Addressing Gender Concerns through Theatre: A Study of Women Empowerment Programme by WASPJ

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Abstract

In recent years there has been growing realization that women empowerment is a pre-requisite for their social, economic and political upliftment. Both national and international agencies have been launching plethora of empowerment programmes and campaigns for women. But while the discourse on gender parity seems to be increasingly gaining currency around the globe, local realities of India still remain grim and disturbing. Despite the concept of Gender Budgeting and providing special provisions for women in programmes such as National Literacy Mission, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Indira Mahila Yojana, Swawlamban Project and Swashakti Yojana, and the latest PM Narendra Modi’s Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Abhiyaan, a large population of women in India still face violence at the time of birth and later, confront barriers in accessing education, restricting social norms and threats to their chastity. The paper attempts to explore the use of theatre as a tool for personal and collective empowerment. It begins with an exploration and explanation of the concept of ‘Community Theatre’ as is evidenced around the world, and its practices in other parts of the globe, based on the principles of empowerment with specific reference to its use in women empowerment. It is followed by a case-study of a Community Theatre group called SAKHHI, by NGO titled Women’s Association for Social Protection and Justice (WASPJ) acting in select villages of Delhi NCR, along with the group’s relationship with the audience and other members of the community.

In this way, the proposed paper shall attempt to propose guidelines towards the use of Community Theatre as powerful means of women empowerment.

Key words: Gender, empowerment, community theatre, justice.

‘The business of art lies just in this – to make that understood and felt which,
in the form of an argument, might be incomprehensible and inaccessible.’

Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*

Theatre, as an art, is a powerful medium to reach and thereby improve the condition of the marginalized and impoverished masses. It is a social tool that can function, at the same time as a means of entertainment, instruction, education, development, persuasion and so on and so forth, thereby leading to personal as well as collective empowerment. The driving force behind the use of community theatre as a means of social change is the evidence of the use of this genre of theatre around the world, in countries like Indonesia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Israel etc. towards this goal. More so, reference to the didactic and social use of theatre is evident in India’s very own theatrical treatise Bharat’s Natyashastra. In Chapter I of the Natyashastra, Bharat says:

This (Natya/Drama) teaches duty to those bent on doing their duty, love to those who are eager for its fulfillment, and it chastises those who are ill-bred or unruly, promotes self-restraint in those who are disciplined, gives courage to cowards, energy to heroic persons, enlightens men of poor intellect and gives wisdom to the learned….It will (also) give relief to unlucky persons who are afflicted with sorrow and grief or (over)-work, and will be conducive to observance of duty (i.e. dharma) as well as fame, long life, intellect and general good and will educate people.

Ghosh, 1950

Thus drama is integrally woven in the Indian social fabric of experience. There are references to the presence of drama around 600 BC in India. The reason of its popularity and longevity of existence is perhaps that drama or theatre, at once, fulfills intellectual, emotional and aesthetic needs of the spectators. ‘It is more than entertainment, a complete emotional experience and creates a state of receptivity in which messages can be most efficaciously transmitted.’ (Bhattacharya, Gupta, 2013)

Community theatre, in its turn, is the non-commercial theatre, meant to serve the interest and social issues affecting a particular group or community. It uses drama, song, dance, mime, ritual, or any combination of these activities, with the aim of communicating some idea, message, or knowledge to the audience (Mulenga, 1993). Instead of using traditional or professional means of theatre, Community theatre relies on scripts or play texts augmented or generated by way of
discussion within a given community on a given topic or issue such as female infanticide, girl-
education, honour-killing etc. Thus, community theatre takes inspiration from the life of the
people or the community itself (Miller, 1979). It serves as a powerful means of transforming the
conventional development process which attempts to convince or involve participation of
community by giving them incentives or by way of lecturing them. Instead of preaching, the
community theatre puts the communities’ interest as its prime focus or centre. It enables the
members of the community to critically analyze the situation and employ problem-solving
approach which in turn may ultimately lead to collective action and change. ‘This new genre of
theatre, being accessible to large number of people and exploiting local social, cultural and other
realities, beyond being expressed in the local language and idioms and using the people’s art
forms like music and singing, drumming and dancing, miming and story-telling, can be a very
efficacious, problem-solving two-way communication tool for community introspection and
action and for the transmission of development message (Malamah-Thomas, 1986). This genre
of theatre uses methodological approach wherein by way of entertainment members of
community are drawn together to collectively witness an event and thereby identify and confront
the whole issue as a problem. It provides an excellent platform to critically deliberate, discuss
and debate the identified issues in a lively and entertaining way, thereby leading to the process of
community based decision-making and collaborative action. Thus, instead of being social-
worker, broker or dispenser of service and information, the members of the social activist group
tend to become the ‘facilitator and catalyst stimulating a process of community conscientization’
(Malamah-Thomas, 1986).

In recent years, there has been growing realization that no culture, nation, society or
community can progress until and unless gender inequities are done away with, and women are
empowered to choose and decide about their own welfare, the welfare of their families and
communities in which they live. According to UNFPA 2005, ‘Women’s empowerment is
essential for ensuring not just their personal or household welfare, but also the well being of the
entire society as women are seen to be the primary guardians responsible for altering the quality
and quantity of human resources available in a country to promote sustainable development in
the coming generations. Thus, it can be said that women empowerment leads to positive social
change because they are the primary means by which social norms are transmitted to their children
and thus are placed in a critical position to inculcate attitudes in favour of gender equality among
their children and household (Gupta, K. et al, 2006). This is because they have the capacity to be the harbinger of a larger social change by challenging prevailing patriarchal gender norms. More so, it must be noted here that more than contributing towards others’ empowerment it is fundamentally wrong to discriminate against women as it violates their basic human rights, at the same time obstructing and hampering their ability to realize their full potential.

In almost all spheres of human functioning in India, the roles defined for women are subordinated to those defined for males, the rights for women are fewer or less emancipating than those of men, resulting in gender disparity at every level, cutting across all types of class and caste powerlessness (Malhotra et al., 2002). It is documented in a number of studies conducted on the topic of empowerment status of women in India that the women in Northern India have lower status, less autonomy and limited control over economic resources and fewer inheritance rights than their counterparts in the southern region (Karve, 1965; Sopher, 1980; Jejeebhoy et al.; 2001). Though government since independence has been making efforts, instituting laws and provisions and implementing policy recommendations on issues concerning women and children in order to improve their status and conditions, yet more serious and concerted efforts from all agencies – government, NGOs and international agencies – is solicited. Issues related to women and girl child empowerment which need greater and urgent focus include declining female ratio in the population in the last few decades, inferior female/girl literacy rate and domestic violence. Despite the concept of Gender Budgeting and providing special provisions for women in programmes such as National Literacy Mission, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Indira Mahila Yojana, Swawlamban Project and Swashakti Yojana, and the latest PM Narendra Modi’s Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Abhiyaan, yet a large population of women in India still face violence at the time of birth and later, confront barriers in accessing education, restricting social norms and threats to their chastity.

A number of NGOs in northern India such as Women’s Association for Social Protection and Justice, All Women Consumer Protection and Guidance Society, Swabhiman Foundation, Sanjeevani Vikas Evam Jan Kalyan Samiti, Aadarsh Mahila Kalyan Samiti, Abhyas Foundation are working to meet the goal of women emancipation and girl child welfare. WASPJ- which is an all women association working towards the goal of girl and women education and running programmes towards their socio-economic empowerment has been successfully running a programme called ‘SAKHHI’ at six villages in Delhi NCR regions of western Uttar Pradesh i.e.
Hilwari, Badka and Niwada in Baghpat District and Arnawali, Ghasauli and Dhauladi in Meerut district, which are all in the close vicinity of national capital Delhi. All the six villages have common problems related to women such as declining female ratio in population, poor girl literacy rate and high number of cases of domestic violence. The current population of the villages and their average sex ratio and male and female literacy ratio is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Village</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Average Sex Ratio</th>
<th>Male Literacy Rate</th>
<th>Female Literacy Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hilwari</td>
<td>8227</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>70.06%</td>
<td>67.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badka</td>
<td>4962</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>83.79%</td>
<td>51.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niwara</td>
<td>4410</td>
<td>892</td>
<td>72.82%</td>
<td>61.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghasauli</td>
<td>4205</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>70.82%</td>
<td>67.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnawali</td>
<td>2509</td>
<td>881</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
<td>65.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasulpur Dhauladi</td>
<td>14187</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>68.10%</td>
<td>50.04%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2011 Indian National Census conducted by Census Organization of India (covered 28 states of the country, 7 union territories including 640 districts, 497 cities and 5767 tehsils and over 6 lakh villages)

http://www.census2011.co.in

The programme run by WASPJ has been divided into four phases namely IDENTIFICATION (including gathering of data related to stratification and problems faced by girl and women folk in the area), FAMILIARISATION (presentation of street plays, puppet shows etc.), INITIATION (seeking participation from resident adolescent girls and women in sharing of problems and participation in writing and augmenting play scripts) and finally, PARTICIPATORY ACTION (staging theatre, conducting and participation in group discussion by village residents and seeking possible solutions by involving their men folk).

The association – WASPJ – conducted the entire programme in four phases spread over the period of two years since August, 2012. In the first phase the group’s UP chapter conducted survey of nearby villages in Delhi NCR region where the problems related to girl and women empowerment were found to be acute and which despite of its close proximity to the national capital are still much retrogressed. The members of the social activist group – WASPJ – conducted in-depth interviews of women, girls and male folks of the villages adopted for study.
before the start of the programme as well as during the various phases of its implementation. In order to minimize the communication barrier the interviews were conducted in the native language of the residents and instead of circulating hand-out the oral interviews were recorded by members of the social activist group. The social activist group relied on this method because the rate of literacy has not been very good among willing participants of the survey. The survey records were documented and evaluated in order to understand the root-cause of the problem afflicting the large group of participant members. Also, for the same survey, first the village sarpanchhs were taken into confidence and due measures were taken to understand and honour the sensitivity of issues concerned since any attempt to radicalize the issue could have led to decline in participation and ultimate failure of the effort and study. Both male and female members of the family were approached and appraised of the objective behind the SAKHHI programme and then interviewed to suggest both issues concerning the well-being, economic status and educational usefulness of the girl and women of their family and collectively participate in the augmentation of solutions and resources towards their empowerment. Thus this phase included both i.e. initial acquaintance with the subject group and clarification of commitment by the activist group.

In the second phase of the SAKHHI programme the group with its 10 members staged nukkad natak or street plays titled ‘Bahu Beti’, ‘Nanhi Chirayya’ and ‘Babul ki Lado’ in the six villages. The response of the village residents was, according to the group convener of street plays for WASPJ, Nehal Dutt, ‘positive yet restrictive’. According to the researchers both men and women spectators seem to agree to the sad plight of girl and women portrayed in the street plays, yet were non-committal in the sense that they chose not to engross in ensuing group-discussion which followed the performance. The men were found to be reluctant to comment on their role in the scenario and women were skeptical. The group also staged puppet shows to attract, involve and thereby convince young girls to participate, deliberate and co-act in the upcoming events related to their physical, emotional and educational well-being. In the second stage itself the data recorded during the first phase of the programme, was studied and analysed and five central issues relating to women and girl children of the area were evolved, namely:

a) High female infant mortality rate
b) Bad average sex ratio
c) Poor female literacy rate
d) Sizeable number of cases of domestic violence

e) Low female per capita income

The group members of the social activist group i.e. Women’s Association for Social Protection and Justice, discussed the common fate of the participants, their role at home and as mother and the role of the male members of their families (i.e. father, brother, husband and son) as their protectors. They were encouraged to enumerate the instances of oppression and differentiation they encountered at home and outside. After initial skepticism and inhibition, the women and girls were drawn into the discussion about the street act performances by the social activist group, wherein Sarla (name of character) of ‘Bahu Beti’, Ganga of ‘Nanhi Chirayya’ and Durga of ‘Babul ki Lado’ faced alienation, distrust and subordination to the privileges accorded to their husbands and brothers respectively. While the women of the villages under consideration shared their views, one or two of the activist group members recorded their views, thoughts and opinions for later reference and use in the augmentation of the play scripts.

The third phase, called Initiation, included participation of resident adolescent girls and women in writing scripts and rehearsing the presentation of the play. In all the six villages namely Hilwari, Badka, Niwada, Ghasauli, Arnawali and Rasulpur Dhaulari, women and young girls were mobilized by WASPJ members to confront, understand, deliberate, address, take up measures and thereby seek resolution of their common problems. Different plays were scripted and rehearsed in all the six villages on myriads of issues from their lives related to prejudice, dependency and passivity as well as superstition and anxieties. By way of entertainment a large number of women were involved in each village. It did not face much obstacle or intrusion from the male members of their family and society as such gathering was organized according to the comfort and ease of the member participants and such time and place was decided upon that all may walk in comfortably. While mothers and young girls participated in the group activities the association members called SATHHIN (meaning companion) looked after their young ones who needed attention and care. This step, particularly, encouraged enthusiasm and led to increased participation. The scripts were improvised under the guidance of the association’s volunteer theatre director who took turn to visit the different villages and helped the participants to string their thoughts together meaningfully to carve a script which may be entertaining, thought-provoking and memorable at the same time. The plays which were staged at the six identified villages were titled as follows:
a) ‘Meri Bahan Banno’ at Hilwvari related to female foeticide
b) ‘Durga Ki Doli’ at Barka related to domestic violence
c) ‘Sapnon ki Boli’ at Niwara related to low female literacy rate
d) ‘Bachpan ka Shor’ at Ghasauli related to declining female ratio in population
e) ‘Kuein ka Mendak’ at Arnawali related to women education
f) ‘Sabki Apni Badki’ at Rasulpur Dhaulari related to women financial needs

The fourth and final phase, namely Participatory Action, included presentation of the improvised scripts by member participants before the village which was followed by group discussion and involvement pledge by male members of the village to positively confront and address the issues related to women empowerment in a constructive and well-defined manner with the help of government, NGOs and self-help groups etc. The association members appointed the task of inviting, cajoling and convincing the family members of their respective families to women and girl members participating in SAKHHI programme. After the initial inhibition and restraint it was observed that out of six villages, four villages were such wherein spectators came in large numbers. During the presentation of the play, the participants transferred the conflict and remorse about their roles and conditions in the family and society to the characters they played on stage, thereby getting an opportunity to release tension and anger without directly addressing any one or group of their family members. Thus, perhaps, by following Brechtian dialectics of detachment and alienation their presentation and present condition got superimposed to create a meaningful and memorable presentation. This, in turn, replaced their complacency, passivity and superstition with a sense of faith, self esteem and active approach and jolted the male members of the six participant villages to reconsider accepted views and question convenient assumptions about their role and power in the family. During group discussion the social activist group members ensured that all sections and groups get the opportunity to speak, deliberate and discuss their view in a positive, healthy and constructive manner. Different parts and scenes of the play were re-enacted, for the convenience of the discussion, in order to keep the focus onto the issue at hand and not communalise or dilute it. The focus of the mission titled SAKHHI was emancipation of women through collective collaborative act and action plan.

The road to women emancipation and empowerment is indeed long and trying in India in the face of rising number of assaults on women both inside and outside home, low female sex
ratio, low female literacy rate and high drop-out rate of female from educational institutions yet through partnership between government, NGOs and society these gaps can be narrowed and situation can be improved. The research presented in this paper is part of the group i.e. WASPJ’s effort to document ways and means to improve condition of women and girl child through collaborative methods. The programme SAKHHI exemplifies process of individual and group development of females through community theatre. It further indicates that community theatre is a powerful tool to empower women to confront reality of their situation of powerlessness and suggest measures for improvement on both personal and collective levels. Community theatre had following advantages as empowerment tool:

a) Entertainment value (at both participatory and viewership level)
b) Integration of individual, group and community practice
c) Simulation effect of the theatre (wherein in a controlled environment subject can experience, confront and tackle the bitter truths of their own lives or the lives of those around them)
d) Cultivation of personal development and socially valuable roles
e) Development of communication and leadership rules
f) Realization of the power of collective collaborative actions

However, the same source i.e. community theatre has its own limitations as well, such as:

a) Personal and family limitations
b) Financial and resource limitation
c) Threat of personal or group conflict
d) Continuity and sustainable monitoring of reforms thereafter

The findings of the research highlight the major contribution of community theatre towards women empowerment. The present paper focused its attention on the use of this means by social activist group called WASPJ in their programme called SAKHHI in six villages of the Delhi NCR region for the purpose of women and girl child welfare yet same or similar approach of community theatre can be used for addressing myriads of other issues and concerns such as drug addiction, pollution and HIV aids etc. The success achieved in the programme called SAKHHI indicates that this tool has a potential of empowering participants and should be tapped and used for larger growth and wider and effective dissemination of message.
References

9. 2011 Indian National Census conducted by Census Organization of India (covered 28 states of the country, 7 union territories including 640 districts, 497 cities and 5767 tehsils and over 6 lakh villages) (http://www.census2011.co.in)