

**CATALYZING SOCIAL REFORM THROUGH PARTICIPATORY FOLK
PERFORMANCES IN RURAL INDIA**

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On a hot July afternoon in the village of Abirpur of India's Bihar State, as the radio played old Hindi songs and the cows grazed along the monsoon-drenched paddy fields, Usha and her six friends gathered under the banyan tree to discuss their dilemma. How could they convince their parents to allow them to attend the week-long participatory theater workshops in the village of Kamtaul, located 20 miles away?

This chapter tells the story of the participatory theater workshops and performances that we initiated and co-facilitated in the Indian State of Bihar in the summer of 2003, highlighting the struggles faced by young, village-based girls like Usha, who had previously never dared to step out of their communities. Workshops participants came from four villages, including Usha's village of Abirpur in Bihar's Vaishali District, and from the villages of Kamtaul, Madhopur, and Chandrahatti in Bihar's Muzzaffarpur District. The participatory theater project was created as part of a larger study to assess the outcomes of an entertainment-education Indian radio soap opera called *Taru* in India's Bihar State. Authors Singhal and D. Sharma were both intimately involved in the conceptualization, design, and implementation of the larger *Taru* entertainment-education evaluation project (see Singhal, Sharma, Papa, & Witte, 2004).

In this chapter, we focus on *one* important part of this project—the participatory theater workshops and performances conducted in July, 2003. We begin by describing the social landscape of India, in general, and Bihar State, in particular. We then situate the participatory theater workshops and performances within the larger historical context of our previous interventions in Bihar, followed by a discussion of our theoretical perspectives and a description of the participatory theater project and its theoretical and practical outcomes. We conclude the chapter with some reflections about our communication activism.

The Social Landscape of India and Bihar State

India is one of the largest and most culturally diverse democracies in the world. Although India has achieved significant gains in its agricultural, industrial, and service sectors since its independence from Great Britain in 1947, poverty and inequality have abated more slowly than

expected, despite government-sponsored rural-development initiatives and increased involvement of non-government organizations with local citizens (S. Kumar, 2002; Singhal & Rogers, 2001). A great disparity also exists in levels of social development across the various Indian states. The State of Bihar, which lies in the northern, Hindi-speaking belt of India, is both the most rural state and, based on economic and social indicators, the poorest.

Districts Muzzaffarpur and Vaishali in Bihar State, where the four villages of our intervention are located, ranked very poorly among all 590 districts of India on the Reproductive Health Composite Index in the 2001 national census (Population Foundation of India, 2002). In Muzzaffarpur, the male literacy rate, for instance, is 60% and the female literacy rate is 35%, with 54% of girls married before the age of 18. The district's total fertility rate is 5.1, with a 25% contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR). Only 31% of children in Muzzaffarpur are completely immunized and 81% of them are underweight. District Vaishali fares no better: Its male literacy rate is 64% compared to the female literacy rate of 38%, approximately 63% of girls are married before the age of 18, the district's total fertility rate is 5.0 and the related CPR is 24% among all eligible couples, only 22% of children are completely immunized, and 51% of the children are underweight (Population Foundation of India, 2002).

The caste system is highly entrenched in rural Bihar (as in most of India), embodying a complex system of hierarchically arranged social differentiation among people (Harriss-White, 2003).¹ The caste system simultaneously unites and divides various groups of people, but its most salient feature is mutual exclusiveness, with each caste regarding the other castes as separate communities. Akin to the privileges that come from being a member of a higher caste, the "good life" in Bihar seems to be designed mostly for men. A son's birth is celebrated as a joyous occasion, whereas a girl's birth is viewed as a burden by her family. Sons usually attend schools, whereas daughters tend to housework and care for younger siblings. When a girl is ready for marriage, her family will have to pay dowry—a bride price (in cash and/or material goods)—to the groom's family. Once married, it is the *dharma* (or "duty") of the wife to serve her husband, in-laws, and children (Jung, 1987; Pande, 2003).

Historical Context of Current Interventions

Within this societal context, over the past 15 months (since February, 2002), we co-initiated (with villagers and rural health practitioners [RHPs]) a series of participatory interventions designed to assist local groups and community members in these four villages of India's Bihar State to secure social and political reform. Specifically, folk performances were held in February, 2002, across these four villages to promote listening to the entertainment-education radio serial *Taru* produced by All India Radio (see Photograph 1). *Entertainment-education* (E-E) is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate (e.g., to increase audience members' knowledge about a social issue, create favorable attitudes toward change, and shift social norms) (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). *Taru* (named after the woman protagonist) was a 52-episode E-E radio soap opera, broadcast in the northern, Hindi-speaking region of India from February, 2002 to February, 2003. The purpose of *Taru* was to raise consciousness about the value of gender equality, small family size, reproductive health, and caste and communal harmony (Singhal et al., 2004). A primary function of the folk performances, carried out a week prior to the broadcast of *Taru*, and attended by 800-

1,000 people in each location, was to prime the message-reception environment for the radio serial, encouraging audience members to tune in to it.

[Insert Photograph 1 here]

D. Sharma² scripted these pre-broadcast *Taru* folk performances in the *nautanki* genre (a popular musical folk theater form of Northern India), using a *nat* and *nati* (male and female narrators) to engage the audiences. The folk performances were sponsored by Ohio University with help from Janani³ and Center for Media Studies. A folk song introduced the themes and characters of *Taru*. The folk performance was customized to the local Bihar milieu (including use of local colloquial expressions, costumes, and props) in a 2-day workshops with members of Rangkarm, a local theater group in Patna, the capital of Bihar State.

Key aspects of the *Taru* storyline, especially its first few episodes, were dramatized in the folk performances to generate the audience's interest in listening to the forthcoming broadcasts. All of these folk performances ended with an open competition for audience members in which radio transistors (with a sticker of *Taru*'s logo) were awarded to self-selected groups of young women, young men, and families who correctly answered questions based on the performance of the drama. These groups were then formalized into *Taru* radio-listening clubs. In each village, at least four listening groups, each comprised of 6-8 members, were established. Each group received an attractive notebook (with a *Taru* logo) and group members were encouraged to discuss with others in their village the social themes addressed in the serial, relate the emplotments and characters to their personal circumstances, and record in their journals any decisions or actions they took as a result of being exposed to *Taru*.

A qualitative study⁴ of these four villages in Bihar—Abirpur, Kamtaul, Madhopur, and Chandrahatti—conducted over the past 15 months indicates that a *Taru* fever has since taken hold in these villages (Singhal et al., 2004). Discussions of *Taru* among listening group members have led directly to several community initiatives to secure social reform. For instance, in Kamtaul Village, an adult literacy program for *dalit* village women was launched, and several early marriages (of underage girls) were stopped. In Abirpur Village, male and female members of *Taru* listening groups, after 7 months of discussion and deliberation, collectively started a school for underprivileged children, inspired by a similar act role modeled by Neha, a character in the radio serial. Such mixed-sex collaboration was previously highly uncommon in Bihar's villages, and faced strong resistance from certain community members. However, these groups' collective zeal, coupled with strong support from the highly-respected local RHP, made the establishment of the school possible. As of mid-2003, some 50 children had attended this 2-hour afternoon school 6 days a week (see Photograph 2).

[Insert Photograph 2 here]

In July, 2003, authors Pant, D. Sharma, and Y. Sharma returned to Bihar (under the direction of Singhal and Harter) to organize participatory theater workshops for members of *Taru* listening clubs from each of the four villages. The interventions were carried out in collaboration with Brij Lok Madhuri. The week-long workshops were designed to empower each group and its members to develop participatory theatrical performances to capture their

individual and group listening experiences in relation to *Taru* and their concomitant attempts to secure political and social reform in their respective villages. These folk performances were then staged for village members to bring participants' narratives into the realm of public discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The dialogic theorizing of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970, 1994, 1998) and its application by Augusto Boal (1979) in the global movement called the *Theater of the Oppressed* served as the theoretical backdrop against which our interventions were crafted. Underscoring Freire and Boal's work is the assumption that the greatest challenge facing activists is the need to understand, appreciate, and respect the knowledge of people's lived experiences as expressed in their vernacular. Freire, best known for his classic book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), argued that most political, educational, and communication interventions fail because they are designed by "technocrats" who seldom take into account the perspectives of those to whom the interventions are directed. No intervention that is truly empowering, Freire argued, can remain distant from those who are disenfranchised. Like Freire, we believe that the authentic potential of activism begins with the lived experiences of involved participants (see also the writings on communication and social justice by Frey, 1998; Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996).

Freire (1970) critiqued the mechanistic "banking" model of education and activism, in which "deposits" of knowledge are made in the minds of audiences, and offered, instead, proposals for democratic problem-solving interventions. Freire started from a position of faith—faith that people can develop discursive consciousness about their material and social circumstances, a process he called *consientizacao*. By positioning oppressed individuals as "subjects" rather than "objects," a Freireian perspective acknowledges that these individuals can and should participate in the transformation of their economic, social, and political domination. As agents who act on and transform the world, individuals must perceive the reality of their oppression not as a static entity that cannot be changed but as a limiting situation that they can transform. Freireian methods to accomplish these goals incorporate critical reflection, dialogue, participation, autonomy, democratic decision making, and problematization.

Freire's work draws attention to what it means to be at the periphery and/or center of the tenuous relationship between the "colonizer" and the "colonized." As Freire (1970) argued, "Revolutionary leaders cannot think *without* the people, nor *for* the people, but only *with* the people" (p. 131). Throughout our intervention process in Bihar, we were conscious of the potential and tendency to "inscribe" or impose our activist agenda within the local community. Rather than penetrating the cultural context of our participants irrespective of their potentialities, we conceptualized our role as working *with* (not *for*) participants to organize efforts to resist oppressive ideologies, patterns, and practices. Sensitized to the importance of dialogical pedagogy/intervention, our primary goal was to create space in the form of participatory theater for community members to *name* their world in order to transform it. Instead of dislodging the oppressed from one reality to "bind" them to another, we sought to make it possible for participants to narrate their experiences, create alternatives to dominant scripts for how to enact public and private roles, and rehearse such "counter-stories" on a public platform (Nelson, 2001).

Inspired by the writings of Freire, Brazilian theater director Boal (1979) developed the *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO), an international movement that uses theater as a vehicle of participatory social change. Underscoring Boal's work is the assumption that all theater is ideological in that it reproduces or resists value-laden practices and patterns. As such, theatre, directly or indirectly, entertains, educates, informs, influences, and incites action. Boal's techniques of TO, based on Freireian principles of dialogue, interaction, problem posing, reflection, and conscientization, are designed to activate spectators to take control of situations rather than passively allow things to happen to them. The goal, therefore, is to transform passive spectators into actors in charge of dramatic action. The human body, the source of sound as well as movement, is the means of producing theatre; thus, embodiment is the means of producing transformation. Through controlled bodily actions, a passive observer becomes an active protagonist.

Boal (1992) argued that most marginalized individuals are spectators of public affairs rather than active agents because of fear of their oppressors. To begin the transformation to an active agent, he developed a series of theatrical exercises to ferret out internalized oppression. In particular, he emphasized the importance of exercises that "undo" participants' muscular structures—the way they walk and talk—to raise people's consciousness about how their body structure, gait, and voice embody an oppressed/oppressor relationship. For instance, when peasants are granted space to act as landowners, their physical bearings change (e.g., posture), reflecting the ideologies associated with their new roles (Singhal, 2004). Boal provides numerous exercises designed to increase individuals' awareness of their body, including deformations suffered because of the type of work they perform (see pp. 127-129). These exercises are particularly crucial to the process of transformation given that human beings are so conditioned to linguistic expression that their body's expressive capabilities are underdeveloped and unconscious. Although Boal described a series of useful techniques to be used by facilitators in helping spectators to become active agents, we argue that such techniques must concomitantly take into account local cultural members' modes of expression, including ways of doing theater.

Within such a culturally infused context, participants can use the tools of theater (e.g., character development and emplotment) to acquire new ways of knowing reality and sharing that knowledge with others. TO is a form of "rehearsal theater" for people who want to give voice to their experiences and discover new ways of fighting against oppression in their daily lives. By rehearsing, and potentially accepting or rejecting, solutions to articulated problems, participants have opportunities to "try out" counter-narratives. The theatrical act, by itself, is a conscious intervention, a rehearsal for social action based on a collective analysis of shared problems of oppression. Participatory theater, however, potentially embodies a process of participation that is empowering both as a *means* (for involved agents) and as an *end* (in terms of potential structural outcomes generated). In the case of Bihar, India, we used Freire and Boal's work as sensitizing concepts in the facilitation of participatory "folk" theatre, song, and poem performances.

Description of the Participatory Theater Workshops and Performances

The participatory theater workshops were facilitated over a 3-day period (July 24-26, 2003) from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. in the village of Kamtaul. The public performances of the subsequent plays were enacted in all four villages on July 27 and 28, 2003. Kamtaul was chosen as the

workshops site because it is somewhat centrally located among the four villages, and has a three-room *panchayat ghar* (the local self-government community center), with a 35 X 30 meter yard, that provided space for multiple rehearsals (see Photograph 3). In addition, the RHP of Kamtaul, Sheilendra Singh, is a progressive and locally influential person, who later became a regular listener of *Taru* (his daughter, Vandana, was a leader in Kamtaul's *Taru* listening club).

[Insert Photograph 3 here]

A month before the workshops began, Pant, D. Sharma, and Y. Sharma worked on location with Janani officials,⁵ RHPs (like Singh), prospective participants, and participants' parents to plan the logistics for the intervention. Activities involved hiring a production executive for the theater workshops, professional video and still camerapersons to document the workshops and performances, caterers to provide meals to participants, drivers and busses to transport participants, and professionals who managed stage materials and props, including an audio-amplification system. In addition, Pant, D. Sharma, and Y. Sharma, supported by local opinion leaders, negotiated the granting of permission by parents so that their children could participate in the workshops and performances.

Fifty members of *Taru* listening groups from across the four villages took part in the participatory theater workshops and performances. Participants ranged in age from 9-27 years old, with 25 female and 25 male participants.⁵ The workshops opened with D. Sharma orienting participants to the week-long activities, followed by a speech by Manoj Maharaj, the RHP of Abirpur Village, endorsing the theater project. Participants were then organized into two "adult" groups (ages 15-27) and one children's group (ages 9-14). In forming these groups, care was taken to ensure that they had mixed-gender and mixed-village representation.

During the first 3 days of the workshops, participants developed skills in script writing, character development, costume and set design, voice projection and body control, and acting and singing. Two folk artists, Rajiv and Dheeraj, from the local theater group *Rangkram*, along with Pant, D. Sharma and Y. Sharma (all of whom had previous training in theater, especially D. Sharma), provided initial direction for the workshops. Participants were first asked to introduce themselves by telling a story about their lives—a story situated in the context of their families and communities. Although a few participants were initially reluctant to share stories (girls were shier than boys) or had difficulty understanding what counted as a "story," a rich collage of narratives quickly emerged within each group. The facilitators urged the group members to identify common themes among their stories and to start to create a "meta-story" that could be used to develop a performance script.

Throughout the workshops, participants engaged in vocal exercises to enhance their speech volume and breath control (e.g., singing songs and shouting collectively). Participants also engaged in a series of body movement exercises (e.g., yoga and stretching exercises) to increase their awareness of their body and its potential as a tool of performance (see Photograph 4). Collectively, these exercises helped to build team spirit and to deepen friendships among participants, and decreased participants' social awkwardness during the performances. Female participants, in particular, learned to relax their bodies in front of men and to use their bodies for public expression. Traditionally, Indian women are taught to be docile in public; they are

expected to keep their voice low and be passive in bodily movement (R. Kumar, 1993). Furthermore, the woman's body is considered sacred, and its sanctity is preserved by limiting public exhibition. Workshops exercises challenged these cultural conventions and, as a result, increased females' self-confidence and willingness to perform in public, and, ultimately, offered females a way to be comfortable with their body without dishonoring it. For example, in an interview conducted with her after the performances, Usha Kumari discussed her impressions of the first day:

First, I did not know how to behave with the workshops participants. They were all strangers to me and I felt shy. In my village, I am not shy, as I know all the boys and girls. However, it was different now, as these boys were not my brothers but strange men. Slowly, I felt comfortable in their presence as we did a number of physical exercises together. That helped in identifying with one another. Soon, all of the participants became my good friends. I hope I can keep in touch with all of them.

[Insert Photo 4 here]

Pant, D. Sharma, and Y. Sharma encouraged participants to create performances centered around self-identified social issues, using their own vernacular, personal stories, and master narratives of their communities. In sum, the “means of production” of the theater workshops and subsequent performances rested primarily with the participants. All aspects of performance—from role development to preparation of the stage—were co-created by participants. For example, in making a decision about how to construct the stages, groups of young boys from each village were recruited to bring a dozen *takhats* (flat wooden beds) from their homes to create raised platforms for the performances. On another occasion, in the village of Chandrahatti, the ground on which the wooden platform stage was constructed was uneven, and a group of workshops participants promptly brought tools from their homes and created a level ground.

During the workshops, participants created three separate plays (for a summary of the scripts, see the Appendix). The negotiation of plotment was not an easy task for all the groups. For example, one of the groups decided to construct a script on the problems of child marriage and dowry. The following excerpt from D. Sharma's fieldnotes illustrates the democratic evolution of this script construction and captures Boal's (1979) vision of encouraging traditional “spectators” to actively wrestle with the potentialities and pitfalls of diverse solutions:

Participants evolved the scripts after countless revisions of drafts and after much discussion amongst group members. One specific incident is illustrative of this process. The ending of the play on dowry and child marriage was not perceived as realistic by many group members. In the initial plot, as the wedding was underway, the father of the groom was demanding dowry from the bride's family, and the groom was refusing to accept dowry. For some young women, this solution seemed unrealistic. For hours, the whole group debated about how the play should end. After many revisions, a solution was reached that was agreeable to all. An additional scene was added between the groom and his friends prior to the wedding to establish the groom's character as idealistic and sympathetic toward women. Further, the wedding scene was modified. A confrontation occurs between the father and son at the beginning of the wedding in which the father

ultimately gives in to the son's wishes to protect the prestige of his family, which would surely be damaged if the son walked away from the alter. The rehearsals for the play started after a whole day of discussion!

The 3-day workshops were followed by 2 days of public performances. No professional actors were used in the performances; instead, participants served as cast members and as directors and set managers. Performances were promoted in advance through word-of-mouth channels, capitalizing on the contacts of the local RHPs, as well as family members and friends of the workshops participants. Prior to the start of the performances, live folk and popular songs were played on the loudspeaker to generate attention among villagers. Each play was publicly performed in each of the four villages for audiences that ranged in numbers from 300-500 people. Interspersed with the plays were a folk dance, some songs, and a poem—all initiated and created by the participants. In each village, we situated the performance site in an open area that was easily accessible to residents. In most cases, villagers provided tarpaulin sheets or mats for audience members to sit on. Importantly, we strategically positioned women at the front of the audience, with men clustered behind them, and, in so doing, subverted the dominance usually exerted by men on such occasions (see Photograph 5). Many women who were not allowed to leave their home (e.g., young married women) watched from the terrace of their home. When space ran short, onlookers perched themselves on trees or terraces to view the performances (see Photo 6).

[Insert Photograph 5 here]

[Insert Photograph 6 here]

All of the workshops and performances were videotaped. Throughout the workshops, Pant, D. Sharma, and Y. Sharma took extensive fieldnotes. In addition, the three scripts were translated from Hindi to English. After completing the workshops, D. Sharma, Pant, Y. Sharma, and Singhal (who attended the folk performances), as well as trained interviewers from the Centre for Media Studies in New Delhi, conducted in-depth interviews with workshops participants, participants' family members, and audience members. In conducting these interviews, we were particularly interested in how people accounted for their experiences and, in so doing, situated themselves and others in relation to the social order of this particular context. The interview protocol included questions about whether and how individuals experienced empowerment through the participatory theater project, challenges and emotions experienced by participants and audience members, and if, when, and where communication about the project took place among interviewees' social networks. A total of 62 in-depth interviews were conducted, audiotaped, and later transcribed into English for analysis. In addition, a letter we received from one of the participants was transcribed from Hindi into English. We triangulate data from these sources to document several theoretical and practical outcomes of the participatory theater workshops and performances.

Theoretical and Practical Implications of Our Communication Activism

Competing views of community are inscribed and enacted through cultural performances and, consequently, illustrate ways in which cultural performances negotiate communal identity politics. Indeed, the concept of "community" possesses no fixed, stable referent but is, instead, a

contested concept whose meaning is continuously negotiated in and by cultural performances and other symbolic forms (see Adelman & Frey, 1997; Shepherd, 2001). Like other scholars interested in performance for the purpose of promoting social change (e.g., Conquergood, 1988), we assume that a reciprocal relationship exists between cultural performance and the constitution of community; communities not only produce but are produced by cultural performances. Cultural performances inscribe community by inserting into circulation particular interpretations of community, through both *description* (i.e., the past and the present) and *prescription* (i.e., the future). As explained below, agents of the participatory theater interventions in Bihar developed counter-narratives that resisted dominant community identities and created social networks characterized by social capital. At the same time, we witnessed the synergistic possibilities that can emerge from multi-layered, participatory E-E initiatives. Collectively, these outcomes illustrate the theoretical and practical implications of our communication activism and its heuristic potential.

Counter-Narratives

Narratization is a means of structuring experience (including temporally envisioning outcomes); hence, narration is a strategy used to achieve envisioned ends (Burke, 1969; Wittgenstein, 1953). Indeed, a chief characteristic of narrative is its ability to render understanding by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network of relationships comprised of symbolic, institutional, and material practices (see Sunwolf & Frey, 2001). Narrative theorizing provides a particularly fruitful framework from which to address the discursive understandings through which subjectivities/identities are constructed (Somers, 1994). Individuals orient to their life worlds, in part, by way of diverse stocks of knowledge that are social in origin. In that light, participatory theater serves as a particularly rich site to explore the (re)construction of identity (individual and communal) through *counter-narratives*, which Nelson (2001) described as emplotments that discursively reconfigure disempowering elements of the existing social order as articulated by and based on the lived experiences of individuals.

The people who participated in these theater workshops and performances discovered a vocabulary for composing their personal stories, connected their stories to other participants' narratives, and spun out alternatives to the dominant societal scripts affecting their lives. Participants' scripts identified *master narratives*, what Foucault (1973) referred to as cultural "truths" based on "global" or "unified" knowledge that often serve to sustain the status quo by involving individuals in its service (e.g., making them "docile bodies" or helpless personae caught in the problem). For instance, the participatory theatre performance scripts recognized the powerful forces of dowry and the caste system as impinging on participants' daily routines and relationships. Concomitantly, through the participatory theater workshops and performances, we glimpsed story threads of resistance to dominant narratives based, in part, on what Foucault termed "local popular" or "indigenous" knowledge.

For some of the theater workshops participants, the performances reinforced existing counter-narrative mindsets and provided a public forum to express these privately held convictions. For instance, one participant argued, "Everyone in the village knows that dowry is a problem but they will not do anything about it." The workshops and performances allowed for

the expression of these inner voices using villagers' own cultural dialect (i.e., folk theater). Another participant, Didi, stated:

I am almost 17 years old and I know the kind of pressure I am facing with marriage. But after listening to *Taru* and having you here in the village, I feel confident to fight and not let my parents come under any pressure. . . . I am happy that my village saw the plays and realized that we were not doing anything wrong.

In other cases, the performances represented an “awakening” of discursive consciousness about social inequities. For some workshops participants, especially the children, these workshops and performances were among their first opportunities to reflect on their social, political, and material life circumstances. Regardless of the layers of social consciousness that we witnessed among participants, the performances collectively served to rearticulate roles and scripts for community life by constructing, maintaining, reinforcing, and renegotiating the relationships among community members.

Participatory theater is unique in its simultaneous (re)construction of personal identity and cultural critique. Although performing autobiography is, in one sense, something we accomplish daily, in public performances, such as the participatory theater interventions described here, participants selected bits and pieces of their lived experiences to share with audiences—creating a pastiche of observations and characters both real and imagined. One participant, Soni, shared during an interview:

When Saumya *didid* [sister] asked me to tell a story about my life or my village, I thought of several episodes but wasn't sure if they are appropriate for the occasion. Then when I heard other participants highlight significant issues in their lives, I felt confident to share my story with the group. I belong to a very poor family as my father and my brother are unemployed. My mother manages to feed us on food that we grow. My dream is to study and change our monetary situation by getting a job. But I hope that my parents will not marry me before I can accomplish my dream. I shared this with the group and felt comforted by their empathy. I felt that we were a team and my dream can get fulfilled!

Participants, thus, simultaneously performed self and culture and, in so doing, offered an often caustic social critique viewed and sanctioned by the community as entertainment because it was articulated in folk theater form. Through performing their marginality, participants resisted the hegemonic power and privilege that shape their public and private lives, and, as argued by Bruner (1987), “in the end we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p. 15).

In a true Freireian (1970) spirit, the interventions encouraged workshops participants to engage in narrativizing about their concrete situations and provided a public platform through which to *tell* their narratives. By telling their stories, people legitimize their experiences, narrativize alternatives to dominant scripts, strategize their roles in emplotments, and prepare themselves for resistance to change. Not to “tell” is to limit the empowering possibilities of our narrative capabilities. The witnessing of such narratives on the part of audience members can also lead to *consientizacao*. One audience member said of the performances she observed, “It

[the play] motivates the villagers to *think* on dowry issues.” Ultimately, the telling of counter-narratives, understood as rehearsals for social change, can lead to action. Indeed, as Boal (1979) argued, “Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution” (p. 155).

Social Networks

Strong social networks were created among participants through this participatory theater project, networks that have remained intact and grown stronger since we left Bihar. The social capital developed through these networks holds promise for ongoing grassroots efforts directed toward social change (see Herman & Ettema, this volume). Putnam (1995, 2000) referred to *social capital* as connections among individuals, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise within those connections, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. He argued, as have other social capital theorists (e.g., Esman & Uphoff, 1984), that social capital is both a private and public good. Our lives are made more productive by social ties, and social connections are important for the “rules of conduct” (read: ideological meaning formations) that they sustain.

An important element of social capital, albeit rarely articulated or theorized, is friendship. Rawlins’s (1992) treatise illustrated how friendships, as cultural categories and sources of imagery about social being, are central to the challenges, satisfactions, and dramas of social configurations during one’s life. “At any juncture,” explained Rawlins, “we can celebrate or critique friendship for its role in shaping an individual’s immediate experiences of self, others, and society in living life’s configured and interpenetrated moments to their fullest” (p. 273).

In the intervention described here, theater participants emphasized the value of friendships formed through the workshops and performances. One participant, Meera, shared in an interview:

I am glad to see the people who did this project and some of my friends who had come from other places. I didn’t know them earlier but during the program, we became good friends. I wish to meet them again.

Another theater participant, Lakhendar, interviewed said:

From the very beginning, I felt comfortable in Kamtaul. I knew we were going to meet strangers, but I trusted you to take us somewhere safe and good for our sisters. Seeing the other participants, they looked like us and behaved like us . . . they were equally lost (laughter). But I know that now we have a relationship forever. We will definitely invite them to our village and introduce them to our family.

As these quotes show, among other benefits, networks of interaction broadened participants’ sense of self, developing the “I” into the “we,” and enhanced their awareness of the benefits of a co-constructed communal life.

At the end of the week-long workshops and performances, several participants in the village of Abirpur created a drama club to continue using forms of folk theater and dance for social change. The following is an excerpt from a focus group interview conducted with them about the newly formed drama club:

Mahesh: It has become very important that we continue acting in such plays.

Kiran: I really enjoyed it.

Saumya (Researcher): Why do you think it is important?

Anuj: Well, we saw how many people came to watch our show. They stood in the sun to see us. I believe if we do more, we will have more viewers.

Sukhi: And it was fun.

Saumya (Researcher): What was fun?

Benu: Meeting other people. It was like a holiday.

Saumya (Researcher): Would you do these performances again with other people?

Ramesh: No, first we have to create our own group identity. We have to show our community in Abirpur and Salaempur that we have learned from you and others how to do the shows . . . and then we will show it to other villages outside ours.

Uma: And we will show them that girls can also be important and useful.

Saumya (Researcher): So what kind of plays will you do?

Sukhi: We want to do religious plays, some musicals . . .

Uma: We have to do plays that are engaging . . . maybe have some music in them and then some social issues . . . like we did.

Saumya (Researcher): Would you like to organize into a group?

Manu: Yes. . . . Let us call us *Taru Natya* (Drama) club.

In the village of Abirpur, members of the drama club created and signed a constitution (see Photograph 7), elected both male and female officers, and created and performed a socially charged play on August 15, 2003, India's Independence Day of celebration. Participants also created a *Taru* cricket club and organized tournaments in eight villages. The social capital generated through these social networks, thus, holds promise for influencing participants' (and others') public life and private prospects.

[Insert Photograph 7 here]

De Tocqueville (1835/1956), commenting on the propensity for civic engagement in the United States, focused attention on the unprecedented potential for social networks to make democracy work. Neo-Tocquevillean scholars have unearthed a wide range of empirical evidence illustrating how norms and networks of civic engagement relate to the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions (for a review of literature, see Putnam, 2000). As Putnam (1995) argued, "For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital" (p. 67). The social networks created through this participatory theater project represent efforts of participants—men and women alike—to mobilize solidarity, alter the self-identified disempowering elements of their communities, and make democracy work.

Multi-Layered and Participatory Entertainment-Education Initiatives

Like the participatory theater projects in Hmong refugee camps facilitated by Conquergood (1988) and the Westerville Prison Theater project coordinated by the University of Natal (Young-Jehangeer, 2002), the interventions discussed in this chapter illustrate how E-E scholarship and practice can benefit by consciously incorporating dialogic, participatory processes in designing, producing, and assessing social change interventions. E-E initiatives typically rely on mass media vehicles to tackle issues of development and social change (Jacobson 2002; Singhal, 2004), leaving little room for the dynamic dialogic pedagogy espoused by Freire (1970) and Boal (1979). The participatory process of creating and implementing public performances among members of *Taru* listening clubs illustrates how synergistic possibilities for social action emerge when E-E radio broadcasts are strategically integrated with community-based group listening and participatory theatre. The use of folk theater, which, by its nature, facilitates intense communication between performers and audience members, coupled with the radio serial and listener groups, represents a truly “multi-layered” entertainment-communication intervention.

Many participants, when asked during interviews we conducted with them, described the benefits of multi-layered E-E interventions with participatory components. One young girl, Pramod, said:

After listening to *Taru* and having you here in the village, I feel confident to fight and not let parents come under any pressure. I have seen Usha *didi* and how she has resisted pressure from community, so I am quite sure I can do so too.

Another participant, Ashish, commented:

Taru has changed our lives. We have started breathing a different air. She [Taru] has not only helped us by being our friend but has helped us to break the silence with our fathers. . . . I am so thankful to *Taru* and to you who have also made a difference by coming here. . . . You are just like Taru for us.

Over the past 2 years, our experiences working with the women, men, and children of Bihar lead us to conclude that the field of communication and social change can be theoretically and practically enriched through the blurring of boundaries between distinct models and approaches to communication interventions (see also Morris, 2003). By integrating participatory elements within traditional E-E initiatives, assumptions about the nature of communication evolve from the vertical processing of information transmission from the knowledgeable to the less knowledgeable to a horizontal dialogic interaction as the catalyst for individual and community empowerment. Although some development projects give lip-service to the notion of participation, the theater workshops and performances highlighted in this chapter represent genuine grassroots participation and control over content decisions and outcomes.

Lessons Learned About Communication Activism

At the crux of our work is a vision of *social justice*, described by Frey et al. (1996) as “engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally underresourced” (p. 110). Our goal was (and continues to be) to work with the women, men, and children of Bihar, India to first identify oppressive grammars, practices, and patterns, and, then, through performances, to reconstruct those discursive patterns in more socially just ways. These participatory theater efforts can best be described, therefore, as social justice activities, guided by dialogic theorizing and enabled and constrained by structural forces (e.g., social, temporal, historical, and material).

Perhaps the most important lesson we learned about communication activism was the importance of honoring and respecting local traditions coupled with paradoxically challenging some of those customs. One month prior to the workshops, D. Sharma went to Bihar to logistically prepare for the interventions. As previously mentioned, one of our biggest challenges was gaining the permission of parents for their daughters to participate in the workshops and performances (as exemplified in the dilemma that Usha and her friends faced in the opening paragraph to this chapter). Socially, it is not customary for Indian girls and young women to speak (let alone perform) in the public sphere, nor do girls leave their respective villages until marriage. At the same time, families depend on young women to perform necessary daily household chores (e.g., preparing and serving meals). For these reasons, parents were generally not supportive of allowing their daughters to participate (despite overwhelming enthusiasm on the part of the daughters).

Encountering such parental resistance, D. Sharma reframed the workshops and performances as a “cultural program.” In Indian high schools, functions are organized on certain days of national importance (e.g., Independence Day and Gandhi’s birthday). As part of these celebrations, students (both boys and girls) often perform for the entire village population. The rhetorical repositioning of the intervention as a cultural program successfully persuaded some parents to give their consent for their daughters to participate. However, we still experienced widespread resistance from village elders who believed that young unmarried women should stay at home and not publicly “exhibit” themselves on stage.

The presence of Pant and Y. Sharma (both women) in the field prior to the workshops, as well as the support of key opinion leaders (e.g., RHPs), were instrumental in securing female participation in this participatory theater project. For example, Pant stayed with the family of the village RHP in Abirpur for several weeks prior to the start of the workshops. Through her networking with local opinion leaders, including the RHP and his sister Usha, she established credibility with other families in Abirbur. She initiated conversations with parents, allowing them to express their concerns about their daughters’ participation in the workshops and performances. Parents were concerned about how other members of the community would perceive their daughters as a result of participating in public performances, perhaps perceiving them as “immoral” and “loose.” Pant, thus, had to delicately validate their fears and simultaneously encourage them to “trust” their daughters and the fieldworkers. The following excerpt comes from Pant’s fieldnotes:

Although I successfully persuaded some parents to allow their daughters to participate, I did so from a place of respect—respect for their desire to protect their daughters by keeping them within the boundaries of the community. I was not there to dishonor their pride. My role was to illustrate the possibilities of the workshops for parents. I relied on my ability to re-frame the issues at hand, hopefully making “participation” on the part of their daughters “possible.” But, I respected parents’ decisions to not let daughters participate. In the course of a conversation, if I felt I was pushing the boundaries too much, I would pause and let the villagers continue the conversation and find and implement their own solutions.

Eventually, a gathering in Abirpur of all participants’ parents was organized to talk about these issues. As rapport between the fieldworkers (and their mission) and parents was solidified, an environment of trust emerged that eventually led to the participation of the 25 young women and girls from the four villages.

During the workshops, tensions abounded between time and logistical constraints and accomplishing the goals of the workshops. Ideally, we wanted to provide participants with all the space and time they needed to debate ideas about social problems and their potential solutions, but we only had 3 days to prepare participants for their public performances. Consequently, at times, we had to “push” them to finalize the script, conduct the rehearsal, and complete the set design. Due to time constraints, participants tended, in some cases, to script simple solutions for complex societal problems (e.g., dowry and gender inequality). Given the difficulty we encountered in gaining parents’ permissions for their daughters to participate, however, it would not have been feasible to extend the length of the workshops. Ultimately, we sacrificed some complexity in the “problem-posing process” (Freire, 1970) to create social networks among participants and to lay the foundation for future efforts toward change.

Another limitation of the theater project was a lack of caste diversity among participants. How deep or wide a social innovation spreads, as articulated by diffusion theory (Rogers, 1995), depends, in part, on the types of social networks that are tapped into by interventionists and researchers. The majority of these participatory theater workshops participants were members of a higher caste; only a handful of them were from lower castes. The homogeneous nature of participants was due, in part, to our recruitment methods that relied on our pre-existing connections with local RHPs, all of whom were high-caste Brahmins and resided primarily in high-caste villages. Individuals in the lower caste did reside on the fringes of these villages, but they were not easily accessible to us as fieldworkers. Consequently, we believe our communication activism was more effective in challenging oppressive gender roles than caste roles; although it did create the conditions for workshop participants (mostly high caste) to wrestle with caste issues and enact stage-based rehearsals to address them in the future.

It is an exciting and challenging task for us to develop more effective strategies for increasing diverse participation in future projects. To accomplish this goal, our (present) higher caste workshops participants are uniquely positioned to orchestrate the involvement of their lower caste counterparts because they are strong advocates for inter-caste harmony in their villages, feel collectively efficacious to take on new challenges, and are socially networked at the village level to involve lower caste individuals in future projects.

Finally, we realized the historical and culture-bound nature of communication activism. Boal (1979) urged active participation on the part of audience members to realize the full potential of the Theater of the Oppressed. The audience, according to Boal, should be fully aligned with the actors and become part of the performative experience (see also Mienczakowski, 2001; Mienczakowski & Morgan, 2001). Freire (1970), however, cautioned that the content of dialogues, which presuppose action, must be carried out at the stage where the participants are in their struggle for liberation. Interventions and social change, thus, should vary in accordance with historical/cultural conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality. In Freireian spirit, we argue that action researchers and fieldworkers must gauge and engage the “readiness” of people to accept new ideas and defy traditional norms. In the case of these participatory theater interventions, we consciously chose not to fully engage audience members as “active spectators” during the performances (e.g., audience members asking questions during and after the presentation), for we did not feel confident in performance participants’ ability to respond to free-flowing audience participation or in our ability to facilitate such a conversation. We had promised parents that we would protect their daughters and we were not confident in being able to control potential hostilities had we encouraged active participation by audience members. It was a huge accomplishment to bring young men and women from Indian villages together to participate in the performances—counter-narratives that defied norms and broke from conventions. Thus, these theater interventions laid the groundwork for future projects that can more fully realize Boal’s vision of active audience-spectatorship.

We did, however, conduct post-performance interviews with audience members. Interviewees overwhelmingly indicated support for the performances. One viewer, Sunita, exclaimed, “I liked everything from the beginning till the end.” Although most viewers expressed support for the various performances, one man, Kulawati, indicated that he would not let his daughter participate and explained, “There is nothing wrong in participation but we do not approve this. House is more important than all this. Men in society are not same, all have different views, and its not necessary that all should approve this.” Having workshops such as these followed by performances demonstrates tremendous ground-based support. It is not surprising, however, that some villagers, like Kulawati, wondered why “outsiders” engaged in mixed-gender workshop activities including allowing young girls on stage.

Conclusion

The ways in which we construct our sense of being are increasingly performative in nature (Denzin, 1995), as narrative links quite well to, for instance, discipline and surveillance (including self-monitoring), and equally well to character-based identifications and narrative sequencing. From this perspective, the participatory theater interventions described in this chapter represent as ensemble of stories told by participants about themselves; narratives inevitably marked by and articulations of wider economic, political, and social structures. The work of Freire (1970) and Boal (1979) transforms a once-understood aesthetic experience (i.e., entertainment) into a medium for engaging people politically.

Issues of gender inequities, dowry, and caste as performed by participants represent deeply entrenched social, political, and economic problems—systemic issues that are difficult to

change overnight. Although we do not claim that the 1-week participatory theater workshops and performances have corrected these social ills, they provided a first-time opportunity for young men and women from four villages of Bihar State in India to work together and voice their concerns—on stage, with a microphone—in front of their parents, elders, and other community members. In the context of rural Bihar, such actions represent important steps toward securing social, cultural, and political reform. In that sense, the workshops and performances represent important rehearsals for securing social and political change. By providing a space for participants to performatively engage in sense making about their lived experiences, this communication intervention revealed important intersections between deeply personal and autobiographical accounts, broader hegemonic cultural narratives, and counter-narratives that offered alternative visions for individual and community identities. We strongly believe that the web of friendships created through this project, both within and across the four sites where this intervention was carried out, will continue to work toward social reform in these villages.

With a little help and support from us, but mainly through their own courage and resolve, Usha and her six friends in Abirpur Village took part in the participatory theater workshops in Kamtaul Village. There they met Vandana, a resident of Kamtaul Village and an avid listener of *Taru*, as well as several dozen other *Taru* listening club members. Collectively, they engaged in social activism and justice with the following hope (as expressed in a letter sent to us by Vandana after the performances):

One day, society's darkness will disappear
 One day, flowers of happiness will bloom
 And, the lamp of enthusiasm will glow!

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Footnotes

¹Although there are many layers of caste-based segmentation among Hindus in India, there exist four main caste categories, arranged in a hierarchy. A person, whether a man or a woman, is born into a particular caste and his or her social position is, thus, fixed by heredity, not by personal or professional accomplishments. The Brahmans, mainly comprised of temple priests, represent the highest caste. The next highest caste is the Kashatrias, the warriors and rulers, followed by the Vaisias, the landlords and traders in society. The lowest in the caste hierarchy are the Shudras, members of the peasant class and those engaged in menial occupations. Among the Shudras, at the very bottom of the caste pit, are the “untouchables,” mainly scavengers and waste handlers.

²Sharma is also Creative Director of Brij Lok Madhuri, an organization dedicated to using Indian folk forms to promote social change. He was closely involved in the programming aspects of *Taru* as a member of the advisory committee formed by Population Communications International. He co-facilitated script-writing workshops in New Delhi, and then worked closely with many of the writers of *Taru* to ensure the integration of key issues in the storyline of the serial.

³Janani is a Patna-based organization that has networked over 25,000 RHPs in the State of Bihar, India. Janani served as a ground-based collaborator for the on-air *Taru* radio initiative; its RHPs promoted the program and provided service delivery on the ground to support the radio soap’s reproductive health messages.

⁴By May, 2003, researchers from the Centre for Media Studies in New Delhi and Singhal and D. Sharma made eight rounds of visits to these four villages, spending over 70 days in them. Various techniques of data collection were employed, including over 50 in-depth individual and focus group interviews, participant observation, note-taking, and photograph and video documentation. In addition, over 20 listening group members’ diaries from these four villages currently are being translated and transcribed for thematic analysis.

⁵Although we set out to recruit an equal number of male and female participants, the outcome of equal gender distribution of participants occurred spontaneously and coincidentally as we navigated our way through the difficulty of gaining the permission of parents and transporting participants to the workshops location.

Photograph Captions

Photograph 1. Some 800 people attended the folk performance in Madhopur Village to promote listening to *Taru*. This performance, staged in February, 2003, a few days before *Taru* began broadcasting, resulted in the formation of several *Taru* listening clubs. (Source: Authors' personal files)

Photograph 2. An open-air school for underprivileged children in Village Abirpur that was established by Abirpur's *Taru* listening club members after being inspired by Neha, one of the radio serial's characters, who engaged in a similar deed. (Source: Authors' personal files)

Photograph 3. A participatory theater rehearsal in progress in Kamtaul's *panchayat ghar*. Each day, several dozen bystanders watched the theater workshops proceedings. (Source: Authors' personal files)

Photograph 4. Participants of the theater workshops engage in physical and vocal exercises in preparation to play their respective roles. (Source: Authors' personal files)

Photograph 5. Women and girls sit in front as a folk performance unfolds in the village of Chandrahatti. (Source: Authors' personal files)

Photograph 6. Spectators perched on a rooftop watch a performance in the village of Abirpur. The banner with the *Taru* logo says, "Listener club members of *Taru* present a cultural performance." (Source: Authors' personal files)

Photograph 7. A member of the newly established *Taru* Drama Club in the village of Abirpur signs its constitution. (Source: Authors' personal files)

Appendix Description of Storylines

Play 1 (Children's Group)

The play is based on two interrelated stories, both of which focus on issues of gender inequality. In the first story, Rajeev's daughter attends school and is harassed by the neighborhood boys because they believe girls should stay at home. The girl complains to her parents. Rajeev, although supportive of her daughter's education, is portrayed as a weak man who decides to withdraw her from school as he fears social opposition. But his wife is a strong woman, and with the help of her two sons, she is able to convince her husband to continue their daughter's education. In the second story, Chandni (the protagonist of the play) wants to study, but her father does not allow her to go to school. In his opinion, only sons should get educated. He is confident of his three sons' future success, and provides them with ample educational opportunities. But Chandni's mother supports Chandni's education against her husband's will. Time passes and one day, Chandni's father has an accident and becomes paralyzed. He looks to his grown sons for support, but they are portrayed as "good for nothing" and are unable to help. Meanwhile, Chandni has done very well in her studies and has a good job. She supports her family in the aftermath of her father's accident. Chandni's father realizes his mistake and repents. He asks the audience not to repeat his mistake, and to give their daughters equal opportunities to succeed.

Play 2 (Adult Group)

The play was scripted on the basis of a real-life event. Inspired by the character of Neha in *Taru*, who opens a school for "untouchables," teenage boys and girls in the village of Abirpur started a school for less privileged children. They make this decision after much discussion and deliberation in their listeners' club. They overcome many difficulties, including social opposition and lack of material infrastructure, to establish the school. In their school, they give free pen-and-paper supplies to the poor children from their own pocket money. During class sessions, discussions about women's empowerment, dowry, and small family size also take place. This play also effectively relied on humor to bring its message home.

Play 3 (Adult Group)

Sharma and Mishra arrange the marriage of their son and daughter without consulting their children. Mishra's daughter is against this marriage because she is too young and wants to finish her studies before getting married. Sharma's son also tells his father that it is illegal to marry an underage girl. Father and son have a confrontation, and the son separates from the father. To save face, Sharma promises Mishra a marriage between his younger son, Ratneshwar, and Mishra's daughter. Mishra agrees. After 4 years, Mishra reminds Sharma of his promise. Meanwhile, Sharma's younger son has been admitted to an engineering college and has bright career prospects. Sharma tells Mishra that he wants a huge sum of money for dowry. Mishra is shocked but finally agrees to fulfill Sharma's demands. Wedding preparations begin. When Ratneshwar comes back from his college to get married, his friends tell him that his father is taking dowry in his marriage. Ratneshwar is furious and confronts his father on this issue. Sharma very cunningly assures Ratneshwar that he will not take dowry. Ratneshwar is very

happy and agrees to get married. But at the wedding, Sharma again demands dowry. Everybody is stunned, but the bride Vandana is very bold. She declares that she will not marry in a family that is greedy for dowry. Seeing her boldness, Ratneshwar falls in love with her. He clearly tells his father that if he insists on the dowry, he will leave home and never return. Sharma, afraid of losing face in front of the whole community, abandons his demand for dowry. He goes through a change of heart and appeals to the audience members to not take dowry. He urges them to remove this social ill from Indian society.