

**Applied Theatre in the Indian Context: Forum, Legislative, and Indigenous
Practices as Transformative Dramaturgy**

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving scenario of Applied Theatre in India, examining how participatory forms such as Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre align and intersect with indigenous theatre performance traditions to create socially transformative dramaturgies or theatre practices. Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed which is widely accepted as the Applied Theatre, has a global institutional recognition but its development in India reflects a unique synthesis between theatre of oppressed methodologies with deeply rooted performative traditions such as ritual theatre, community storytelling, and politically engaged street theatre. The study looks at how Forum Theatre practices in India goes beyond just 'rehearsal for revolution' or preparation for change. It functions as an active open conversational space of collective reflection, community engagement, and talks on policies. Legislative Theatre, though less organised and structured in the Indian framework, shows potential as a democratic tool for local participation and socio-legal awareness. By accumulating these forms within Indian aesthetic and performative traditions, the paper shows applied theatre in India can be seen as an evolving hybrid dramaturgy- not just borrowed ideas. This study uses studies of

performances, talks with practitioners, and theories from performance studies to identify key benefits: community healing, giving voice to the marginalised, adapting better teaching methods and collective participatory decision or policy making.

The paper proposes that applied theatre in India works not only as an interventionist practice but also as an expanded dramaturgical model—where spectators become ‘spect-actors’ and theatre becomes a space of blending of art, activism, and social policy.

By placing Indian practices at the global applied theatre discussions, this study redefines dramaturgy as a socio-political practice deeply shaped by indigenous cultural practices.

Keywords

Applied Theatre; Forum Theatre; Legislative Theatre; Theatre of the Oppressed; Indian Performance Traditions; Participatory Dramaturgy

Introduction:-

When we hear the word ‘Theatre’, a lot of us may imagine the stage, lights, actors, beautiful set-design, music, and audience in front sitting silently in rows, sometimes shouting, clapping, smiling, ultimately experiencing an aesthetic pleasure. Theatre has always been understood as a Space of entertainment or any artistic performance. However, in various parts of the world, theatre has been used as a powerful social practice that helps communities to gather and discuss real life problems, solutions or alternatives and sometimes even to influence real life decisions. They use Drama as a way to talk about issues, share experiences and experiment with possible changes together. This form of Theatre which has stepped out of conventional theatre practices, is often referred as Applied Theatre.

Unlike conventional theatre, this takes place in specific community spaces, schools, streets, public institutions, villages, industrial labour workspaces. It not only aims to create Drama or Performance, but also to make involvement of everyone present there, create dialogues and active participation that reflects on the life of the experiencer. In this sense theatre becomes more of a collective thinking and active participation rather than mere spectatorship of the audience.

Out of the broader spectrum of the Applied theatre, one of the most influential approaches is Forum Theatre, developed by a Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal, as a part of his designed a broader methodology, which is known as “Theatre of the Oppressed”. In Forum

Theatre, when the performance is going on, the audience will be invited to step into performance and change the dislikes or the playing storyline, modify or suggest the changes or try possible solutions to the problems being shown. Therefore according to Boal, the audience became “Spect-actor” i.e. active participants instead of passive viewers.

And over time, such participatory practices have influenced the Legislative Theatre, where performances are used to bring public issues to have a collective dialogue with policy makers, law makers and sometimes even contributing in developing law and policies.

In the Indian Context, though such participatory and socially engaging theatre practices are not new. Long before the modern applied theatre structure emerged, several Indigenous performance traditions- such as rituals, community festive gathering, storytelling, folk forms, other street theatre forms were and are functioning even today, where a community gathers, shares, celebrates altogether social events, concerns, ethical, spiritual and moral practices, pray, discuss, perform a collective experience and sometimes portray sociopolitical representations. This paper reflects how Forum theatre, Legislative theatre and Indigenous performance practices of India can be considered together as a Transformative Dramaturgy that is a dramatic process where not only shaping of stories or performances takes place but also an active participation, collective dialogues, search for ideas on real life reflection and alternatives of solutions to real life problems take place.

By navigating applied theatre in the Indian landscape, this paper aims to start a conversation on how theatre performances can go beyond just presentation to a tool of social dialogue, engagement, awareness and transformation.

To understand the applied and participatory practices work in India today, we need to first outline the meaning of applied theatre and how its foundational theories evolved.

Understanding Applied Theatre:-

Applied theatre is basically, where theatrical tools used to address social, political, educational or ecological issues with an emphasis on questions, process, facilitation and impact (reflection, healing, awareness, decision making) sometime just merely unfinished performance rather than only entertainment performance, usually which can take place in everyday community spaces like school, villages, prisons, hospitals, with survivors, NGOs, streets. It is basically a broad

spectrum of there, which includes many theatre practices, with frames itself out of common and conventional theatre and works directly with people on real-life concerns.

This applied theatre's elements of its broad spectrum may include, Theatre of the Oppressed (Forum theatre, Image Theatre, Legislative theatre etc.), Theatre in Education (Drama used in schools to support curriculum, creativity, expression and personal growth), Prison Theatre (projects with people in jail, on their participation, healing, communication and reflection), Drama Therapy (applied theatre for therapy, healing often with psychologists or social workers) and other forms like museum theatre, newspaper theatre, documentary theatre etc.

All of the above have an ultimate target of active participation, social impact or critical transformative outcomes. The theatre movement arose during the 1920s where theatre makers and practitioners started leaving conventional commercial stages and worked directly with specific groups, workers, villagers, labourers, students on their real social issues. Overtime period during 1960s-90s practices like left-wing radical theatre, workers' theatre, Brecht's epic theatre, Community theatre, Theatre in education, theatre for development projects in global south and several therapeutic experimental practices such as J.L. Moreno's psychodrama, Grotowski's psychophysical 'Poor theatre' were gathered under the broad term "Applied Theatre" to describe issue-based, participatory practices in educational, societal, health and developmental atmosphere.

While in India, these global theatrical societal trends intersected with long past cultures, rituals, folk theatre, street theatre movements like- IPTA, Jana Natya Manch, already addressing issues on class, community, caste, governance, economy in factories, labour institutions, streets, public squares. It is then Boal inspired theatre of the Oppressed works (Forum and Legislative theatre) gets into Indian society and reshaped as a hybrid theatre practice.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed:

Now Augusto Boal (1931-2009) who got inspiration from Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", argued that audiences in traditional theatre are passive recipients as they don't question or take action for change, they just get entertained and stay silent about the oppression. Boal therefore conceptualises the "Theatre of the Oppressed" as a "Rehearsal for the Revolution", where everyday people analyse oppression and rehearse interventions through games, image formation, forum and legislative theatre to invite participants or audience to co-create, discuss the knowledge and have a real life solution-action on the oppression. The central

idea is the “Spect-actor”(active audience participation) with the Joker (the facilitator) rehearsing with theatrical tools on several problem solving onsite performance interventions by the audience to change the scenario of the protagonist(the oppressed) aiming for an impactive action or successive reflective outcomes.

One of the most influential audience participation practices within this framework of applied theatre is the Forum Theatre.

Forum Theatre:

In this form, a short street play about some injustice is shown and again replayed so that the audience can observe and step in to try their own changes they wish to see in the situation of the performance, which will be coordinated by a facilitator termed Joker. It is designed as a rehearsal space for real life, helping people to explore different reactions to oppression which they may face outside.

A basic structure in Forum Theatre how it works, could be explained in following steps -

a) *One small scene-*

Where actors perform a small scene at a public forum, showing a particular targeted problem with a clear situation of oppression, could be caste discrimination, domestic violence, unemployment, harassment, corruption etc.

There will be an antagonist(the oppressor) and one protagonist(the oppressed), where the scene will end in an unfavourable manner for the oppressed character; this is called the “anti-model” which they aim to change.

b) *Replaying the scene-*

The same scene will be repeated again from the start. But this time the audience will be instructed to observe keenly the scene and find out its key moments where they feel something could be done differently.

c) *Intervention by the audience(‘spect-actor’ concept)-*

Any audience member who feels, somewhere something can be done differently, can shout “stop!”. Then they go in, replace the oppressed character, try out different actions to change the situation for the oppressed. And the rest of the actors then will respond to the action realistically, so the new action will be properly tested.

d) *Multiple attempts and discussion-*

Many different audience members(spect-actors) will be invited to try out different paths. In between the process, the group discusses what worked, what did not work or seemed unrealistic ? what could be the possible real life outcome etc.

e) *No single “perfect” solution-*

Not aiming for a perfect solution, but to open imagination, build courage, critical thinking, analyse the oppressing forces, and collective reflection.

Basically the Forum Theatre is a space to try out possibilities of resistance to oppression with a trained team of actors and a Joker who mediates and keeps the “forum” running, fair and reflective.

While Forum Theatre works for collective thinking and reflection, another extension to this process links theatre directly to governance and policy making.

Legislative Theatre:

Legislative theatre uses these participatory performances to turn citizens into policy thinkers. In the similar way communities act out,co-create, and test ideas for public laws and policies. These improvised ideas then documented and communicated to the policy makers as a policy suggestion or a draft of law.

This method was developed by Augusto Boal, during the 1993-97 period when he was a local city councillor of Rio De Janeiro, and effectively he was able to pass several laws in favour of marginalised groups. He almost spent half of his councillor allowance to hire Jokers. Who practiced Legislative theatre with community groups and formulated ideas for potential laws and can be submitted.

Legislative theatre provides scope and space for communities and leaders to pre-test policies through role-play, experimenting with practical consequences and power dynamics before changes are implemented as a constitutional law. According to Boal it is a participatory democracy, where there is a two-way exchange between legislators and voters. Where voters are not just viewers, but participants, a spect-actor. This way it will maintain the elector and elected relationship a dynamic structure promoting two way active participation instead of one way catharsis. It revisualises democracy as a creative, enjoyable process of double flow

participation between citizens and institutions, very different from distant hearings, consuming news as a spectator.

While these scenarios emerged in the international stage, in the Indian landscape, these performative community based rich traditions were already in practice but in a more of a conventional approach of commentary on social political issues through performance. After the influence of Theatre of Oppressed by Boal, several contemporary groups emerged with a hybrid mode of practicing theatre with marginalised underprivileged politically oppressed communities. The most highlighted group among them like “Jana Sanskriti” founded by Sanjoy Ganguly in 1986 took the movement of applied theatre to a level where Forum theatre practice got its Indian reshape.

Indigenous Performance Practices In India:

Indian indigenous performative traditions already have a long past generational experiences of values that applied theatre states such as collective participation, community dialogue and shared reflection and a very thin line between performer and the audience. Ritualistic theatres like Therukoothu, Yakshagana, Chhau, Mudi yettu and several popular folk forms with community based like Jatra, Nautanki, Bhavai, Danda Nata/Jatra, Theyyam etc performances usually takes place in village square, Rural, streets and in open air pendal, have extensively involved the audience in their rituals, sometimes in performances, ask for wishes, suggestions, community welfare work initiation, sometimes psychological ritualistic dialogue between performer and spectator takes place.

These forms not only perform social events or rituals, they provide a space for everyday politics, moral and ethical judgement, satire with mythic text are seen together. Some clown characters or interactive characters that break the distance between actor and spectator by taking a few moments out of a scripted performance to engage and to get hold of the audience on a special topic. Such examples like- “kattiyakaran” in Therukoothu, “Bhagavathiyar” in Yakshagana, “Vidushaka” in sanskrit dramas, “Mausa” in Danda Jatra are some character who in between a performance, be it from any mythology, historical, periodical, will suddenly break the fourth wall and have audience interaction on several local political, social, family, employment related issues. Later political street-theatre movements like IPTA, Jana Natya

Mancha promoted the language of direct address, collective sloganeering, post show interactions all extensively used to raise questions about class, caste, power, human rights.

So in this context when applied theatre enters Indian arena, it restructured and sharpened and catalysed the participatory and dialogic dramaturgic practices with a hybridised look abiding with indigenous performance practices.

Current scenarios of Forum and Legislative theatre in India:

The theatre of oppressed forms like Forum theatre and Legislative theatre are rarely studied academically. Though groups like “Jana Sanskriti”, W.B. and “CCDC”, Bangalore are working actively in the respective TO(Theatre of Oppressed) field with marginalised communities through participatory theatre that promotes social and political change.

i) “Jana Sanskriti” :

“Jana Sanskriti”(means People’s culture) was a theatre group founded in 1985, by Sanjoy Ganguly in West Bengal, primarily based on the methods of the Forum theatre also affiliated as a member of the International Theatre of the Oppressed Organisation.

Janasanskriti team is the largest Forum theatre group in India with 30+ networked village-level troupes working in 12+ states across the country, with an average audience reach of 2 lakhs spectators annually. The group also organises workshops and festivals. Among which the “Muktadhara International Forum Theatre Festival” brings participants and TO practitioners from around the world.

How does Jana Sanskriti work?

Started with just 5 member troupes, Jana Sanskriti now has 40000+ members working in the practice. Its practice can be studied in four linked phases which continuously gets reshaped with experience and political moods of the communities they serve.

a) Problem identification-

Troupe meets locals, discuss their grievances (such as domestic violence, political abuse, gender inequality, unemployment), outline a small resembling storyline or performance script with including elements like folk songs, local arts and aesthetics, myths, local behavioural symbols etc, to make the text feel original and relatable rather than an imported method.

b) Rehearsal as Research-

A series of workshops, replaying the script will be done, with several time stopping the targeted action, try alternatives, where most of the spect-actor interventions are being discussed and analysed till an actual real life move on the issue will be drafted aiming for a community drive for social collective political reflection to take place.

c) Public Forum Performance-

The rehearsed scene will be staged in a public forum, and after every run through, the group invites the audience to stop the scene sequence, take up a character and test a new strategy. The discussion then links all the possible outcomes to strong reflective actions (documenting, filling complaints, meeting governing officials, arranging protests).

d) Feed Back Loop and Scaleup-

The Outcomes are recorded and discussed with local leaders and taken back to next rounds of workshops around other social setups to have a regional experience of responses to similar issues. Like they inculcated Baul songs structures in West Bengal, in Rajasthan they took elements of folk dances of regional practices. In such a way the Forum Theatre practice stayed relevant and politically effective.

ii) Centre for Community Dialogue and Change (C.C.D.C), Bangalore:

CCDC is also working in theatre of the oppressed in India, founded in 2011 by Radha Ramaswamy, is a non-profit educational and community organisation. It is also focusing on areas of issues like human rights, gender justice, youth employment and participatory democracy promoting the Theatre of Oppressed aims to encourage dialogues and sensitivity in human relationship. This team trains the facilitators to promote these participatory practices in their respective institutions and communities. It conducts workshops in schools, colleges and in NGOs on education, mental health, elder abuse. The mode of operation is the same as Forum Theatre methods using theatre games, image theatre, community storytelling etc.

iii) Other Forum Theatre or Theatre of Oppressed practising groups.

- Budhan Theatre (Ahmedabad, Gujrat) , a community theatre group founded in 1998, works for the rights of the Denotified Tribes(DNTs) particularly Chhara Community, uses Forum theatre to challenge police abuse, caste and discrimination.
- Yours Truly Theatre (Bangalore), founded in 2003, uses interactive theatre methods like Forum Theatre in some of their workshops.

- Sambhavana Institute of Public Policy and Politics(Himachal Pradesh) promotes TO, through long term programmes focused on “joking-Justice”
- The Yuva Ekta Foundation (Delhi) works at the intersection of youth and governance, using “Theatre for Change” to empower youth addressing social issues.

iv) Academic Training Institutions:

- University of Hyderabad: integrated recently the theatre of Oppressed into their academic curriculum and applied these methods with community groups like local orphanages.
- ATI Foundation(Applied Theatre India-Mumbai): India’s first academic institution that offers applied theatre courses that include Theatre of Oppressed and Forum Theatre.

So the core focus area of Indian theatre of Oppressed groups are gender violence, caste, discrimination, health care, education, mental health, and political oppressions communities go through.

When we view the Forum theatre, Legislative theatre and Indigenous theatre practices, shows immense dramaturgical possibilities.

Transformative Dramaturgy:

Dramaturgy in simple terms can be understood as a structured theory, practice that gives meaning to a Dramatic performance and its performative elements such as plot, text, aesthetic values, characterisation, audience relationships. Basically a whole architecture of meaning in Theatre, which shows the story structure, audience interpretation, space value for the performance and the ideology blended in the performance.

But here, the transformative dramaturgy means not only interpreting the meaning or reality, but to alter or change it according to the desired reflective possibilities.

As Boal describes his methods of Theatre of Oppressed, not as a revolutionary idea, but the “rehearsal for revolution”, this transformative dramaturgy breaks the fourth wall, provides space for participatory performances, ignites creative thinking, allows multiple narrative outcomes from “spect-actors”. Which ultimately, benefited in community healing, strengthening marginalised voices, encouraging working class community people for effective

participation in socio-political events, form policy proposals for law making out of discussed solutions in Legislative theatre practices.

So overall, transformative dramaturgy can be stated as a dramaturgical structure that enable participatory intervention, allowing audience to collectively rehearse and perform possibilities for social transformation, where spectator became “spect-actor”, stage became a laboratory of social experiment, text became a collective construct and finally the theatre becomes a part of civic and social transformation.

In the Indian context, this dramaturgy drawing framework of applied theatre from west and flavourise its practices with local performative cultures. Performances in local language, usage of folk songs and traditional elements for better resemblance, taking inspiration from local historical stories, events and ritualistic practices, addressing targeted local issues (like, Dalit, adivasi oppression, health awareness, giving knowledge on agriculture, environment, labour laws etc.) shows the relevance of applied theatre in contemporary cultural and social setup.

Conclusion:

Applied Theatre in India is not merely an imported practice but an evolving hybrid dramaturgy, shaped by indigenous theatre cultures, community histories, and contemporary TO methodologies.

Applied theatre in a large extent work beyond just performances, Forum theatre encourages participatory interventions and Legislative theatre, though less institutionalised in India, connects theatre with civic engagements and Indigenous traditions already rich with performative and participatory dramaturgical elements all together opens a hybrid model of operating in India, addressing and finding a collective solution to societal issues through the “Rehearsal for revolution” process.

With much potentials, of strengthening grassroot impact on communities, Educating them, serving gender justice, addressing unemployment, and participatory governance, the applied theatre practice also have weaknesses like, less academic recognition and promotion, dependency on NGO funds, lack of legislative theatre practices with further law making process experience India are visible.

Some of the future scope and aim of Theatre of Oppressed practice in India should be integrating legislative theatre practice in governing bodies like Grampanchayats, Municipal

and assembly councils, applied theatre in educational institutions like schools, colleges and universities, Planning and organising several Forum theatre practices in community development projects such as health, climate change awareness, elder caring, mental health care, labour rights activities etc.

Apart from this, there is also a strong need for documentation of performances, comparative studies between western and Indian adaptations as theory generation, not just case studies, and deeper analysis of legislative theatre experiments in India.

These Participatory forms, will definitely make people look at theatre not just as an entertainment medium but also as a tool that can be used in our social transformation, political dialogue-space with “spect-actor” community involvement and collective decision making that will definitely show a path of active participatory democracy.

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