

Theatre as a Vehicle of Communication

Arunima Mukherjee

Abstract

As the world moves towards greater democracy and decentralization, it is vital for people to stimulate their awareness and participation. In this situation a decisive role can be played by communication in promoting human development. Communication is a crucial part of development process because it enables people to acquire the information they need to understand any process as participatory practice must be at its core, *theatre* can be a great tool for *communicating* complex social messages and creating understanding. All over the world, the theatre has now become not just a medium of communication but an increasingly indispensable aspect of human awareness. Theatre is one of the oldest ways of effective communication methods across the world. Still today, in a developing country like India, in rural areas where mass media reach is very low, the relevance of theatre as a traditional medium for Developmental issues is very much relevant. Theatre gives people the opportunity to tell their own stories, and addressing matters that are relevant to them. This is one of the most effective ways of participatory communication where people can participate and talk about the taboos of the society freely and frankly. This is a tool for exploring issues, difficulties, problem-solving and improving communication. Consequently, theatre is regarded as a tool or instrument for development. This article analyses, relevance of theatre arts as a communication tool and evaluate the changes brought by theatre.

Key words: Theatre, Communication, Agent for social change, Theatre for development, Participatory Approach, Reflections of individuals.

Introduction

“I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being”

Thornton Wilder, an American playwright, novelist and winner of three Pulitzer Prizes, once said very significantly. [*1]

Social change is an inevitable and necessary part of the transformative process. But the question is ; in the age of new media and information technologies will theater as a form of traditional media become extinct? Carl Weber, Professor of Directing and Dramaturgy at Stanford University asks **"How can theater evolve its unique mode of 'live' performance so that it will stay competitive in a market where all kinds of electronically created and enhanced performance will dominate the merchandising of entertainment?"** [*2] This is reasonable fear, but there are indications that 'live' performer will not be replace electronic actor. It emphasizes dialogue, ensuring audience-oriented feedback, and joint participation. Without participation effective communication is compromised. Theatre as a medium gives the opportunity to exchange of ideas, to achieve the objectives of development and encourage local participation in development. To define theatre as a tool of communication, it is important to analyze the basic functions of communication . Communication as a concept implies that through communication, individuals can share information and thereby increase their knowledge and develop a sense of community. Similarly, audience members after watching the theatre can communicate its messages to others within the community. The message is communicated through interactive dialogue participated in by the actors of the theatre and the audience. In the field of communication the role of theatre is same similar to that of the opinion leaders. Theatre is used as a particular form of development communication. Communication for social change is the heart of theatre arts. Through this medium people describe their behaviors in their professional and personal spheres as if they were performers on the stage of life.

What does theatre mean: The word 'theatre' comes from the Greek word 'Theatron', meaning 'seeing place'. Theatre does not mean that people do not just get up onstage and pretend. Theatre is representation of 'live performance'. Theatre that can be seen in different types and styles, involved the activities of different groups or organizations who accomplish such dramatic play or show openly to render their message to the public widely. A view to

draw the public attention as well as generating the awareness within them through the delivered messages. It remains as one of the most powerful media of mass communication, as it evolve from an attempt to understand ourselves and the world around us. Theatre enhances three qualities:

> It is collaborative art form

>It is about human beings.

>It is live in form.

The essence of theatre:

- Theatre that covers the various performances that relate to express all events and facts, ideas and thoughts of the respective society through the presentation in the manner of pleasure and enjoyments. Theatre can mould the numerous illiterate villagers effectively. What it caters for the people are mostly in easy and understandable manner.
- It applies very common and widely used languages of the respective society which make any presentation understandable quickly by rendering useful informations.
- Theatre caters its major programs through ‘face to face’ presentations to the audience.
- It can earn ‘credibility’ through its live presentations easily from the audience by delivering its messages.
- It is true that this traditional medium has significant contribution towards bringing the success of many developmental programs. It can impact the audience with an immediate effect through its catered program exchange of lesser expenses that it can afford easily.
- Drama engages people in creative problem-solving and decision –making.
- Drama builds cooperation and develops other social skills.

The problem of theatre:

Theatre plays an important role in informing people. It is means of public communication reaching a large audience. Theatre has a purpose beyond entertaining . Theatre has been used as a tool for upliftment which was demonstrated by a UNICEF Puppet Theatre Program after the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. But there is no support as such from government. The government or any other private or public organizations are hardly found patronizing the art of theatre. Now, theatre is facing hindrances in various ways with the threats of closure .Funding is the major crux .Today technology is guiding our routine of everyday life. For this reason, the mass media has become a major source of information in 21st century. I want to address the tension that media technology and globalization create for this traditional form of communication. For instance, television in many cases has replaced traditional media. Theatre as a form of folk culture began to fade away following the development of modern mass media. But how can it be forgotten as a form of traditional medium? Theatre is an important vehicle that delivers information and culture to people. In this paper I will make clear that the theatre arts is still a powerful means of communication. It deserves to be called the medium of mass communication. The boom of electronic media cannot undermine the significance of this medium.

Why theatre?

Theatre will be taken to mean the vehicle through which messages are carried from one end (variously or specifically called source, artist) to another (receiver, listener, reader, or viewer).



A basic communication model showing the sender, message, and receiver.

This model includes three basic elements of communication. Through this model, it can be easily understood. That here sender refers to artist, receiver refers to audience members and

the remaining element, and message is speech by the actor. Theatre will therefore refer to the vehicle 'the common people'. Perhaps, we could look at the theatre in at least four ways. I shall now discuss the relevance of theatre as a communication tool or instrument towards performing the various communicative functions:

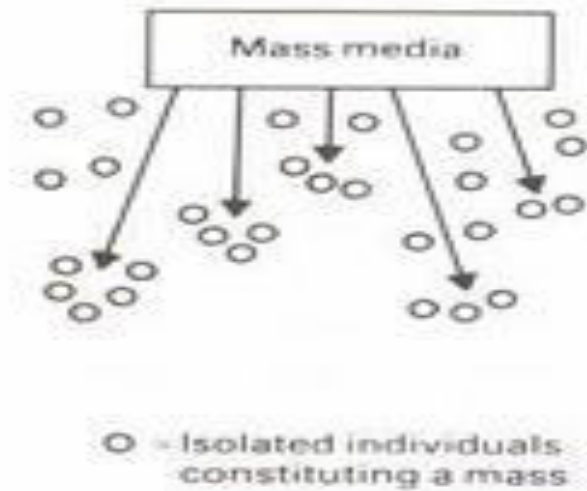
A) Information Function:

Communication programs have tended to fulfill the role in development thinking and practice."To inform and persuade people to adopt certain behaviors and practices beneficial to them".[*3] Theatre as a medium of communication constantly mirrors and reflects the society. It can function to bridge understanding among audience members in a community. Theatre plays an important role to inform people. Theatre has a purpose beyond entertaining an audience. This purpose is generally to change the knowledge, attitude and behaviors of audiences. Theatre is being used as a medium of information. The use of theatre to inform audience members has many names. The terms 'infotainment' and 'theatre-in-information' are most often used. Although television and the internet have dominated mass media, but also theatre plays a powerful role in culture, as do other forms of media. Theatre arts form a major form of communication through which individuals can inform and persuade their thoughts. Theatre is involved in the dissemination of the information in a particular community. I give an example here:

Paul Lazarsfeld (American Sociologist) and his associates in their "hypodermic needle theory" implied mass media had a direct, immediate and powerful effect on its audiences. Mass media in the 1940s and 1950s were perceived as a powerful influence on behavior change. The core assumption of this theory is that the mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by 'shooting' or 'injecting' them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response. This model is a classic example of the application of theatre arts.[*4]

Conceptual Model:

Early mass communication model



Magic bullet theory model

Source: Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955)

Similarly, theatre is as exactly how the theory worked. Theatre is an effective means of communicating an idea. Theatre can change the mode of perception of the audience through information. Thus theatre arts play an important role in shaping people's view.

Theatre as a mode of communication in the Development of society:

Many researchers stress that there is no guarantee that greater access to information will automatically lead to increased participation in development. Theatre for development aims to offer an alternative approach by which theatre can be of direct service to the marginalized urban and rural poor masses.

“When real life experiences are captured within the dramatic form, strong emotions and resonance can be aroused among audience and powerful outcomes such as change in attitudes, behaviors or even causes of life are possible”-Said Somers(2008)[*5]

For instance, the dramatic representation of real stories brings the hidden values in the society to peoples' awareness. It has been proved that traditional forms of media are more effective to set the mind of illiterate masses.

Many theorists and communication workers think that the use of local and traditional media automatically ensures people's participation with rural people. As a form of traditional media, theatre is alive to new ideas. Theatre is fostered through local dialect. The nature of theatre arts is, this form is personal and more credible. People could easily identify themselves as part of this art form. The main motto of theatre as a popular form of traditional medium is to tell people a certain story through melodrama, attracting a heterogeneous audience at a time. While creating awareness about the reality is not easy in rural areas, where education levels are generally low and poverty is widespread. Therefore theatre can contribute to awareness building among the rural mass. Stage shows like theatre can target a large number of people at a time and have a profound influence on the spectators. 'Koottu' (theatrical form of Kerala) or 'Pandavani' (folk theatre form of Chhattisgarh) are some of the traditional forms of storytelling and narrative theatre. Theatre has a high effect in creating awareness and influencing the attitude of the audience. Example is given below in the form of a Case-study.

Case Study on Effectiveness of Theatre in Development communication:

Kerala Sangeeta Nataka Academy deals with socio-political issues and gender discrimination. Shankar Venkiteswaran, artistic director of this academy has stated that, **“When the entire world considered Palestinians as terrorists, we were trying to express the identity of Palestine people in front of the world,”** he said. The world should know what is happening in Palestine. Innocent people have been portrayed as terrorists and sent to jail. They are undergoing cruel human rights violations, the activists said. The theatre should be able to express the plurality of society, stressed a discussion held at the seventh International Theatre Festival, here on Tuesday. It discussed the devices to take the theatre to villages. (The Hindu, 14th January, 2015)

In fact theatre has some added advantages like local appeal, direct personal contact, local dialect which make this medium so unique and useful. Thus theatre will help in developmental activities. Having wider flexibility, theatre as a folk medium can include any fact or event for delivering the same through their presentation, to the

[Theatre Street Journal, Vol.1, No. 1, 27 March 2017]

audiences immediately. No other medium of mass communication, has got any such opportunity or way to execute the same. Beside this, a very quick or instant interaction between the audiences and the communicator is possible satisfactorily in an easy environment. Such interactive part done satisfactorily, can command a successful communication which may lead in developing the rural society with the utilization of rendered ideas and thoughts as available from it. It is also, adored by urban people equally.

People's Participation and Interactive power: As a means of communication, in many developing countries theatre is easily accepted. Theatre may also be used as a means to identify problems and to seek solutions with the participation of the community. Theatre for development may be very effective in addressing communities in their own ways of understanding. Theatre also serves as a participatory tool by involving audience to participate in the act, making it a genuine two-way medium for communicating information.

Everett Rogers (communication scholar) in his theory "Diffusion of Innovation" (1962) described -An innovation is "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived to be new by an individual or other unit of adoption". "Communication is a process in which participants create and share information with one another to reach a mutual understanding" (Rogers, 1995). Here Rogers first deals with innovation of an idea, He cites that *diffusion* is the process by which an *innovation* is communicated through certain medium over time among the participants in a social system. So it is an absolutely participation based research work. Similarly, theatre for development is a participatory theatre practice which allows communities to write their own stories and perform in a drama based on the messages that emerge from the storytelling process. It is a practice which operates from their perspectives, using their own language. Sometimes, spectators are encouraged by the tradition to stop the play, make comments and ask questions during the performance. Thus using of theatre in a development environments has involved performing plays to convey strong social messages. Yerima (2007) who quoted Shakespeare " **Theatre is a mirror for highlighting man's humanity and also a tool for understanding why man also finds it so easy to transgress that same humanity**"[*6] Theatre as a medium of communication constantly reflects the society. The dramatic representation of real stories engages people's emotions. When real life experiences are captured within the dramatic form, powerful outcomes are possible. For

this reason theatre projects reality to direct participants and targeted audiences to analyze their own situations. Thus the theatre medium has been able to aid in national development since a long time.

Entertainment Function: Theatre is the indigenous means of communication. Theatre is not merely outdated forms of entertainment. But at the same time theatre too has some entertainment ingredients in it. It allows people to see life as an entertainment with their own perceptions. Theatrical performance which has been worked out in practice over the past few decades. Theatre gives a flavored and juicy entertainment wrapped with feelings, motives and sometimes full of reality. It is really educative as well as an entertaining instrument of communication. But the presentation as a catered by the theatre always comes to the people in the form of entertainment and enjoyments as well. Theatre in general, is significant to all because it goes straight to the heart. It helps to say and address things that peoples may not know how to say or address themselves. Theatre provides many of them an escape from everyday life and transports people to completely different world and with entirely different people.

Theatre for social change: Theatre has power. Theatre is an outstanding tool due to its accessibility to a wide range of audience. Yes, it can entertain but it can also tell stories that can convey important ideas and change the perspectives of the audience. Theatre is trying to give plurality of voices. Theatre is a way of social change is characterized as the **“Significant alteration of social structure and cultural patterns through time”**. (Harper, 1993)[*7]

Bertolt Brecht (Theatre director) became the first to influence what theatre for social change is today.(Willet, 1992, 138).The reason for Brecht’s importance in theatre is that his work attempted to bring about a change in the whole relationship between the actor and the audience. What Brecht most disliked and reacted against was the professional’s view of the theatre as an end in itself. He wanted the theatre to accept its responsibilities as the social art with the utilitarian purpose of communicating with ordinary people about the matters that most concern them. (Bradby and McCormick,1978) [*8] Theatre is a powerful tool for social justice and change. It’s a space that holds multiple truths and allows people to explore the human condition .By using theatre as a catalyst for discussion, people can create empathy,

affirm experience, raise awareness and hold folks accountable for action and inaction and offer a way through.

Theatre provides many of them an escape from everyday life and transports peoples to completely different world with entirely different people. Theatre is relevant to influence social change. Theatre is an outstanding tool due to its accessibility to a wide range of audience. The combination of oral communication, physical expression, image, music can capture and maintain the attention and interest of a great number of people over time (UNESCO, 2006) .[*9] This medium widens its audience by includes those groups who are illiterate or incapable to understand the other languages. The meaning conveyed by theatre essentially lies in the audiences' own interpretations. Theatre as a tool thus deserves an outstanding tool for social change.

Critical Evaluation of the medium of theatre:

Role of theatre in our society difficult to define. But sometimes theatre had been used only for the tool of entertainment. But there should be a responsibility to look into the problems that confront society and solve those problems. One of the peril of theatre is people don't want to pay to see the theatre in the era of television, laptop or handheld device. My suggestion is to theatre permeates every aspect of everyday lives of peoples and will give the ideas which would not otherwise be exposed. Theatre artists express themselves more effectively. It develops their ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings to others. There should be a proper balance between entertainment and information in content material. There is a lot we can do on film that we cannot do on a stage due to budget. To maintain its ideal form, theater needs to be subsidized. It is very essential that the performers establish the correct mood for the play, covey the proper meaning which is important for audience members.

We have seen that theatre can efficiently be used even in the modern world. It is an authentic, acceptable and reliable tool of communication now. Theatre is a sophisticated expression of human need, Theatre brings people together, contributes to development and influences how people think and feel about their own lives. Theatre is a great way to learn. Theatre is a cultural space where society examines itself in a mirror. It develops the ability of

peoples to communicate their thoughts and feelings to others. Many people feel that theatre is a way for them to escape their lives for a while and enter a new reality where there are lessons to be learned. Theatre then has the potential to significantly change lives of audience members. It is summarizing that theatre should be viewed as an instrument of sustainable development. We make this affirmation because it is the basic role of theatre. Let us promote communication through this art form which is more credible, personal and appeal directly to the daily lives of the people.

References:

[*1] ‘A little bit of theatre never hurt anyone’ by UMER BIN AJMAL

[*2] Theatre/ Dance and New Media and Information Technologies By Scott DeLahunta

[*3] Theatre for Development: An Introduction to context, application and training, Volume 1, Issues 84277-84735 By C. P. Epskamp

[*4] Lazarsfeld, P.F., Berelson, B. & Gaudet, H. (1944). The people’s choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign. New York: Columbia University Press.

[*5] Interactive theatre : Drama as social intervention by John William Somers

[*6] Theatre for social change and development by Pearly Wong

[*7] exploring social change by Harper, 1993

[*8] People’s Theatre by Bradby and McCormick,

[*9] Communication for development , strengthening the effectiveness of the united states , UNESCO report, 2006

1. Theatre for social change and development by Pearly Wong

2. Why theatre? A theoretical view of its centrality in HIV/ AIDS communication by Kennedy Chinyowa
3. Using participatory theatre in international community development by Annie Slomam
4. Speculative paper: Theatre/ Dance and New Media and Information Technologies by Scott delahunta
5. The Traditional Folk Media For Effective Communication by Suman Showry
6. “ Street Theatre for Edutainment” A participatory research conducted with youth in Delhi 5th April, 2010 by by Anjali Capila, Phd Associate Professor, Department of Development Communication and Extension, Lady Irwin College, University of Delhi. & Pragati Bhalla, Post Graduate, 2010, Department of Development Communication and Extension, lady Irwin College, University of Delhi.

Arunima Mukherjee is Lecturer, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, Gurudas College, Kolkata and can be reached at arunimamukherjee2009@gmail.com