DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Social theatre has been and continues to be used to bring about social change in various parts of the world since the 1970s. Different forms of social theatre have adapted themselves in different ways to specific cultural contexts and social settings. The goal of this study was to examine two such approaches, as implemented by Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base, two organisations working in the state of West Bengal. These organisations represent different theoretical approaches, and our goal was to understand, describe, and compare the processes of social theatre as practised by them. As women’s empowerment is an important aspect of social development in marginalised communities, another goal of the study was to assess whether these forms of social theatre empower women to organise and negotiate for their rights, and if so, how. Finally, we also wanted to study the ways in which social theatre mobilises rural communities to take collective social action. In this chapter, we summarise our findings regarding these questions, discuss some issues that arise from these findings, and outline some potential directions for further exploration.

8.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Theatre of the Oppressed as practiced by Jana Sanskriti and Theatre for Development as practiced by Contact Base are effective social theatre methods / approaches that create spaces for continuous rural community education, engagement, and empowerment for social action.

Jana Sanskriti’s philosophy is to stimulate the rational thought process of marginalised rural villagers so that they are able to critique their social reality shaped by the top-down development agenda of the state, and initiate political and social action for bringing about meaningful local development. Theatre for them is not only an end in itself but also a means to initiate activism on and off stage. Through theatre, the audience is motivated and mobilised to engage with social issues as rational thinkers, become conscious of the oppression they suffer, and evolve solutions from within the society through collective learning and analysis of the oppression. Thus the process
involves an intellectual development of the participants who themselves take charge of their own development. It is important to note that those engaging with Jana Sanskriti are not necessarily completely passive to begin with. In reality, many who are apparently passive actually covertly struggle against the oppression they face in their lives. Jana Sanskriti’s Forum Theatre allows this covert struggle to come out and be expressed in a more organised, collective, and vocal manner.

Contact Base’s theatre for development model is quite different. It capacitates local communities to undertake theatre based campaigns against social vices and oppression, through which the community is mobilised to take action against their exploitation. The philosophy is to sensitise the village communities through theatre, motivate them to take charge of their own situation, and network with other local stakeholders of the government and non-government entities to initiate collective action. In contrast to Jana Sanskriti’s methodology, Contact Base uses a more directive method in the form of a campaign, which is initiated and designed by the organisation, is message centric, and less dialogical.

In case of both the organisations, it is critical that local community members take part in actual performance of the theatre shows to establish a community led process. Both organisations take advantage of the popularity of theatre in rural areas. Contact Base often makes use of local folk theatre forms, and engages professional theatre groups to carry out the campaigns based on specific scripts with social messages. Alternatively, they also develop theatrical capacities of interested local community groups and train them to perform pre-written scripts. Jana Sanskriti on the other hand scripts their plays through theatre workshops where impromptu dialogues and actual experiences of the community actors are first narrated and linked to meaningful images, and a script is developed later once the play has been formulated by combining the spontaneous dialogues and images.

CHALLENGES Through years of engagement with social theatre work, both organisations have had effective community interventions at the grassroots level that have initiated community-led collective action for social change. However, this has not been an easy and smooth journey. In the case of Forum theatre, political parties and local administration have often tried to disrupt ongoing theatre shows, sensing risk in activating the minds of the otherwise silent and subverted communities. These kinds of disruptions have mainly happened when the local community addressed issues related to electoral politics, the ration distribution system, or sale of illegal liquor, where interests of particular groups have been threatened. In addition, women who came forward to
perform have faced resistance from within their households. Women have been prevented from performing in Forum Theatre, and many of the women who joined Jana Sanskriti’s teams had to drop out because they could not resist the domination at their household level. In fact, based on the interviews with the Jana Sanskriti women’s group, level of education and age of the women were important factors influencing the women’s ability to continue their struggle against the domination and oppression through theatre; women who were more educated and were older showed more confidence and seemed likely to sustain their involvement whereas the less educated or uneducated women and those who were younger faced more difficulties and seemed more vulnerable.

Contact Base being less activist in its approach faced fewer challenges while carrying out the campaigns. Other than challenges specific to particular campaigns, they in general face problems such as mistrust and lack of cooperation from the local communities in the initial months of their intervention, but this is usually overcome with time. However, they too have faced problems caused by patriarchal attitudes during campaigns on women’s issues. Male members in the audience have often tried to stop theatre shows and have pulled their wives away from the audience when women’s oppression was being shown. They have stopped shows in particular localities with the complaint that Contact Base with their social theatre is trying to pollute the minds of the women with messages and thoughts that would be disruptive to their families and society.

**Women’s Empowerment**  One of the long term and primary goals of both organisations has been to empower marginalised rural women to fight for their rights and dignity in their lives. Such struggles initiated through theatre based activism have been against child marriage, dowry, domestic violence, women’s access to social spaces, and their self-worth as independent and capable personalities. Most of the women engaging with social theatre have had direct experiences of social oppression in their lives. Theatre of the Oppressed was considered by these women to be a creative space not only to voice out their own thoughts, opinions, and grievances but also to mobilise other community members to take collective action against the social oppression depicted in the plays. Similarly in case of Theatre for Development, marginalised women came together to perform street theatre shows to sensitise rural communities on the social and legal rights of women. The process of training in social theatre as well as the actual performances led to the formation of women’s action groups in the villages who, with their collective sense of injustice, started activism against the oppression they faced. These women’s groups have campaigned and stopped corruption in the
ration distribution system, broken up illegal breweries selling local liquor that drained their family income and increased domestic violence, stopped girl child marriages, and have mobilised families to send their girl children to school. Alongside their action for larger social issues, their own mind-sets, capabilities, and lives have changed. They do not continue to accept their daily oppression silently and as given anymore and have been able to establish their dignity in their own families and society. Social theatre has successfully empowered them to become confident, able, and informed persons who understand and undertake social action for the betterment of their own societies and children.

However, the process of empowerment is not linear and absolute. The women who are empowered continue to face new oppressions which they have to deal with everyday. Not all the women who joined social theatre have been equally empowered. There were some who had to discontinue their association with the group. The ones who managed to continue were not only more educated and articulate even before they joined social theatre, but were also able to convince their husbands and families to allow them to go and perform in public. Sometimes they had to argue forcefully to succeed in doing this, which is itself a sign of their empowerment. But all the respondents agreed that they would not have been able to continue their involvement with theatre if their husbands had really been unwilling. In other words, a normative sanction by the patriarchal society was a factor for the success of the women who continued to perform. Thus, the process of empowerment needs to be looked at critically wherein the dominant discourse shaped the process to some extent with exceptions. Jana Sanskriti’s Theatre of the Oppressed enacted through Forum theatre demonstrates their ideology, which resonates with Foucault’s notion of power/resistance and the feminist concept of agency for empowerment. Contact Base’s approach on the other hand is different because its use of street theatre is a strategy with target groups and impact that demonstrates a more limited, directive and formulaic model. But this does not imply that the way Contact Base influences the participants to take charge of their lives and to resist oppression is any less inspiring than the more activist approach of Jana Sanskriti.

COLLECTIVE ACTION  Social theatre performed in village communities sensitised the spectators and even mobilised them to come forward and take action. Both Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base have strategies for bringing together the mobilised and active participants of the theatre shows to meet and discuss solutions and ways of further collective action. These community meetings are held with those audience members who are vocal and engaged in the discussions at the shows and
wish to undertake some form of action against the social oppression or problem. Jana Sanskriti’s active community members join their Human Rights Protection Committee and continue social activism through this network. In addition, the theatre groups continue to perform the theatre shows and also act outside the stage for social change. Contact Base’s action groups are also formed out of these meetings, and these action groups develop their own strategies for local action and continue their activism collectively. Contact Base supports these action groups by linking them with relevant stakeholders such as local NGOs, law enforcement, and administration.

Social theatre is an extremely powerful strategy for empowerment that directly touches the emotions and hearts of the spectators through the depiction of real life scenarios with which the viewers can identify, and inspires them to think logically, discuss, voice out, and finally act through planned organised action giving rise to a continuous struggle for social development that is meaningful and necessary to the local people.

8.2 SOCIAL THEATRE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

This study did not try to assess the extent to which the approaches of Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base have been successful in achieving their broader goal, namely, social change or social development. This question is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to answer in the absence of systematic baseline data. However, the information obtained in our study certainly makes it possible to make some observations and present some analysis regarding this important question.

8.2.1 Goals of these organisations

Although the broader purpose of social theatre is to enable social change or development, exactly what kind of change is desirable differs depending on how one defines development. However, before getting to that discussion, it is also important to judge the success or failure of a social initiative based on the specific intentions of that initiative.

The primary goal of Jana Sanskriti’s theatre is the intellectual growth of its audience. Specifically, they want to transform relatively passive marginalised rural villagers so that they can rationally analyse their situation and then perhaps become activists for bringing about betterment in their
social situation. For Jana Sanskriti, gaining the ability to think for themselves and become activists is an end in itself; the issues they protest or become activists for are secondary.

This kind of intellectual growth, like the Foucauldian notion of resistance discussed in Chapter 7, is difficult to measure, and in fact Jana Sanskriti is not particularly interested in measuring it. Based on case studies and life stories, both from this study and other writings on Jana Sanskriti, there is certainly evidence of such growth, although it is not uniform and depends to some extent on the situation of an individual; in fact, it is unrealistic to expect this growth to happen in everyone at the same level or in the same way. Particularly for those who are already conscious of oppression but appear passive because they do not know how to protest, Jana Sanskriti’s theatre provides an outlet to voice out their thoughts and become participants in collective action for change.

Another goal of Jana Sanskriti, more easily observable, is to initiate social action through collective community activism. Jana Sanskriti runs the Human Rights Protection Committee, a network of its socially active members. Although we did not try to study their activities in detail, the respondents interviewed in this study described their social activism, and further instances are described by Ganguly (2010a). This activism mainly takes the form of protest against local problems, such as corruption in the ration distribution system and illegal liquor shops. The respondents also described constructive action, for example, in resurrecting the Mid-Day-Meal scheme in their local schools.

One point of note is that the activism initiated by Jana Sanskriti is essentially local, and does not try to identify deeper root problems or address them through attempts to influence policy. This is quite appropriate; as Foucault suggests, grassroots resistance tends to form against local oppression, and Jana Sanskriti’s intervention is not explicitly designed to take it beyond this level. This is not to say that Jana Sanskriti minimises the importance of policy initiatives. For example, Ganguly (2010a :84) describes the following initiative to address lack of quality education:

Ten Jana Sanskriti teams based in South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal have started addressing this whole question of quality education through Forum plays, repeated several times in each of 100 villages and interspersed with the dissemination of information about the education system. As far as my information goes, this is going to be the first time a theatre group has reached nearly 200,000 people on an issue like education, discussing with them, giving them time for reflection, disseminating
information, collecting their interventions and trying to compile a report highlighting the recommendations of the people at the margins on the question of quality education, which will be sent to policy-makers and academics.

However, this kind of systematic effort is an exception rather than the norm, and even here the primary goal is for the village communities to ‘create a movement to demand reform in the education system on the basis of their rational thinking, not as blind followers of Jana Sanskriti’ (Ganguly 2010a:74).

The goal of Contact Base’s interventions are quite different. When Contact Base builds the capacity of local community groups to carry out social theatre, they focus on the personal growth of the group members as an essential part of this process. Although this is not the primary goal of a social theatre campaign, it adds to the generation of local capacities for social change. However, Contact Base’s primary goal is to use theatre for information dissemination, and the theatre performance itself does not attempt to either stimulate or prohibit the mental or psychological growth of their audience. Their goal is to convey a predetermined message to a difficult-to-reach audience, and any personal growth that happens in the participants of their interventions is a side-effect. Although Contact Base and Jana Sanskriti both use social theatre methods to achieve their goals, for Contact Base theatre is simply a tool where the theatre form itself is largely agnostic to what information is being disseminated. The choice of what information is to be disseminated is not determined by the audience, and to that extent Contact Base’s approach is open to criticism as a top-down approach. As previously noted, Contact Base responds to this criticism by pointing out that while broad areas are determined by the agendas of funding organisations, details of the communication are determined by field studies that incorporate feedback from local stakeholders. In fact, the process through which a communication plan is formulated is perhaps a more interesting aspect of Contact Base’s work, compared to the actual theatre shows which are fairly routine when eventually performed as part of a campaign. Contact Base does try to measure the effect of their intervention through systematic baseline and endline studies. While the degree of success varies, there does seem to be measurable short-term effect, and enough information is available that longer-term studies could also be done in principle.

As with Jana Sanskriti, Contact Base also tries to form local action groups and connect them with stakeholders in the local administration. Again, based on the findings in our study, these
efforts seem to be successful in the short run, and it is possible in principle to assess their longer term effectiveness as well. Although not a primary goal, the formation of these community groups may also lead to intellectual growth and empowerment. Anecdotal data shows that many of the community groups continue their social activism even after Contact Base has concluded their campaign, and it might be in interesting to study this aspect in further detail. However, there is no comprehensive way of comparing this with Jana Sanskriti’s achievements, because such comparisons must rely on case studies and life stories, which are ultimately anecdotal and subject to selection bias.

To summarise, the upfront aims of Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base are quite different and as we argue below, they should perhaps be thought of as complementary rather than competing approaches, with their relative usefulness and effectiveness depending on the context in which they may be used.

8.2.2 Which form is more useful?

Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base represent two very different paradigms of development, and which of the two forms are more useful depends on which kind of development one sees as desirable. As Kabeer (1999b) points out in her discussion of empowerment, there is a natural tension between the idealist feminist post-structuralist approach which views empowerment as a psychological process that is desirable in itself, and a more pragmatic policy-oriented approach which considers empowerment an important goal not only for its own sake, but also because it promotes broader development. In a way, the approaches of Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base reflect the same tension in the sphere of development. Jana Sanskriti’s goal is to intellectually stimulate rural communities and involve them in collective action; thus their work is in line with the post-development paradigm of development. Contact Base represents an alternative development approach using participatory communication, where the goal is to communicate information about various policies or initiatives with participatory implementation. In addition, they try to systematically document their findings on the ground from community members and other local stakeholders and communicate them to the government and funding agencies in order to influence subsequent policy. Thus, their approach is neither fully top-down nor bottom-up, but rather a hybrid of the two.
These approaches represent different, but reasonable points of view, covering a wide spectrum of opinions, that nonetheless recognise that a blind emulation of the Western notion of development is bound to fail. Although the post-development notion of progress as an increase in the awareness of oppression is more attractive as an abstraction, the more pragmatic notion of progress measurable through indicators is also important. In fact, one may conclude that the two notions complement each other, and Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base give concrete form to these two complementary notions of progress through social theatre. It should perhaps be noted that postdevelopment theory, with roots in radical ecology and ecofeminism, also emphasises indigenous knowledge in development and education, not unlike Paulo Freire’s concept of ‘popular culture’ (Morrow 2008); however, although Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base take advantage of the familiarity of indigenous theatre forms, neither try to make use of indigenous knowledge systems as such. In this sense, both organisations can be viewed as modernist in their approach. With all their strengths and weaknesses, both forms still play a positive and important, if not essential, role in the true empowerment of these marginalised rural communities.

One aspect that we have not considered so far is the possibility that perhaps one approach is more useful than the other in certain contexts. Thompson and Schechner (2004) remark that social theatre is generally practiced in times/places of crisis. But crises can be of different types and have different genesis. India is not a homogeneous country, and oppression takes many forms and is caused by many reasons. Even within individual states such as West Bengal, socio-economic realities vary widely; as noted previously in Section 3.5, the geographical peculiarities of South 24 Parganas, where Jana Sanskriti primarily works, make it a particularly difficult area for conventional development work. More generally, in contexts where powerful lobbies with economic interests at stake have a vested interest in stalling development, the approach of Contact Base which requires cooperation of local authorities is less likely to succeed, whereas an underground movement initiated by Theatre of the Oppressed methods may empower the oppressed to resist their oppressors. On the other hand, in contexts where inefficiencies in government service delivery are due to incompetence rather than malicious intent, and marginalisation can be addressed to some extent by reducing these inefficiencies, Contact Base’s Theatre for Development approach has the chance to make a positive contribution.

This view is partly supported by an analysis of the themes and issues that are addressed by the two organisations. Both Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base work with women’s issues such
as child marriage, girl child education, and trafficking. These are issues that have backing from the administration, and do not antagonise any powerful economic or political lobby. Other issues that appear as frequent themes in Jana Sanskriti’s theatre are liquor addiction among males and corruption in the ration distribution system. Liquor addiction in rural areas is fueled by unregulated local breweries that government initiatives are unlikely to control even if there was desire to do so, and consequently no funder would probably consider it worthwhile to address the issue. Contact Base is also unlikely to be funded to undertake campaigns against corruption in any form, as such campaigns would be politically sensitive and prone to opposition from powerful interest groups. In fact, Contact Base cited the example of a campaign promoting the Jan Kerosene Pariyojana, where plays targeting corruption by kerosene dealers who did not implement the provisions of the scheme were forcibly stopped by such dealers who represented a powerful interest group. Jana Sanskriti’s theatre groups, being unhindered by external agendas, can probably give a stronger voice to these issues even with the threat of opposition.

On the other hand, Contact Base undertakes campaigns on issues related to health such as sanitation and immunisation, which are not found to be addressed by Jana Sanskriti’s theatre, and are unlikely to be addressed because they are not perceived as important by the community. For example, none of the homes we visited in the villages of South 24 Parganas to interview Jana Sanskriti’s respondents had any toilet facilities, and the villagers use a bamboo grove as a toilet. A strict post-development approach would say that addressing these issues is not a priority simply because they are not important to the community. However, common sense tells us that these issues have long-term health implications, and attempts should be made to address them. Contact Base’s campaigns can effect behaviour change by explaining the importance of health issues, and promoting the effective use of government schemes. If the community faces difficulties due to problems with the way schemes are designed, such feedback is taken to policymakers for further action.

8.3 Social theatre in the context of broader social change

Although it was not the purpose of this study to evaluate the overall achievements of these two types of social theatre, this is a relevant question particularly for Jana Sanskriti, which has been
working in their intervention areas for several decades. Jana Sanskriti’s activities largely overlap with the period of economic liberalisation in India that started in 1991 leading to an unprecedented pace of change in socio-economic conditions. Although the impact of these changes has been peripheral in the communities studied, some of which do not even have access to electricity till date, they have certainly not been untouched. The general increase in wealth enjoyed by India in recent years has reached them, for example, through state-funded initiatives such as the MGNREGA and the Mid-Day-Meal scheme, and through contact with urban life. It is therefore interesting to analyse evidence from other studies that deal with issues that are important to the marginalised communities, so that we can assess the role exogenous change has played in the lives of these communities, and establish the broader context in which the achievements of social theatre may be placed. In the following discussion, we look at some of these issues one by one.

Oppression and marginalisation of women and girl children is a recurring theme in the activism of Jana Sanskriti as well as many of Contact Base’s campaigns. It is almost taken for granted that the gender bias seen in marginalised rural societies is a consequence of entrenched patriarchal norms that must be altered before any real change can take place. However, it is also clear that these patriarchal norms stem at least in part from economic conditions, and these norms would be more amenable to change if the economic situation became more conducive. It is of course virtually impossible to estimate the relative importance of these factors. However, Jensen (2012) describes an interesting study that suggests that given the right incentives, a significant proportion of women are willing and able to forego their traditional roles. The study was a randomised trial where three years of recruiting services, beginning in 2004, were provided to young women in randomly selected rural villages in Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, to help them get jobs in the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry. No such service was provided in the control villages. As the BPO industry was relatively new at the time, this effectively provided increased employment opportunities for women in the treatment villages. These women were significantly more likely to delay marriage and childbearing, choosing instead to enter the labor market or obtain more schooling or postschool training. They also reported wanting to have fewer children and to work more steadily throughout their lifetime.

The villages in South 24 Parganas that we visited were connected to the main road by network of brick roads. The roads were recently constructed through the MGNREGA scheme, and in fact the villagers noted that the lack of good roads had made it difficult to access health care till recently, even leading to preventable deaths in the villages.
Education, specifically for girl children, is another recurrent theme. It is well documented that school enrolment has gone up all over India, including West Bengal, over the last few decades. Data on school attendance, as opposed to just enrolment, is relatively sparse, but is available through NSSO surveys conducted in 1995–96 (National Sample Survey Organisation 1998) and 2007–08 (National Sample Survey Office 2010). According to these reports, over this period the school attendance ratio (per 100) among rural females in West Bengal has increased from 67 to 82 in the age group 11–13, from 42 to 57 in the age group 14–17, and from 4 to 7 in the age group 18–24. In fact the amount of increase is larger relative to the increase among rural males, which for the corresponding age groups are from 74 to 83, from 44 to 55, and an unchanged ratio of 14 in the age group 18–24. School attendance may not fully reflect interest in education, especially in West Bengal, because the public education system suffers considerably from resource deficiency and inefficiency; the number of teachers per student is low, teacher absenteeism is high, and it is quite possible that the status quo is favoured by vested political interests (Kremer et al. 2005, Bandyopadhyay 2008, Béteille 2009). As a consequence, private coaching has become the de facto mode of education in West Bengal (Gangopadhyay and Sarkar 2014). In fact, during informal discussions after their interviews, the members of Jana Sanskriti’s women’s theatre team noted that their wider community is now very conscious about the need to get their children educated, and so they send their children for private tuition even though it is costly. I have had similar feedback in other contexts in the course of my own work with Contact Base. The NSSO surveys cited above also provide information on spending on private coaching. Among rural women pursuing general education in West Bengal, the average per student annual expenditure increased from Rs. 292 in 1995–96 to Rs. 916 in 2007–08, and the corresponding increase for rural males is from Rs. 221 to Rs. 826. These amounts are all more than four times the corresponding all-India averages. More importantly, the percentage of these increases, 274 per cent for rural females and 213 per cent for rural males, far exceed the increase in the Consumer Price Index for Agricultural and Rural Labourers in the corresponding period, which is around 75 per cent (240 in 1995–96 to 418 in 2007–08, with base year 1986–87).²

The reasons for this increased interest in education is unclear. There is evidence that the Mid-Day-Meal scheme has had a positive impact on enrolment of both male and female children.

²From the Labour Bureau’s Annual Report 2007-08, available at http://labourbureau.nic.in/Annual_Rep_ALRL_2k7_08.pdf
Afridi (2011) suggests that it has in fact increased attendance rates rather than just enrolment, for girls in particular. More interestingly, in line with the conclusions of Jensen (2012), a study by Oster and Millett (2010) uses data from three states in South India to suggest that job opportunities such as those provided by call centres promote school enrolment. All these studies suggest that rapid changes in economic realities over the last few decades, irrespective of their long-term impact, have had a significant role in increasing school enrolment of girls, and by implication support the hypothesis that patriarchal attitudes alone are not responsible for the marginalisation of women in rural communities in India. Regardless of the precise reasons, educational indicators have improved substantially over the last few decades both in West Bengal and pan-India.

Corruption in the Public Distribution System (PDS) is also an important concern for the women we interviewed in South 24 Parganas. Evidence suggests that this corruption is a consequence of the implementation of the system (in West Bengal), and local community protests are unlikely to reduce corruption unless such protests are able to create public pressure on the state to overhaul the system. Based on a nine-state survey of the PDS (which did not include West Bengal), Khera (2011) notes that contrary to the common impression that the PDS is dysfunctional, respondents received 84-88% of their full entitlement, and that its revival is largely due to state initiatives such as expanded coverage, reduced prices, and computerisation of stock management. Puri (2012) particularly praises the reforms implemented in Chhattisgarh that focused on extending coverage, improving delivery and increasing transparency. The specific steps that he credits are the shifting of the management of ration shops from private dealers to community-based organisations such as gram panchayats, self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives, and addressing the problem of diversion of foodgrains while they were being transported from government godowns to PDS outlets by dispensing with private trucks and directly delivering foodgrains to ration shops.

All these findings indicate that exogenous change over the past few decades has probably far outpaced the incremental progress Jana Sanskriti’s activities would have made in its absence, making it difficult to make any reasonable assessment of its achievements in terms of catalysing broader social change. However, the importance of continued activism to vitalise the local communities and make them proactive participants in shaping their future cannot be minimised. At the same time, these findings suggest that to be successful and effective in the rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape of India, a bottom-up approach needs to engage with state actors for local activism to
lead to concrete beneficial outcomes. Jana Sanskriti, in spite of having worked in the same region for three decades at a micro level to make villagers conscious and capable of making the right choices and taking responsibility for their own betterment, has not directly influenced any major social policy change. Contact Base on the other hand strategically integrates its campaign and communication with existing state resources and ensures that when the minds of local villagers are activated with new information, knowledge, and a sense of leadership, government resources, policies, and schemes are in place to support their social development with conscious and active participation of the more vocal, informed, and mobilised community members. However, Contact Base’s dependence on external funding shapes and limits its agenda and the issues it can take up. Furthermore, it may not be able to sustain its campaigns if and when sources of such funding dry up, which is more and more likely to happen as the state becomes increasingly neo-liberal and reduces its welfare dimensions.

It is thus very difficult to say how much only social theatre has contributed in bringing about social change, and perhaps this is not a relevant question at all. Social change at the macro level is inevitably brought about by larger socio-economic changes, usually implemented using state machinery through policy actions. The more important observation here is that villagers, after becoming conscious of their entitlements and after acquiring the skill to rationally address social issues affecting their lives, have been engaged in fighting for proper delivery mechanism of services — social, legal, and political, as well as for resisting the operation of power relations in their everyday lives. Our focus in this study was on gender relations of power. It is this internal and external journey of the social theatre activists that make this study most interesting, as it delves deep into how an external stimulation — with respect to intellectual inputs, knowledge, and attitude of questioning one’s existing social reality — is leading to internal changes reflected in increased confidence, leadership, and capacity to break free from a state of marginality enforced by socio-political institutions.

8.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study as a whole delved into the processes of social theatre and its effect on rural communities, an important specific question was the empowerment of women through social theatre.
Our analysis of this issue was based on Foucault’s concept of power/resistance for analysing the empowerment process. It might have also been interesting to analyse women’s empowerment in the context of Judith Butler’s framework of gender identity and subjectivity within power structures, which was however beyond the scope of this study. Given the growing importance of women’s empowerment issues and research interests in this field, future studies can explore this aspect.

Just as this thesis deals with the process of empowerment of women, the dimension of caste is another important marker on which empowerment could be studied. However, this study did not address caste as a factor in empowerment because a systematic study with more in depth research and analysis would require more resources than was available to us. The issue of caste did not arise in our study partly due to the relative lack of caste diversity in the communities studied, which was possibly due to lack of explicit focus on caste while choosing the respondents in consultation with the organisations involved. Caste being an important social institution in India, linking it to the issue of empowerment through social theatre can be an interesting area of future study.

Finally, this study focused on one particular aspect of Contact Base’s work, whereas there are other interesting aspects as well that could be topics of further study. In particular, their theatre-based research approach is perhaps more interesting, as it is more explicit in combining a bottom-up approach with the broader policy-driven focus of Contact Base. Longer-term studies delving into the activities of local action groups that are formed by Contact Base, after the latter leaves their interventions areas, is also another interesting aspect that could be explored.

This study describes and analyses in detail two social theatre approaches as case studies, and relates these approaches to various relevant frameworks such as feminism, postdevelopment, power/resistance relations, and communication theories. Although the existing body of scholarly work on social theatre is substantial, this work has attempted to use the lens of gender and power in order to explore the potential of social theatre, rather than focusing on its deployment for mainstream social development. This particular study is an attempt to build knowledge and understanding of this sector for strengthening both academic and applied work in future, and will hopefully lead to more interesting and multidimensional contributions by other researchers. Such studies have the potential to influence national policies for rural and social development through a more democratic, participatory, and inclusive approach.