the women’s struggles being studied here, these are true and similar for all male dominated societies. The struggle opposes the existence of the unequal power relation itself where men enjoy power over women. These struggles are organised against the power over the women that they experience in their daily lives in the settings of their immediate family and society wherein they are subjugated under the control and power of men — their husbands, their fathers-in-law or the elder male members of their family and the neighbourhood. The struggle is against the action of these men over the action of the women leading to exercise of power over the latter’s daily action. Through these struggles, the women actively assert their own identity as free and independent individuals fully capable of making their
own life choices. At the same time they protest against the stereotypical role and image that has been assigned to them that separates and undermines them in relation to the men. They refuse to submit to their identity that has been defined by the patriarchal society. They also struggle against the privileges of knowledge and competence that the men enjoy. The women are deprived of education, technical skill development, information gathering and are confined to household jobs that entail serving the men and their families, cooking and raising children. They essentially oppose this power that deprives them from gaining knowledge, capacities and qualification and are controlled by these elements possessed by men. Moreover, women themselves have practical, everyday knowledge and skills which are devalued by the dominant order. Therefore, their resistance goes beyond accessing certain dominant knowledge systems as described above but also by asserting that they have knowledge and skills, and that they do contribute, even through domestic work. These struggles thus revolt against the patriarchal form of power and not any particular man or institution in the lives of the women.

According to Foucault, the three types of conditions against which struggles are organised are domination, exploitation, and subjection. The struggles shaped by the empowered women through the forms of social theatre include activism against all these three conditions. They raise their voices against the domination of men over them, the physical, social and economic exploitation that they experience and also their social identity which necessitates their unquestioned submission to the men. The power of men over women curtails and modifies the free action of women and governs their entire lives. The consent of women to this power is given, naturalised by tradition and custom. This power is against the free living, thinking and being of a woman which the male order continuously opposes. The internal and external struggles of women which are a continuous refusal to submit to this power are generated through critical thinking of the women and their capability to use social theatre as a tool for analysing the power relations as unequal, exploitative and restrictive. The internal struggle is shaped through self- transformation and motivation to live freely and with dignity. The external struggle is the demonstration of the internal transformation to mobilise more and more women to rise against this form of power which is making them subjects to men. The process of empowerment and the resulting struggle lead the women to refuse to compromise with their freedom.

The concept of discourse and its relation to power as put forward by Foucault also explains how social theatre works towards changing power relations in day to day lives. According to him,
Discourse can be both ‘an instrument and effect of power’ (Foucault 1978:101). Discourses can give rise to power and at the same time power in turn can lead to discourses. Discourses thus can lead to developing a strategy for resistance. As stated by Foucault (1978:101), ‘discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’. Discourses do not just express reality in language but provide a system of understanding the reality in a particular way. The concept of how discourse affects power relations is important for understanding how the agency of women works to resist power to which they are subjected. The discourse of patriarchy has established a system of disciplining women wherein they are expected to behave in certain ways restricting them from some forms of behaviour. In this power relation, as women resist the oppression through social theatre, a discourse is generated on the role and existence of women within a better negotiated social space in the dominant order of patriarchy. Thus in the first form the discourse exercises and reinforces the power of men over women and in the second form women who perform social theatre generate a discourse which exposes the first type of power relations and its oppressive nature and depicts reality as experienced by the women. This gives them the power to resist and oppose patriarchal power relations by maintaining their discourse. It is a continuous circular process and there is no linear progression from one point to another to achieve emancipation.

Here it may be interesting to refer to Judith Butler who, drawing from the Hegelian notion of dialectic, establishes that knowledge develops through a process of resistance and cancellation, never reaching an absolute truth but only putting forward ideas (Salih 2002).

Thus, through antithesis and thesis such knowledge grows, making it a continuous circular process. A similar progression of knowledge is seen in the way social theatre works where the women through discourse within the theatre develop a body of knowledge, which raises questions. The questions about the reality or the social problem depicted give rise to a form of opposition and rejection of that reality leading to a collective notion of another reality that the women seek. Thus, as stated by Butler, this is an open-ended process without a final resolution to the problem. The desired reality, which has its own power relations, is again questioned and resisted, leading to further struggles against it leading to a dialectical process of producing knowledge. This ensures a democratic process where no resolution based on ideology is imposed. Butler’s concepts of identity and subjectivity within power structures could also be interesting in this context. However, they are beyond the scope of this study and may be dealt with in detail in future studies.
Foucault also associates power with knowledge and emphasises that knowledge is integrally linked to power. He states that ‘it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power’ (Foucault 1980 :52). Through knowledge, power is produced and at the same time knowledge also generates the struggles against power. He terms this as ‘power/knowledge’. Knowledge about marginalised groups of people enables the knowledge holders to maintain them. But at the same time the knowledge that is produced by the marginalised themselves can change the status quo. This concept may be used to understand how social theatre enables the marginalised to generate knowledge and information in a way that leads to resistance against patriarchal or state power. The knowledge about patriarchal and traditional norms and about the discourses on women’s role in the society, as well as the surveillance exercised over them, helps to maintain regimes of control that govern the everyday lives of women. Side by side, as and when the agency of women is formed through social theatre activism, knowledge is generated about the patriarchal exploitation through depictions of women’s real life experiences through theatre. Moreover, in the format of Forum theatre, the Forum mobilises public opinion about the social issue depicted and generates a body of knowledge through dialogue on the subject among the participants. In the Forum, no solution is provided to the social oppression being enacted but questions are raised for the viewers leading to discussion, rational thought and sharing of views, thus leading to collective knowledge. This collective knowledge becomes power in the hands of the marginalised to contest the existing social conditions. This knowledge circulates and permeates into the society at a very micro level and influences the way people think and rationalise their lives, impacting power relations.

Foucault established that our bodies are also products of discourses and undergo discursive pressures. According to him, ‘the body is the site on which discourses are enacted and where they are contested’ (Mills 2003 :81). Power affects these discourses and therefore the bodies, its gestures and desires. Bodies are historical and cultural constructs which are dealt with and experienced in different ways with respect to different historical and social contexts. Through such constructions of the bodies, identities are developed. Thus power relations also construct particular types of identities in the way it constructs particular types of bodies through specific discourses. These identities are multi-dimensional and can be used subversively to counter what had already been established by others through power relations. Drawing on this framework, it can be explained how women’s bodies are shaped by discursive regimes and social pressures and how their identities are
determined by patriarchal rules and norms. The female body is subject to a whole regime of codes regarding dress, body posture, eye contact, behavior, and presence in public space. Women who do not comply with these codes are considered as ‘bad’ or ‘loose’ women and run the risk of social ostracism and disciplinary action.

The experience of performance within social theatre can challenge some of these codes. Women, as active subjects can deploy social theatre against this form of power and subvert circumscribed identities, moving towards greater freedom of expression. In this case, through theatrical performances they use their bodies to depict and perform the reality they experience under the patriarchal domination. Through knowledge building and sharing, they can influence and change their identities, which are subversive to the imposed identity of femininity. Their bodily gestures, emotions and desires break free from the oppressive conditions of patriarchy which forces the bodies into compliance and establish greater freedom and self-confidence, shaping their identity as resisting beings with improved capacity of negotiation with the patriarchal order, unlike in previous times.

Our experience of the world is also through discourses, through disciplinary practices already established by the power relations of men over women and the ways those shape our understanding. As we interpret the world through discursive frameworks, these interpretations are normalised and naturalised beyond any questions or doubt. Our day to day lives are thus guided by discourses and those are associated with rituals that shape our daily actions. Social theatre can work towards creating spaces for alternative discourses that could challenge these normalised ways of seeing and being.

7.2 FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

In this section, we describe our findings concerning a subset of respondents, namely the women who are themselves members of rural marginalised communities, to understand the process of their empowerment through social theatre.

Jana Sanskriti was represented by women of the Mahila Samity in Basar Uttarpura in South 24 Parganas and a woman respondent from the Shyamnagar Kulpi group. For the Contact Base campaign in Malda, these were members of the Adolescent Girls’ Group in Chanchol I and the Adibasi Charcha Kendra SHG in Bamangola. At the time of their interview, all these respondents
were active members of social theatre groups. The backgrounds of the respondents are summarised in Chapters 4 and 5.

7.2.1 Social situation of the women respondents

WOMEN RESPONDENTS OF JANAK SANSKRITI THEATRE GROUPS The members of the Basar Uttarpara Mahila Samity were married village women from a poor agricultural community who were exposed to social theatre through Jana Sanskriti’s work. According to them, exploitation of women is common in their society, which views women as the inferior sex who are supposed to remain subservient to men. As discussed above, unequal power relations exist wherein they are subject to domination, exploitation and subjection in the daily lives. The control of men over the actions of these women is established by tradition and custom and seeks compliance to a socially established identity of women. Because of this social sanction, most women remain silent and tolerate their exploitation by family and society. They are also beaten and abused if they do not conform to what their husbands or in-laws say. Young girls of the villages are at a risk of being married off at an early age without their consent, and sometimes even trafficked. These underage girls are at a higher risk of being victims of domestic abuse because they are not mature enough to handle marriage and related household duties. One of the interviewees, Anita, who is currently a regular theatre actress of Jana Sanskriti’s Shyamnagar Kulpi group, had in her childhood seen the suffering of her elder sister who was married off at an early age; because her family was very poor, they could not give enough dowry to the groom’s family, and so her sister’s husband and in-laws used to beat and abuse her sister. Her sister used to come back home crying after being beaten up.

The issue of girl child education is another concern highlighted by the respondents. Even today villagers think that they do not need to educate their daughters and education is useful only for their sons. As outlined in Foucault’s framework of power relations, privileges of knowledge and competence that the men enjoy shape their power relations. In poor families, where it becomes difficult to financially support education of children, priority is given to the boy child. Most girls are not allowed to attend school after class IV or V and are married off. Although times are changing, this attitude is still very prevalent in the local communities.
ADOLESCENT GIRLS’ GROUP OF CONTACT BASE  Findings from the interview of Contact Base revealed that most of the out-of-school adolescent girls have never been to school or had dropped out at early primary level. They have no say in their family. They lack exposure and are not aware of their rights or available opportunities for education. Many had simply stopped going to school because their parents thought that school education was of no value for the girls and they should be married off.

Based on these findings, when the girls of the Adolescent Girls’ Group were approached by Contact Base and oriented on the risks of early child marriage, they could identify with this issue immediately. They were aware of girls in their village who had been married off at a young age and suffered exploitation. Even one of their friends, who used to study with them, was married off and had a child soon after her marriage. Since then, she has remained physically unwell and has come back to her own village; she is unable to participate in physical activities like running and playing; she is ‘different’ and is no longer ‘the same girl they knew as their friend’. The girls recognised that they too were vulnerable. The expressed their desire for knowledge, self-development and confidence which would provide them with an independent identity outside the patriarchal rules and compliances. They did not want to get married early; instead, they wanted to complete their studies and fulfill their dreams of becoming doctors, nurses, and teachers. So, they had stood up when they saw an opportunity to fight this problem. For them, social theatre provided a space to resist the relations of power impinging on their lives and to move towards alternative identities.

SHG THEATRE GROUP OF CONTACT BASE  The Bamongola SHG group consisted of women from a tribal community, and also constituted a self-help group. Before being approached by Contact Base, they had already been performing plays on witch problems locally for a year. As part of Contact Base’s campaign, they performed plays on issues of child marriage prevention for two years, a common problem in their village and surrounding villages. They themselves identified with the issues on which they performed. One of the women actors said that her elder sister had gotten married at an early age and died. She herself played a similar role in the anti-child marriage shows which impacted her emotionally and served as a catharsis for her grief. Women audiences of their theatre shows have told them that they can fully identify with all that is being depicted in their shows.
To summarise, similar situations of oppression were observed in the case of all the three women’s
groups. Though they were from different geographical locations, they all lived subservient lives
under a patriarchal order. They were denied freedom of choice, and basic conditions for improving
their lives such as education. The women respondents of Jana Sanskriti group were married women
belonging to the poor rural agricultural families and faced violence and oppression at the household
level. The situation of the adolescent girls’ group showed how oppression penetrates a girl’s life from
an early age where they are not only denied their basic right to education but also married off at an
early age affecting their minds and bodies in a negative way leading to a limiting and exploitative
life. The SHG theatre group coming from a tribal society had more freedom, as demonstrated by the
fact that they had already performed plays before they were contacted by Contact Base. However,
they were conscious of the issues of child marriage and even child trafficking in the neighbouring
villages. All the groups thus identified with the oppression and took the opportunity of using
theatre to resist the relations of power that pervade their everyday lives and to create their own
spaces of alternative identities.

7.2.2  Motivation to join social theatre

As noted above, many of the interviewees were motivated to join social theatre because they had
had personal experience of exploitation in their lives, or had seen exploitation around them. In
social theatre, they found a tool to challenge the gender relations of power in their lives. Social
theatre also served as a catharsis for some, who found in it an outlet for their own emotions. Others
joined because they found theatre as a creative engagement, and saw in it a way to establish an
independent identity and develop a sense of achievement. Here, motivation to join social theatre
may be understood within the framework of resistance as put forward by Foucault who said that in
the concept of power is embedded the idea of resistance that produces new actions and behavior
challenging that power. Individuals are the sites where power is enacted and countered and their
identities are formed through this matrix of flows of power and resistance. The tool of social theatre
thus enables them to exercise resistance over the power that dominated and subverted them. The
development of a theatre group is a multilayered and dynamic process, with multiple motivating
factors. In the following discussion, we try to understand these motivations.
WOMEN RESPONDENTS OF JANA SANSKRITI THEATRE GROUPS

The women of Basar Uttarpara Mahila Samity, who now perform Theatre of the Oppressed as part of Jana Sanskriti’s work, got introduced to social theatre through Jana Sanskriti’s Forum Theatre performances that they had watched in their village. The group traced back its formation to the mid-1990s and credited it to one of the respondents, Lata, who had watched a Jana Sanskriti team perform in a neighbouring village and had liked the show. She had had some experience with stage theatre, and wanted to join Jana Sanskriti. She along with other women from her village visited Jana Sanskriti’s centre located at Badu. After undergoing training in Forum Theatre she started performing it as part of existing teams. Eventually more women from her village got introduced to Jana Sanskriti theatre through her and expressed their interest in joining. Eventually a women-only team was formed in Basar Uttarpara. Over the years, many more women in the village became interested in joining after watching them perform as they perceived Theatre of the Oppressed as a reflection of their lives and a way to escape the drudgery of their lives. Many of the Mahila Samity group members said that they had been so deeply moved when they first saw Jana Sanskriti’s theatre that they had immediately felt a strong urge to join.

Anita, a resident of Shyamnagar village in Kulpi, had been interested in theatre from her childhood. She was introduced to Theatre of the Oppressed when she watched a team from Basar performed a theatre show ‘Sonar Meye’ in their village. The show had moved her very much. This was because she could identify with all the problems that were shown in that play—problems of her own life and the exploitations that her own sister had faced. She said that ‘I felt they were talking about me. In the play they were saying all that I have wanted to say and express. They were speaking for me.’ She said that she felt completely involved. She felt a very strong urge to go and stand amidst the performers and say what she had in mind. She wanted to get into the play and beat the exploiter. She had no idea about what a forum is and had never experienced anything like it before. When the forum started, she found that the actors were calling out to the audience for their participation. She went and joined the forum and felt that she had found a space to talk and express her mind. She said all that she had wanted to say while role-playing in the Forum. Following this experience, she got involved with Jana Sanskriti and joined its Shyamnagar Branch.

As discussed earlier, the identities of women for example are social constructs determined by patriarchal institutions, discourses and practices which over time have become naturalised, leading women to behave and become subjects as expected by the patriarchal power structures. The women
who struggle to alter the power relations challenge this subjectivity through social theatre and through the discourse it generates for triggering critical thought and desire for an independent identity in the minds of the otherwise subservient women. Forum theatre produces knowledge through enactments of real life scenarios and through the Forum itself which generates the discourse. This knowledge that is produced by the marginalised themselves can change the status quo.

**Adolescent Girls’ Group** The members of the Adolescent Girls’ Group were initially approached by the workers of Contact Base, who had visited their village and had organised a workshop with young girls. Girls who had volunteered to take part in this workshop were introduced to the issues of girl child marriage and child trafficking. At the end of the workshop, participants were asked whether they would be interested to perform street theatre shows on these issues to raise awareness and thus reduce vulnerability of the villagers to these vices. The girl children, never exposed to theatre performances before, felt strongly for the cause of child marriage which was a reality in their lives and society, and got motivated to be proactive and ‘do something about it’ through street theatre shows and campaigns.

**SHG** The members of Bamongola SHG group were already interested in theatre, and had scripted and performed their own productions in their village. While carrying out their field study, Contact Base saw a performance by their group in a local village fair, and offered to engage them in social theatre based campaigns on anti-child marriage issues with financial support from Contact Base. Recognising the importance of this social problem, and seeing an opportunity to perform theatre which they loved, they agreed.

All the three women’s groups were motivated to join social theatre because they saw in it an opportunity to bring to light the oppression they face in their lives and create awareness among about it among the viewers. However, the format of social theatre influenced and motivated them in different ways. In case of Jana Sanskriti’s women’s groups, the women spectators who eventually became actors could actually participate within the theatre space and voice out their feelings about the subservient life they led. This participatory space generated the initial confidence, motivation, and interest to carry forward similar initiatives subsequently, and hence they joined Jana Sanskriti to perform Forum Theatre. In the case of the adolescent girls group of Contact Base, the possibility of resisting child marriage which was a reality in their lives was brought in by Contact Base through
participatory discussions in the form of a workshop where theatre was introduced as a tool for such resistance and awareness generation about the vices of child marriage. Theatre for the young girls was both a method for mobilising their parents and community to stop child marriage, as well as for expressing their aspirations for a better and fulfilled life which can be achieved through education and future professional engagements. The SHG group was already interested in theatre as a tool for entertainment, and when an opportunity for merging their interests about theatre and the social problem of child marriage was presented to them by Contact Base, they decided to pursue it. For all the three groups, the leadership of a few women in the village who understood the value of social theatre was a critical factor in motivating more women to join.

7.2.3 Training and production development

Jana Sanskriti conducts its training and production workshops primarily at its central training centre in Badu, North 24 Parganas, where interested community members travel and stay for 7–10 days and undergo training on Forum Theatre. Contact Base trainers travel to the villages where the theatre or community groups are located and train them. The training process as experienced by the community members is described below.

Women respondents of Jana Sanskriti theatre groups  Lata from Basar Uttarpura Mahila Samity described the training she underwent at the Jana Sanskriti office in Badu with other participants. Both men and women participated in this training. They went through a series of theatre exercises and games for 3 to 4 days that were meant to break inhibitions and shyness, to understand the context of Jana Sanskriti’s theatre, and identify social issues and their own vulnerabilities. Through these activities they became freer and could overcome their shyness. After this initial training, they started developing a play. The entire training period was for about 7 days.

During the initial days of training, she was uncomfortable with the fact that men and women who did not know each other well had to stay in one house and work together. After 2–3 days of the workshop, the discomfort decreased/went away as she realised that all of those present there were working together as a team. Initially she also felt shy and uneasy about the idea of acting
in a street theatre which is performed right in the middle of the audience. She felt stage theatre to be easier because she had previously acted on stage where the audience was at a distance and she could not see the audience much, and so she could act more freely. Stage theatre also had the advantage that dialogues could be prompted from the wings whenever needed. More importantly, in stage theatre, she performed stories from scripts written by other authors. In contrast, here they had to tell their own stories, identify the social problems that they felt was important, had to carry out image-making exercises on what they wanted to depict through the play, and develop dialogues of their own, albeit with the help of Jana Sanskriti trainers. The dialogues had to be in her own words, and there was no one to tell her what to say. During the training, they also had to think and discuss a lot within their team to script their play. This seemed a difficult process because creative thinking, analysing a problem, and articulating her thoughts through meaningful images and words were not things she had done before.

In the initial days of performing street theatre, she continued to have inhibitions, but with practice she performed better and over time became comfortable with it.

Discourses as generated by Forum theatre affect power relations and as stated by Foucault discourses do not just express reality into language but provides a system of understanding the reality in a particular way. This understanding of the reality, different dimensions of power relations and the points of struggle or contestation are developed through this training process which connects one’s mind to critical thinking, evaluation of one’s reality, self- knowledge and recognition. Thus Forum theatre training is about being able to enact the reality as it is through one’s own understanding of it.

ADOLESCENT GIRLS’ GROUP The training of the Adolescent Girls’ Group by Contact Base was divided into two parts, conducted over a period of 3 to 4 days. Initially, they received training on the issue of child marriage, the evils of child marriage and the risks involved therein, and on the various messages that were to be delivered through the shows. They were concurrently trained in the actual theatre production on stopping child marriage based on a script jointly developed by the children and Contact Base trainers and a given set of messages. They also participated in further similar workshops on various creative skill-building exercises focusing on issues against child marriage that were organised by Contact Base at regular intervals. Knowledge enhancement of the
adolescent girls group gave them the self confidence to use this knowledge to their advantage in establishing resistance towards child marriage which is a socially accepted and sanctioned norm.

Because the Bamongola SHG members were already used to developing their own scripts, they were asked to develop a script against child marriage. After the script was developed, Contact Base refined the script and added some messages regarding child marriage prevention. After the script was finalised, the women rehearsed by themselves. A 3-day training on theatre production development was carried out by Contact Base theatre specialists. Then the women rehearsed the changes and the modifications made in the workshop. Thereafter, the theatre production went through a final check by the Contact Base specialists before performance started in the field.

Both Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base developed the capacities of women’s groups to go out in public and perform social theatre. Jana Sanskriti’s model of training includes residential workshops where all the participants stay and learn in a common environment. The women respondents of Jana Sanskriti experienced a rigorous and intensive training programme which addressed overcoming shyness, learning to work in a team, learning the purpose, grammar and format of forum theatre, and the process of developing a forum theatre. The process narrated by these respondents included identifying one’s own issues, scripting one’s own dialogs, and develop the play in a more impromptu manner where the participants continue to change the dialogs and images as the play evolves. This process requires critical and creative thinking by the participants and builds their capacity to do so. Thus, Jana Sanskriti’s training process presupposes neither the issue of the theatre nor the script. In the case of the adolescent girls group, Contact Base trained them on the issue of child marriage in terms of its negative ramifications and the various arguments against it. Knowledge enhancement of the issue at hand, which is decided beforehand, is a critical step to prepare the performers. In addition, Contact Base also trained the group in overcoming shyness, in communication skills, in developing a story from their lives around which the script is developed, and in the actual performance of the theatre show. The training not only gave the adolescent group the skills to perform theatre based on a script developed jointly by them and Contact Base, but also the confidence and the knowledge to carry out advocacy against child marriage within their own families and villages. Though the SHG women’s group were also trained in a similar model, the script was mostly developed by the group themselves because of their prior experience in scripting plays.
on their own. The training programmes conducted by Contact Base are non-residential and an organisational team travels to the location of the group to train them in their own setting.

### 7.2.4 Overcoming social barriers

The village women encountered social barriers from within their neighbours and families when they decided to get involved in social theatre. This was true for both Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base.

**Women Respondents of Jana Sanskriti Theatre Groups** When Anita had shown interest in participating in Jana Sanskriti’s plays, and wanted to join one of their theatre groups, her parents and neighbours did not support her, and instead told her that she will be stigmatised as a ‘bad woman’ (noshto meye) and no one will marry her. She had to tolerate a lot of bad-mouthing and insults when she came out to perform theatre shows in public. Anita was not allowed by her family to go out and perform because she was not being compliant with the stereotypical identity that the patriarchal society had imposed on her and expected her to abide through the exercise of power over her actions and behavior. But she was adamant about pursuing this theatre, and did not care about what others were saying and remained steadfast in her decision to join Jana Sanskriti. This is where the resistance that accompanies all power relations according to Foucault is reflected giving rise to an exercise of power by Anita that lets her continue her struggle for the identity she aspires for. It has been ten years since she joined Jana Sanskriti and continues to perform with them. She is more confident and independent now, and the attitude of the villagers towards her has also changed and has become more positive.

At one point Anita’s parents had also forcefully arranged her marriage, with a promise of dowry. She had requested her parents not to marry her off at such an early age, but they did not agree. So she had run away from home. The villagers and the neighbours thought that she had run away with some man in the theatre group where she had been performing, but in fact she had run away to the safety of Jana Sanskriti’s office in Badu. After she reached there, she had called her parents to say that she was alright and that they need not worry about her. She came back home after a week, but her parents initially refused to accept her for fear of social stigma. They gave in eventually after she cried to them a lot, but they refused to let her go out and perform with Jana Sanskriti again.
However, as Anita puts it, ‘they could not hold me back’. Jana Sanskriti team members also visited her home and explained their work to her parents, who finally gave in. Today her parents feel proud of her. She has been able to question definitions of what it means to be a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ woman, to a certain extent, making space for a greater acceptance of her mobility and independence. Her father appreciates her performances in Forum Theatre, and feels especially happy when the other villagers appreciate her work. Thus Anita successfully continues to resist the existing power structures that limit women to the identity imposed by patriarchal society. She generates discourses that influence existing power relations through Forum theatre and contributes to building collective knowledge that initiates new power relations and generates resistance against domination, exploitation and subversion.

Lata’s parents had always encouraged her interest in theatre. Although her in-laws were comparatively backward and less educated, she did not face any resistance from them either. Her mother-in-law was old and did not interfere much. Her father-in-law was quite encouraging, and used to accompany her during the performances and watch her act. He was very happy and proud of her. She stressed that she did not face any obstacle or challenge from either of her families regarding her love for theatre and acting. Lata’s interest grew from her passion for intellectual and creative development which is an essential component of Jana Sanskriti’s work and adds to the power/knowledge concept discussion in the first section. Lata, through Forum theatre work, has established an independent identity for herself supported by knowledge, skill and capacity to generate collective community action for bettering their living conditions.

Not everyone was as lucky. Not all the women who had attended the initial Jana Sanskriti training with her could continue to do theatre. Most of the women had faced some hindrance from their families in the beginning. Many in their village, both men and women, stigmatised them saying that they are ‘bad women’ because they go out of their houses and mix with outsiders. Some in the group could face and overcome that hindrance while some others could not overcome the barriers they faced. In most cases, their mothers-in-law and husbands did not let them go out, saying that they were meant to do household jobs. In a few cases, though their mothers-in-law were not in favour, their husbands supported them, and this allowed them to continue.

Most of the women in the current Jana Sanskriti Mahila Samity group, many of them much younger, have had similar experiences. All agreed that they are able to continue their regular involvement with Jana Sanskriti’s work because they get support and encouragement from their
husbands. But for many of them, this support has not been easy to obtain, and has required continuous pressure and advocacy on their side over a considerable period of time. This effort and determination on the part of the women to continue Forum theatre and lead lives of their choice reflect the continuity of resistance and struggle against oppressive power relations. These struggles constitute both internal and external struggles of women in the form of continuous refusal to submit to the oppressive power that is generated through critical thinking of the women and their capability to use social theatre as a tool for analysing the power relations as unequal, exploitative and restrictive.

Gouri, one of the younger members, wanted to join Jana Sanskriti after seeing their shows, because she thought that she would find peace in doing something of her own. However, her husband felt that her in-laws and neighbours will not like such behaviour, and to avoid any social stigma he refused to let her go out of the house and perform in Jana Sanskriti’s theatre. Over time however, she was able to convince her husband that it was difficult for her to cope with the problems at home without any other outlet, and eventually he agreed to let her join Jana Sanskriti’s team. He even met the head of the women’s team to facilitate her participation in the group.

A few months after her joining, the group had gone to Badu for training. While they were away, some neighbours in the village told her husband that she will become a ‘bad woman’ as she has gone out of the village alone. She said that her husband got furious on hearing this, and called her at the training centre to ask her to leave the theatre training and come back to the village immediately. When she returned home he abused her, which she could not tolerate. She had a fight with her husband during which she told him that she may or may not leave theatre but she had decided not to stay in her husband’s house any longer. She also said that if he did not support her, she would go out and manage on her own and would take care of her own life. Upon hearing this, her husband got even more angry and said that she had become outspoken and was showing the courage to argue with him because of her association with Jana Sanskriti, who taught her how to talk like this. She agreed that it was indeed her theatre activities that had given her the confidence and courage to speak for herself and express clearly what she feels and thinks. She convinced her husband to come with her to watch her theatre show in the village. After watching the show, he realised that she was not doing anything bad. He also confessed that earlier he had been instigated against her by his parents and other villagers.
Priti was one of the first women of this village to get involved with Jana Sanskriti, and eventually became a core team member. In the course of her work with Jana Sanskriti, she had thought of developing an exclusive women’s team in her village. While mobilising the village women who were interested, she faced social hindrances from their families, which made her task more difficult. But she persevered and eventually a team of 8–10 women was formed and trained in Forum Theatre by Jana Sanskriti. She added that these women could only perform 3–4 shows per month in the initial days. There were lots of obstacles created by their family members who did not like their wives and daughters-in-law going out and performing theatre shows on the street in public. But over time, women coming out and performing in public has become more acceptable, and they are able to perform shows more regularly and have organised themselves better into a full-fledged team.

In addition to the struggles of the women in continuing Forum theatre and receiving support from their families, peer support has been a very important factor in sustaining these efforts. The members of the women’s groups have generated confidence and motivation within the group to support each other’s participation in Forum Theatre based activism. The collective nature of the resistance creates a support structure and with persistent efforts of the groups to bring about change through dialogue, one sees the emergence of new codes and norms that give women greater space for self-expression in both private and public spaces. Jana Sanskriti itself provides organisational support, technical as well as emotional, to its entire network of performers cum activists.

**Adolescent Girls’ Group**  There was initially an apprehension among the villagers of Chanchol I about Contact Base’s intentions when they had approached the children, and many of the villagers thought that they may have come to kidnap their children. When a few of the girls came forward to form a group, their parents were afraid for their safety in the beginning, and many of their friends and their parents discouraged them saying that they would get into trouble.

They performed their first show in Malda town at Town hall in front of a large audience that included members of the local administration. Their show was very successful and was appreciated by all the people who came. The audience present at the Town Hall also said that the group should continue to perform more such shows. The children’s group was very encouraged and the audience also said that if more such shows happen then child marriage may stop in the villages. When the children came back to their village after this show, their parents and other villagers were convinced that Contact Base did not have bad intentions. They have since performed several shows against
child marriage. Although the group’s activities are primarily limited to their own village, they have also performed in other neighbouring villages such as Gobindapara. They were also invited to perform at Rabindrabhabhan, the community cultural centre of their village, during the Durga Puja festival. Their parents are very proud of them when they see them performing theatre shows in public and getting so much appreciation. They want to continue with their shows because such performances give them an opportunity to see new places outside their village and meet new people.

SHG The women of the Bamangola SHG initially faced some opposition from their husbands who would stop them from going out and performing theatre shows throughout the day. Their mothers-in-law also used to get irritated because during the shows the women members went out at 7 in the morning and returned late in the evening. But when their group started getting appreciated and encouraged by the outsiders, their husbands were also happy and did not stop them any more. They said that ‘we want to carry on our shows and want to contribute more to the understanding of people about the vulnerabilities faced by children’. They said that their group has become popular, and local people discussed their shows and the issues they address. A local club also facilitated performance of their shows in the local high school. The fact that the SHG group was engaged professionally by Contact Base from which they earned also contributed to their improved status within their family.

The stereotypical ‘good’ woman in a patriarchal order is expected to remain confined at home and carry out household activities to serve their husband and their family. She is not allowed to go out on her own or interact with unknown men and is considered to be the sole property of her father or husband. The women who made the choice to perform Jana Sanskriti’s Forum Theatre faced considerable stigma and opposition. Some of the women who were stronger in their will to pursue Forum Theatre were able to do so by convincing their husbands and in-laws over a period of time through continuous insistence and arguments supporting their behaviour. Some women were unable to face this continuous opposition and dropped out of the team because they could not persuade their families. Overcoming the social barriers was not easy, as public performances by women was not an accepted norm. However, when these men realised that the Forum Theatre demonstrated social issues relevant to the communities who appreciated the creative presentations of these women, they started supporting their wives in continuing such initiatives. Therefore, overcoming these barriers involved proactiveness and strong will on the part of the women as well.
as eventual sanction of their performances by the men. In the case of the adolescent girls group, trust about an external agency trying to intervene in their lives was a major issue. As Contact Base was not involving adults, obtaining permission from the parents was a hindrance. Some of the girls who believed strongly in the cause and could mobilise their parents to allow them to perform joined the team and gained huge appreciation and applause in their very first show. This recognition generated significant interest within the community and these girls’ families to let the girls continue. The SHG women’s group who were already used to performing in public did not face much hindrance from their families.

7.2.5 From theatre performers to activists

Both Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base aim to create independent social theatre movements in the villages as well as activist or action groups to fight oppression and exploitation.

WOMEN RESPONDENTS OF JANA SANKRITI THEATRE GROUPS The Basar Uttarpara theatre group has evolved into a women’s activist group of sorts. Alcohol addiction is a serious problem in the local villages. Illegal breweries are easy to set up and so they crop up frequently. However, these are unpopular among women because men tend to spend their money on cheap illegal liquor, which drains the family income and also increases their tendency towards domestic violence. Thus, whenever the group puts on shows about alcohol addiction, the forum becomes very active and women audience members come up to the forum and protest. Using this animosity, the Mahila Samity members have on several occasions led operations to shut down illegal liquor shops and breweries in the locality. Their activism has created a fear among the local sellers. The Mahila Samity team members also visit panchayat and block offices to pressurise them to take action against illegal liquor dealers.

The team has also done plays on the ration system in the villages where they have addressed the corruption of ration dealers. India’s Targeted Public Distribution System, administered under the Public Distribution System (Control) Order 2001 notified under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 (ECA), requires the distribution of essential commodities including edible oils, food crops such as wheat, rice, and sugar, among others to the poor. The system aims to provide subsidised
food and fuel to the poor through a network of ration shops. Under this system, every dealer after having allotment of public distribution commodities as may be made by the allotting authorities separately for APL, BPL and Antyodaya Anna Yojona, are required to distribute allocated stocks through ration shops between 7:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. in the morning, and between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. in the evening, Tuesday through Saturday, and mornings on Sundays, against ration cards. By law, every dealer shall arrange for storage and sale of adequate quantity of public distribution commodities, arrange for display of stock-board and rate-board in a conspicuous place, maintain proper books of accounts pertaining to stock of different commodities, and issue a cash memo against each sale of the commodities.

Since the villagers were not aware of their rights, they were regularly cheated by the corrupt dealers. With Jana Sanskriti’s campaign the awareness spread and the beneficiaries became aware of their rights. Earlier the ration shops did not open on time, remained closed for most of the days and the villagers were told that the ration did not arrive. Also, they did not provide receipts for the ration bought by the beneficiaries. The Mahila Samity’s activism changed the situation. After the shows and protests by Mahila Samity members, these dealers are more conscious and afraid of them. The ration shops now display all the information as required by law, open the shops on time, distribute allocated rations, and provide receipts.

**ADOLESCENT GIRLS’ GROUP**  
The Adolescent Girls’ Group narrated how they have stopped the marriages of several girls of their own age whose parents or guardians wanted to marry them off. In one case, the girl was their friend, and had come to them to ask for help. With the support from the theatre group, the girl got the courage and the confidence to refuse her marriage. The theatre group members also visited her house and explained to her parents that child marriage was illegal. Finally, with pressure from the group and other villagers whom they had mobilised, this marriage was stopped. The girl is now continuing her studies. The Adolescent Girls’ Group had also prepared a list of vulnerable girl children in their village and had submitted it to Contact Base. This list included girls who wanted to study but whose parents did not send them to school, or those who were enrolled but had stopped going to school. This exercise was done to identify out-of-school girls in their village and bring them back to school by mobilising their parents. However, the respondents were not aware whether this effort had the desired outcome.
The Bamangola SHG described a case where they came to know about a girl child who was being married and sent to Bihar. They reported the case to the local police with whom they have good relations, developed through their earlier actions to stop child marriage. The police immediately came and stopped the marriage, without disclosing how they came to know about it. They have also sensitised local children about the issue. In one case, a child of class VII informed them that a classmate was being married off, which they immediately reported to the police. The women said that many villagers are afraid of their team because they have stopped child marriages with legal and administrative help. They intended to continue such interventions whenever they found child marriages taking place. They are proud of their activism and their team’s work in the villages.

All the three womens’ groups have been engaged in activism in their villages. They have been engaging with the local administration for bringing about change in their villages. Such engagement has been in the form a pressure group or advocacy group to make systemic changes. It is interesting to note that the social activism in which the women’s groups have been involved in are post show actions. Whereas Jana Sanskriti’s theatre group has challenged sale of illegal liquor and corruption in Public Distribution System, women and adolescent groups linked to Contact Base were found to carry out activism against child marriage and girl child education. All the groups used the information and knowledge that they gained from their theatre work to strategise their activism and interactions either with police or with the panchayat. Theatre work that they engaged with clearly gave them the confidence and the courage to come forward.

7.2.6 Changing attitudes and audience reactions

According to the Mahila Samity members, the mentality of the villagers who have been watching their theatre shows has changed over time, and their attitude towards women has become more positive. To illustrate this claim, they pointed out that unlike in earlier times, when the Forum takes place now, both men and women from the audience come up to the forum and say that women have equal rights and argue that women are equally capable, e.g., by giving examples of women holding high posts. The fact that a public discourse on the rights of women can be successfully carried out with participation of both
men and women on a single platform shows a positive impact of their theatre. The respondents felt that through their continuous theatre based activism they have been able to ensure more freedom for themselves now. The women of the group faced a lot of hindrances both from family members and neighbours initially while coming out of their houses to perform theatre in public. But now that situation has changed. Their husbands, family members and neighbours, after watching their theatre shows and seeing the appreciation they receive, do not try to stop them anymore. They enjoy much more independence and can decide about their own activities by themselves. According to Lata, the theatre shows that they are doing have contributed to this change. She said that they can see the change happening in the mentality of the people in the villages.

The theatre shows have raised general awareness on certain issues. For example, upon watching theatre shows on child trafficking, the audience could in many cases identify with real life incidents, and during the forum participants from the audience have narrated real life cases of missing girl children from their villages that had not been recognised earlier as trafficking. This illustrates how Forum Theatre contributes to knowledge building and triggers analysis of a familiar situation wherein the spectators and the actors travel from specifics of an incident to the underlying causes and ramifications of the situation, thus understanding the larger issues. This understanding is also critical in formulating related discourses through Forum Theatre that influence collective action for social change.

In one case, a girl from the village had supposedly been taken to Kolkata for work. When her sister went to Kolkata to meet her at the address she had given, she was told that no one by her sister’s name lived there. Suspecting something was wrong, she informed the local youth of that area, who called the police. The police came to the house and were also told that no one by that name lived there. Incidentally, the trafficked girl heard the commotion, and looking down from the terrace of the house noticed her sister and attracted her attention. The police then forcibly entered the house and rescued several trafficked girls from that house. Through such community stories, the severity of the problem has been established and villagers have become more cautious.

When they visit other villages, the local women take a lot of interest in their performances. They want to know more about the work and how the Jana Sanskriti women performers manage to perform such theatre alongside their household responsibilities. They also want to know how they could convince their own family members to allow them to participate in theatre performances. The women in distant villages such as in Kakdwip Block are not exposed to this kind of theatre shows.
They watch Jana Sanskriti shows with a lot of interest, appreciate the courage and confidence of these women, and hope that they could transform their own lives in a similar way. They request them to visit and perform again in their villages.

**Adolescent Girls’ Group** According to the Adolescent Girls’ Group, their theatre shows have a positive impact on the audience and the audience learns about problems related to child marriage from these shows. They claimed that child marriages took place frequently in their village before they started their shows, but has gone down considerably since then. They felt that once the village audience understands the ill effects of child marriage from their shows, they will stop marrying off their girl children. They feel that the attitudes of their own parents have changed towards them and they are now more conscious of equal rights of both boys and girls, legal aspects, as well as health issues related to child marriage, and that the girls should get education and be treated in the same way as the boys. The children themselves also realise how important education is for their own development, as it will enable them to take informed decisions about their own lives.

Other girls of their village who had suspected the intentions of Contact Base and did not join them earlier, now want to join their group and perform theatre shows like them. As their group already is already quite large and cannot accommodate new members, these girls may form another group.

**SHG** The Bamongola SHG said that their audience reacts positively to their shows and have encouraged them to continue their shows. After watching their shows, the audience often discusses the social issues raised in their shows, and such public debates bring to the forefront the vices of practices such as child marriage, which was never considered a social problem before. They are a popular group and a local club has also organised their shows in a local high school for awareness generation. Their work in sensitising the community has led to several reports of attempted child marriage which have then been stopped with the cooperation of local police.

In case of all the three theatre groups, appreciation and increasing popularity for their performances are common factors that have enthused and sustained their efforts. In case of Jana Sanskriti’s group, the women were able to break free from the hindrances they faced from their families and neighbours when the latter saw them perform. A positive attitude was generated
among the viewers which enabled the group to continue. Moreover, their performances generated common platforms for dialogue between men and women on issues of women’s exploitation where women argued against the exploitation that they faced on an equal footing with men within the Forum. The adolescent girls’ group and the SHG group had faced much less hindrance from their families and neighbours. Rather the awareness that they generated among their viewers brought issues such as child marriage and child trafficking into open discussions thus leading to improved consciousness about the issue. It was also interesting to note that both the adolescent and the SHG groups worked closely with the local administration and police and got their cooperation in stopping child marriage in their villages. Jana Sanskriti theatre group’s activism on the other hand was more against the local administrations and sought to hold them accountable in their performance of duties to citizens.

7.2.7 Self-development and skill development

All the women interviewed who engaged in social theatre stated that they have undergone immense transformations in their lives internally in terms of self-development and skill enhancement. They explained their own processes of change, which we summarise below. The self-development and skill development of these women are significant because their enhanced capacities also influence and change power relations that otherwise oppress them. A very important aspect of struggle against patriarchal power is the struggle against the exclusive privileges of men to knowledge, skill and competence vis-à-vis women who are limited within their stereotypical roles and are stopped from gaining knowledge and skills. Thus, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, the women struggle against the privileges of knowledge and competence that the men enjoy. The women are deprived of education, technical skill development, and information gathering, and are confined to household jobs that entail serving the men and their families, cooking and raising children. They essentially oppose this power that deprives them from gaining knowledge, capacities and qualification and are controlled by these elements possessed by men. Moreover, social theatre not only generates confidence and courage in them but also creates an enabling environment for them to think, rationalise their thoughts, be creative and establish their own understanding, sensitivity, and analysis of their surroundings which is beyond the information and knowledge controlled by the
patriarchal order. Thus it addresses the space within to generate new knowledge contributing to independent and creative learning. Theatre breaks the conventional structure of formal learning and accessing knowledge and puts emphasis on learning through dialogue, self reflection, introspection and self analysis.

WOMEN RESPONDENTS OF JANA SANSKRITI THEATRE GROUPS  As a young girl, Anita had seen her elder sister suffering from severe exploitation and abuse by her husband and in-laws. At the time, she did not have the courage to say or do anything, and had to watch silently. Even as an adult, she did not feel confident about taking any action on her own. But that anger had remained inside her. Today she feels that if she could have spoken at that time the way she can do today, she would have protested the exploitation that her sister had faced. Her engagement with social theatre gradually made her realise that she has the capacity to do something important and meaningful with her life, and to address the issues that are important to her. Now, with her experience in public speaking, social theatre, and independent thinking, she feels confident and more capable. She has better knowledge and more information about how to deal with social problems and is able to judge what is right and wrong. She always strives to do better in her theatre and social work with more practice and experience. Through social theatre she can now voice out about the power relations in society and has the courage to revolt against exploitation of women.

The Basar Uttarpara Mahila Samity members said that they enjoy more freedom in their lives and have been able to overcome the hindrances they faced from their family members about performing theatre because they have gained confidence to speak out for what they want. They now have a sense of their own identity and no longer fear the opinion of other people. One of the group members said that earlier she did not have any communication skills and could not communicate properly; that she is able to speak in the interview and explain her work in an articulate manner was only because of her engagement with Jana Sanskriti’s work. All the women team members present in the interview agreed that they used to be shy and afraid of speaking to outsiders and could never express themselves properly; when they first saw Jana Sanskriti’s shows as audience members, they did not have the courage or the capacity to go up on stage and speak or argue in the forum even though they wanted to. But now they have the confidence to do so. Through social theatre they have acquired the skill to speak clearly and articulately; they can now express and explain what they feel and think; they are able to interact freely even with new people they
meet. They also have more knowledge about Panchayat’s work, corruption, their own entitlements, and village development work and are ready to take collective action for improving their living conditions.

In spite of this increased independence and freedom, some of them continue to face exploitation in their families. What is different is that unlike earlier times, they do not silently accept their situation any more, but resist by being more vocal about their rights. Now they are capable of countering abusive and insulting words with their own arguments. One of the respondents explained that she had always been quiet whenever her father-in-law or brother-in-law said abusive words to her. She never used to answer back or protest their behaviour. Now, because she answers back and argues if they tell her anything wrong, they have become very angry seeing her confidence and ability. They said that after joining Jana Sanskriti’s theatre group, she has developed this confidence and courage and are not happy about her theatre activities at all. She said that she has told her family members that they will not be able to exploit her anymore. She has also threatened them by saying that she has the capability to lead her own life independently and take her own responsibility and does not care for their mercy. As a consequence her father-in-law has stopped talking to her in anger.

The women’s team also expressed why their own development and a space of their own is so important to them: it is only when they come out of their houses for a few hours to do Jana Sanskriti work that they forget all their pains and sufferings. They enjoy the time they spend to develop theatre productions, rehearse, discuss and actually perform the shows because that is when they are doing something of their own. It gives them an identity and intellectual stimulation that make their lives more meaningful. This is when they find peace and happiness and feel completely free from their stereotypical subservient role of a woman. This makes them feel empowered and is important for their self-development and a positive way of life.

Many of the women in Jana Sanskriti’s group are non-literate and have never been to school. With Jana Sanskriti’s help, some of them have learned to sign their names, which gave them a sense of empowerment.

adolescent girls’ group The Adolescent Girls’ Group mentioned that through the performance of theatre shows against child marriage they themselves have gained information and knowledge. They are now better aware of their rights and can take informed decisions in their own
lives. They are also conscious of equal rights of both boys and girls and feel that the girls should
get education and be treated in the same way as boys. They have also explained these issues to
their parents and sisters.

Their involvement with social theatre has developed their courage, confidence, and leadership
abilities. In addition to the plays that Contact Base taught them, they have learned to prepare
their own plays by developing their own scripts, and have also formed an action group of their own
to fight against child marriages. They have performed their own production in Rabindrabhabavan,
the cultural centre of their village. This play, written and developed by them, showed how agents
come and take away girl children for marriage by paying their parents and family some money and
how they go and sell these girl children.

SHG The Bamongola SHG felt that they have gained new knowledge about the evils and
illegality of child marriage while developing their own productions. Through the performances,
their own mindsets have changed. Earlier they used to think that if they can get hold of a good
man, they will marry off their daughters early. Now, they do not want to marry their daughters
at an early age but want them to study till graduation because education is very important for
one’s self-development. They said that ‘our minds have matured and our understanding is clearer’.
They feel that since they themselves are more aware and better informed they can explain to others
much better. The women respondents said that their performances and the encouragement from
the audience have led to lot of enthusiasm among them and have increased their confidence. They
do not fear the people and have the courage to stop child marriages by reporting to the local police.

They also stated that their skills of interaction with others, especially people whom they do not
know, have developed through the campaigns they have done for Contact Base.

Both Jana Sanskriti’s and Contact Base’s theatre groups expressed similar feelings about how
theatre has helped them to transform themselves. The common self-development aspects included
courage and confidence to speak out their minds, and skill development aspects included the skills
of communication, acting, and creative thinking. Whereas Contact Base’s groups stressed more
on gaining information and knowledge as part of their learning from the theatre campaigns, the
women’s group of Jana Sanskriti stressed more on their sense of liberation through their engagement
with something creative. Theatre helped them to create a personal space of their own away from
the oppression of their households which in turn led to their self-development.
7.3 COMPONENTS OF EMPOWERMENT

Our analysis of women’s empowerment is based on the framework of Resource-Agency-Outcome described by Kabeer (1999b). As Kabeer herself points out, empowerment is difficult to define, let alone measure. Moreover, there has been a natural tension between feminist approaches to empowerment that argue for it on intrinsic grounds, and the more politically expedient instrumentalist forms of advocacy that tie empowerment to more easily understood development goals. It is in this latter context, where quantification of empowerment is imperative so as to make it objectively verifiable, that Kabeer (1999b:437) defines empowerment as ‘the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them’, and describes this ability in terms of three inter-related dimensions: resource, that is, an enabling environment for the women to take action; agency, that is disempowered women themselves becoming agents for their own development or freedom from oppression; and achievements, or the outcomes of the action undertaken by women.

It is important to note here that this view of empowerment in terms of these three components conflict with Foucault’s more nuanced approach, and has also been criticised in feminist debates related to the notion of empowerment. In Kabeer’s concept of empowerment there is an absolute state of empowerment, which the women reach through agency. In contrast, Foucault establishes power and resistance as a continuous process; there is no state of absolute or ultimate liberation because one encounters new forms of power continuously. Thus, whereas Kabeer is talking about different stages that are arrived in the process of empowerment, Foucault’s concept of struggle, as discussed previously, is continuous.

Furthermore, the concept of agency as described by Kabeer has also been criticised by the feminist writers. The feminist post-structuralist framework defines agency in a different way, and it will be critical to analyse women’s agency in this section in light of the feminist post-structuralist concept of agency.

With all its limitations, however, the framework of resource, agency, and achievement serves as a useful first approximation to the complex process of empowerment. To examine the empowerment process of women respondents as initiated by social theatre, we analyse how social theatre has affected these three components of resource, agency, and achievement as was interpreted by the
women themselves through introspective interviews, with a critical analysis in view of the concerns discussed above.

7.3.1 Resource

The rural women communities of Malda and South 24 Parganas suffer gender inequality and subjugation in a patriarchal society reflected in the forms of limited access to education, child marriage, violence against women, lack of freedom to express oneself and limited access to social spaces. Through years of such domination, their roles have been naturalised to the extent that they tend to believe and accept their subordination, resulting in low self-esteem and a sense of incapability and unworthiness. Most of them are completely unaware of their rights and do not have any means to fight against the oppression.

Social theatre, both Theatre for Development and Theatre of the Oppressed, is performed with the objective of raising the critical consciousness of the viewers through the depiction of real social problems in a play. In the case of Theatre for Development, at the end of the performance, a participatory discussion forum is opened up for the viewers to take part and express their opinions and arguments regarding the problem being addressed. In the case of Theatre of the Oppressed, the Forum Theatre format is used where the play is stopped in the middle, at a critical moment when the concerned problem has reached its height, and viewers are invited to play a role and argue their points. In both the cases, the play creates an environment where the viewers are mobilised to think and express their opinions independently and consciously.

When such social theatre forms were first introduced to the women interviewed in this research by the two concerned NGOs, they felt a keenness to participate because they could directly identify with the issues and problems being depicted. As expressed by Anita, one of the women interviewees regarding a Forum Theatre show ‘Sonar Meye’ (Girl of Gold) which she had watched in her village for the first time:

I felt they were talking about me. In the play they were saying all that I have wanted to say and express. They were speaking for me. I felt completely involved. I felt a very strong urge to go and stand amidst the performers and say what I had in mind. I wanted to get into the play and beat the exploiter.
Another factor that motivated the women to take part was the performance itself which they thought could be a creative expression of their inner feelings. West Bengal being a culturally vibrant state with many different local theatre forms, the rural people are aware of theatre. In fact, that is one of the oldest forms of entertainment in the villages. Thus, when the women were specifically targeted and approached by the two NGOs to participate, they considered the idea without any prior negative bias. In an environment where they have never been in the focus or have never been listened to, there was an opportunity for them to create a space of their own through such performances.

However, women of these communities are denied their basic human right of freedom of expression and are confined to the households, and their families and neighbours did not support their wish to participate in social theatre. They suspected the intentions of these organisations and tried to stop the women from performing in public spaces by abusing and stigmatising them. Theatre of the Oppressed and Theatre for Development could on the other hand inspire the minds of some of these women to the extent that they succeeded in their desire of availing the opportunity of joining the theatre groups. This independent decision by some of the women in the villages motivated other women suffering similar hindrances to come forward adding to their courage resulting in a collective will. Psychologically, this resulted in collective awareness of injustice and potential of mobilisation at the community level.

It is also important to note that the two NGOs which reached out to these women also intended to mobilise the marginalised women to come forward and take part in the discussion forums and eventually in the performances. Whereas Jana Sanskriti did so by performing shows dealing with women’s oppression in the villages, Contact Base organised meetings with the women to discuss about the social problems and motivate them to participate in theatre campaigns against those issues. Though it was a voluntary process for the women to come forward and join social theatre, there was an underlying external and conscious effort on the part of the NGOs to create such an environment.

Thus, the women utilised the resource or the enabling environment created by social theatre as the first step in the process of empowerment. This access to the resource led to their participation in extra-familial groups, beyond the household where they were limited before. Thus, social theatre constituted the enabling factor or the critical input to initiate an empowerment process affecting the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of empowerment.
7.3.2 *Agency*

Agency is an integral part of the process of empowerment where the oppressed women themselves realise their ability to utilise the resources for their own well-being and become actors or agents in the process of change.

In order to analyse ‘Agency’, we first look into the different concepts of agency and their limitations. This provides a perspective to critically understand how theatre initiated the process of developing Agency.

Kabeer defines Agency within the dominant humanist discourse where becoming an agent is equivalent to being someone who has an independent recognisable identity, a rational being with a moral authority. This individual has the capacity to stand up against the society which is external to them and oppresses them. This is considered as a stage in the process of empowerment that is reached.

Foucault criticises this view, stating that power resistance is a continuous struggle and process and those who have resisted power face new forms of power continuously. Foucault’s concept of space and spatialisations is also a key concept in this process where heterogeneous and multiple spaces are created. Forum Theatre for example creates similar spaces of enactment and lets the spectators come and enact resistance accommodating multiplicity and different practical actions.

The feminist post-structuralist concept of agency also considers the way agency is understood within the dominant humanist discourse to be illusory (Davies 1991). Within this dominant discourse, the way a rational self with moral authority (that is ‘Agency’) is defined is essentially a masculinist and elitist definition (Benson 1990). Within this framework, the apparently free choices that the rational self, in this case the woman, is making are approved by the powerful and the dominant discourses. Here, the knowledge and capacities that the women are disallowed to acquire by the patriarchal society are finally acquired by the women through resistance. However, these knowledge and capacities are defined and approved by the patriarchal system and the existing normative standards established by the powerful, in this case the men. Therefore as per the feminist perspective this definition of agency is problematic, as ‘moral rightness is defined by those with power and then used by them to judge as lacking all those who do not share those definitions or
have access to those discourses’ (Davies 1991:45). Women are considered as non-agents within this discourse.

In the feminist post-structuralist analysis, the choices that an agent makes within the dominant discourse are forced choices and the action the agent undertakes is the action approved and accepted within that dominant discourse. As Davies (1991:46) explains, ‘the subject’s positioning within particular discourses makes the “chosen” line of action the only possible action, not because there are no other lines of action but because one has been subjectively constituted through one’s placement within that discourse to want that line of action’.

The feminist post-structuralist framework defines agency as one who has the right to speak and to be heard, one who can create and develop different meanings and wishes which are her own, and one who is not bound by a particular discourse and its meanings but is capable of producing new meanings by combining different discourses in their own ways, which demonstrates that there is a shift in their consciousness which is independent of dominant discourses reflecting on multiple possibilities and actions. These new meanings, possibilities and actions are more inclusive of different viewpoints and do not establish one dominant viewpoint. Thus it is more inclusive. To summarise, ‘agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognise that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted. It is the freedom to recognise multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one’s identity’ (Davies 1991:51).

When the women from Malda and South 24 Parganas interviewed in this study decided or chose to learn and perform social theatre, they took their first step towards acquiring agency. As explained by Kabeer (1999b), agency is at the heart of the process of empowerment through which choices are made. Theatre of the Oppressed performed by Jana Sanskriti theatre groups created a creative outlet for the women to express themselves and also bring out the social inequalities suffered by them. Also, social theatre, which entailed public performance and interactions with a wider community was not something that was approved by the dominant patriarchal norms. The choice that the women made was not considered as acceptable within the patriarchal normative structure. When the women decided to join Jana Sanskriti it was not only because they aspired to acquire knowledge, skills or capacities that the men have but more because it gave them a platform to speak and to be heard as individual identities. Forum theatre created platform for multiple meanings and discourses outside the dominant discourse and was an inclusive and dialogical
platform that attracted the women to join. The space for dialogue, arguments and their chance to put forward new meanings and discourses motivated them which led to the creation of the agency. However, the process was still limited by how the men cooperated with the women to allow them to participate in Forum theatre. Similarly, the meetings and discussions held by Contact Base with the rural women and adolescents about social issues of child marriage and gender inequality that directly affected them motivated them to join theatre for development. In the case of Contact Base, the process was more directive where the women tried to resist the patriarchal oppression by remaining within the dominant discourse. Street theatre of Contact Base did not provide a platform for generating multiple perspectives and meanings but simply offered a platform to resist and struggle against patriarchy. In both the cases the collective sense of disempowerment together with the external resource enabled the creation of the agency. However, this step was not enough for the women themselves to understand that they can become agents of change.

The actual training process of both Theatre of the Oppressed and Theatre for Development further contributed to building the agency. Both the NGOs facilitated a participatory learning process wherein the women identified the social problems they wanted to address, scripted their own plays and developed their own productions with technical support from the NGOs. This process necessitated women’s recognition of their own problems and self-analyses of those problems. Additionally, their knowledge was enhanced on the complexities of the social issues identified and the associated legal implications and tools related to girl child marriage, right to education for girl children, violence against women, dowry, etc. Moreover, their life skills and communication skills were also developed through various participatory exercises using theatre based activities which helped them to break free from their shyness and inhibitions and made them confident to perform social theatre in public. The women who undertook the training workshops therefore went through a process of self-development. They not only became better aware of their own rights and legal tools supporting their rights but also gained the confidence to stand up against the patriarchal norms of society supporting discriminatory practices against women. They also realised that they have the capability to think independently, articulate and express their thoughts through social theatre and take actions. This self-development also resulted in an independent identity creation beyond their stereotypical roles as women. They felt ready to go out and perform in public to raise public awareness and stop social vices affecting their security, safety, well-being and happiness. Thus, a collective awareness and understanding of injustice led them to constitute the agency to
bring about their own empowerment. As one of the women respondents said: ‘Earlier we could not talk properly. Now we can speak clearly and also stand up for what is right. We have learned how to fight back after joining Jana Sanskriti’s theatre.’

When the women started performing the theatre shows, they experienced direct audience reactions from both men and women, which also significantly strengthened their role as agents. The Bamangola SHG and Adolescent Girls’ Group trained by Contact Base received a lot of appreciation from the audience and encouragement to carry on with such shows. The audience discussed about the social issue of girl child marriage as a social problem and also felt that continuation of such efforts by the women and girls themselves will generate greater awareness on the issue and result in stopping child marriages in their villages. The women’s group also started receiving invitation from local clubs to perform in different social gatherings and local school. The women’s groups trained by Jana Sanskriti received positive response too, when in their shows the Forum became very active on issues of dowry or alcoholism leading to domestic violence against women, and both men and women came up to argue and debate in the Forums. They also started receiving appreciation from other women in the audience. While performing the shows, the women started realising their capabilities to activate the minds of others about social issues. Through the knowledge gained from their first hand experiences their mindsets have also changed from a state of submission to patriarchy to a state of independent action against the existing discriminations. With more information, knowledge and experience, their self-efficacy and self-worth increased and they became confident to revolt against the discriminations and ensure women’s access to opportunities such as education for their own development.

The process of being agents was also supported by the NGOs who hand-held them not only to conduct discussions, coordinate forums, and manage debates in the play but also supported them by helping them to take legal actions when appropriate. The activism started by the women was initially guided by the NGOs to help them think, analyse, and strategise their actions. Such activism included stopping actual cases of girl child marriage in the villages by contacting the police or by convincing the parents directly about its ill effects, ensuring that girl children in their villages were sent to schools, and breaking up illegal liquor distributors. The fact that the women were successful in their interventions added to the process of agency creation and sustenance from within wherein the women actors in social theatre became social activists in real life.
This process of development of the agency may be interpreted as conscientisation (Longwe 2002) because the women at this stage realised that they were not inferior to men but were capable of taking action. This stage in the process of empowerment resulted in women’s visibility in and access to social spaces and their direct participation in social networks through local campaigns and activism. Thus the women were motivated to come together and organise themselves for ‘the recognition and analysis of problems, the identification of strategies to overcome discriminatory practices, and collective action to remove these practices’ (Longwe 2002 :7).

As agents of change the Adolescent Girls’ Group and SHG of Malda carried out social theatre campaigns against girl child marriage and mobilised their own family members, neighbours and other villagers to become aware and conscious of this social problem. These adolescent girls also ensured continuation of their own school education and some of them stopped their own marriages. The women’s groups of South 24 Parganas continue to perform their own productions on social problems and sustain their activism against dowry, domestic violence, illegal sale of local liquor, corruption in Panchayats, etc. These women who suffered a life of suppression are today recognised as important agents of change.

To summarise, the Forum theatre space created an enabling environment for agency creation more than the street theatre format of Contact Base. Forum theatre established the Forum as a dialogical platform that is a space for continued struggle and resistance by the women. The women learned to identify their issues, develop their plays and express their arguments and discourses in their own creative ways. The ability to think creatively, intellectually and develop an independent thought process outside the elite or dominant discourse is what created the agency for the women engaging with Jana Sanskriti. Contact Base’s approach towards creation of agency falls within the dominant discourse where the women and the adolescent girls acquire knowledge, skills and capability that they were previously prevented from obtaining within the patriarchal structure. Their struggle did not create multiple meanings and discourses but was more directive giving out a message against women and girl child oppression. However, the process created independent action and thought and established their right to speak and to be heard in a creative way.
7.3.3 *Outcome*

As the women’s sense of agency successfully acted to bring about transformations in their own lives over a period of time, the process led to several outcomes at the psychological, socio cultural and political levels.

The women who learned and performed social theatre and undertook the role of social agents gained new knowledge and information in the process. This made them conscious of equal rights of both men and women and importance of education for the girl children. Earlier, the women themselves believed that it was better to marry off their daughters early as it is a social norm and had been silent sufferers of the deprivations and marginalisation within family and society. Their experience and knowledge enhancement resulted in changing their own mind-sets, which was a very important outcome of the process. Now they want their daughters to pursue higher studies. They stop girl child marriages with the help of police and local government officers. They are more vocal within their families and fight for their dignity. They carry out political activism against corruption of local government and demand for their entitlements under various government schemes. The present reality is that they can talk, argue, behave the way they want and make their own judgments about what is right and what is wrong within the family and in society, which have led to a sense of freedom from exploitations and confidence about their own abilities. They freely access social spaces through their performances and interact confidently with unknown people without fear of stigma or abuse.

These women and adolescent girl children have travelled outside their villages even to distant areas to perform. Groups that campaigned as part of Contact Base intervention carried out more than 100 shows across Malda district and stayed away from home for long durations for their work. They continue to perform shows in different village gatherings and upon invitations and support local police and administration in stopping social exploitation. The women groups who are part of Jana Sanskriti theatre movement perform Forum theatres regularly in their own villages and even in the neighbouring villages at regular intervals. They discuss the most pertinent and current issues they want to address amongst themselves and with Jana Sanskriti’s coordinators while developing their productions. They decide on their own show schedules and timings and carry out their campaigns.
The lives of the women have thus changed from a situation where they were denied independence and freedom to make their own life choices to one where they have overcome this situation. The outward actions and behaviour are triggered not only by better information and more knowledge but also by an internal and psychological transformation. Through the process of recognising the resource of social theatre to actually performing it, they have developed a strong sense of self efficacy, self-esteem and an identity of their own. This resulted not only from their realisation about their own capabilities but also from the social recognition and appreciation they received from their audiences and the villagers who benefited from their leadership as social agents. Moreover they not only successfully fulfilled their roles as social agents but also motivated other disempowered women to join similar initiatives. Thus they became resources for further agency creation from within their own society strengthening the overall process.

Another significant outcome in the lives of the women who joined the social theatre was that they found a creative engagement and space of their own. They described it as a space of relief, peace and happiness away from the pain and sufferings of their lives. The common factor that motivated these women to join social theatre, be it theatre for development or theatre of the oppressed, was that they liked theatre as a creative activity. Thus other than personal and social skills social theatre improved and strengthened their creative skills including creative thinking, extempore, theatrical skills, imagination, articulation, acting, etc. Earlier they had a sense of shame and inferiority because most of them were either illiterate or had been to school only till classes V/ VII and considered themselves worthless. Through their active engagement in social theatre they acquired special skills of developing and performing theatre, a popular performing art form of Bengal, which also led to their cultural identity creation and an intellectual development.

However, the empowerment process for these women would not have been complete without positive participation of the men in these villages. Previously, when the women had expressed their choice to join social theatre, they faced a lot of hindrances from their families, especially their husbands, parents, in-laws who did not allow these women to go out and join theatre movements. The women who were of stronger will stepped out to join social theatre against all odds. Thus initially it was a situation of conflict between the women and their family members who did not accept the freedom and independence of their daughters / wives / daughters-in-law.

Under those circumstances continuing with the theatre shows and social activism became difficult or impossible for the women. They continued to negotiate and explain their activities to their
family members and invited them to watch their plays. When their family members watched them in a bigger and an important social role, their mind-sets also started changing over time. Presently, for those women who are able to successfully and smoothly continue their efforts, cooperation and support from their families have been a very important factor. For those women who still continue to negotiate within their families for performing in social theatre, their journey is not as smooth as others. As mentioned earlier, the weaker members who could not negotiate at all have dropped out completely from these women’s groups. Therefore, successful mobilisation of male family members and villagers to support women’s activism and campaigns is a very important social outcome of the empowerment process where the patriarchal norms are shifting.

However, the extent of such transformations was different as all the women interviewed were not at the same stage or level of empowerment. Some had established themselves as senior theatre practitioners and successful social agents of change; some had reached the stage of self-confidence and self-efficacy but struggled with their families to continue their shows and activism; some had just started on with their journey and were being supported and groomed by the more experienced women in the group. Thus there was an enabling environment of mutual support, understanding, hand-holding and collective effort within the larger group of women actors towards improving women’s conditions at the household level, socio cultural level and political level.

7.3.4 Indicators of empowerment

Empowerment can also be assessed with the help of certain standard indicators as discussed in Chapter 2 and summarised in Table 2.1, which lists specific socio cultural, familial, legal, political, and psychological indicators at the household and community level — the two levels relevant to this study. The following discussion explores how the experiences of the women respondents discussed above tie in with some of these indicators.

Socio cultural indicators of empowerment include women’s freedom of movement, their visibility in and access to social spaces, and participation in extra-familial groups and social networks. As discussed above, the women respondents who engaged with Forum Theatre negotiated their rights to move beyond the boundary of their family and household to pursue theatre publicly. They travelled outside their village to participate in Jana Sanskriti’s residential workshops. In the case
of Contact Base, the adolescent girls overcame hindrances from their family and neighbours to go out of their houses and receive training from external urban theatre specialists who were new acquaintances. All the respondents continue to participate in social theatre activities, both inside and outside their villages.

In the course of their involvement in social theatre, the respondents gained a new sense of confidence, self-worth and the consciousness that they independently were capable of doing something of their own, in this case developing the skill to act, perform, say dialogues, practice theatre regularly and think creatively. This fulfilled the psychological indicators of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and psychological well-being. Their involvement also increased their awareness of oppression and exploitation, and worked towards creating a collective awareness of injustice, and made them aware of their own potential to mobilise against such injustice, thus fulfilling these psychological indicators of empowerment at the community level.

Legal indicators of empowerment include knowledge of legal rights, community mobilisation for rights, and effective local enforcement of legal rights. Both Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base support their community groups by increasing their awareness of legal rights, especially with respect to child marriage, domestic violence, and right to education. As discussed above, all the groups interviewed above have gained knowledge of their rights and have acted in different ways to prevent violation of these rights.

7.4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have discussed the theoretical underpinnings of empowerment and analysed the lived experiences of women and adolescent girls engaged with social theatre to understand their process of empowerment, particularly in terms of some measurable indicators of empowerment that have been previously used by other researchers.

An obvious question here is whether there is a fundamental difference in the nature of the ‘empowerment’ that happens as a result of the two kinds of theatre approaches. This, unfortunately, is impossible to answer from this study, not least because of the differences in the nature of the interventions: Jana Sanskriti’s long term engagement in their intervention areas allowed us to obtain the lived experiences of women whose process of empowerment started many years back. On
the other hand, the lived experiences of those involved with Contact Base’s theatre goes back only a few years; due to its project-based model, Contact Base does not systematically keep track of the community members they train beyond the duration of the campaign, making it difficult to follow up with them after a substantial number of years have gone by. One may conjecture that Jana Sanskriti’s theatre leads to a deeper sense of empowerment because it is truly endogenous, with Jana Sanskriti merely acting as a facilitator, whereas Contact Base’s interventions are exogenous and guided in a specific direction. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that the most important step towards empowerment is the decision to show up and participate when given the opportunity; the path is irrelevant as long as it is taken at all. This position is at least partially supported by the observation that in the case of both Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base’s respondents, although many women/girls chose to get involved, they had to cross barriers to do so, which many others could not. The determination and desire to resist flows of power of those who could take the first step was an important, if not the primary, factor in their empowerment.

In the next and final chapter, we conclude this report with a summary and discussion of our findings, and a few thoughts on future directions.