

## PRA and theatre for development in Southern India

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### • Introduction

Theatre which is fully participatory can significantly empower individuals and communities. It can be effective in highlighting important issues at grassroots level as well as re-establishing local art forms and traditional cultural practices that are so often lost through marginalisation and discrimination.

This article looks at the introduction of a new education scheme with a community in southern India in which PRA and practical drama activities were used. We consider whether PRA can be enhanced by integration with participatory theatre activities and what compromises may result from this synthesis.

### • The project

As part of a post-graduate degree in Theatre for Development, we were invited by an Indian NGO, PREPARE, to run a series of theatre training sessions for a new project aimed at educating seven to fifteen-year-old Dalit girls in rural Tamil Nadu. PREPARE works to encourage Dalits to overcome political and cultural subordination and has set up a variety of community development projects such as credit, health and agricultural schemes.

A number of local women had been identified by PREPARE to be trained as informal educators. We were asked to work with these women to train them to promote the potential benefits of the scheme and to investigate possible

objections they might face during its promotion. In common with many development agencies, PREPARE's understanding of theatre was as a medium for the promotion of messages. We sought through this project to find ways of introducing a more participatory approach to the use of theatre in PREPARE's work and, as part of this, to experiment with the integration of Theatre for Development and PRA.

### Using PRA with women educators

PREPARE provided us with the results of their investigation into how education for girls had been identified as a need in local Dalit villages. In order to complement this information, we set out to explore the perceptions and priorities of the women who had been trained as educators, through a collective visualisation activity. All of the group were literate and comfortable working with pens and paper.

We began with Venn diagramming. We divided the participants into two groups. One group was asked to create a diagram around the heading of 'benefits of education for girls'. The second group constructed a diagram around 'potential objections to girl-child education'. We asked the groups to concentrate on points that were contextually specific to girls from their own villages. As members of a minority of literate women in the local villages, participants were highly qualified to highlight the benefits and disapproval which they themselves had experienced or witnessed in their own villages. As issues were raised, they were written onto paper circles. Participants were then asked to prioritise them by placing the circles at varying distances to the subject, according both to their importance in everyday village

life and the frequency with which they might occur. For example, in the Venn diagram illustrating benefits, agriculture and health were identified as the most vital reasons for needing literacy and were placed adjacent to the subject.

Exploration of collective issues encouraged active discussion among group members. This became particularly energetic when the groups compared the results of the two diagrams.

### Moving into theatre

We were aware that participants had had little or no experience of theatre-making. As an introduction, therefore, we began to work with activities which encouraged participants to improvise with objects and actions in a fun and non-threatening way. To build cohesion in the group, we encouraged women to draw on their personal experiences and knowledge to express themselves in a practical way and gain ownership of the material. Two exercises were chosen as tools for group building, raising confidence and as a way of revealing information that would not be immediately apparent to us. These were:

- *the object game*: one by one, participants passed around the circle an object with which they mimed an action, with the proviso that the mime had to be completely unrelated to the true function of the object. The rest of the group had to guess what the object might represent.
- *shape and mime*: this activity was similar to the first, but encouraged participants to improvise with body shapes rather than objects. Person A entered the circle and, for example, curled themselves up into a ball, sticking one arm in the air; person B entered the circle and observed the shape. They decided it reminded them of a waterpump and began to mime the appropriate action, using the body of Person A accordingly. Both actors continued until asked to freeze. Person A then left the circle and person C entered to use the shape person B had created, and so on. One person directed the action by calling stop and start so as to include all players.

Both of these activities were useful to focus the group. They also demonstrated how supportive the women were of each other. As facilitators, we also took part in the activity. These activities introduced the group to the rudiments of theatre-making, yet also had a purpose outside of theatre practice. The women became more confident and more relaxed as the session went on. The activities also acted as a research tool. Even though we were working with the women outside their village and domestic contexts, we were able to witness intimate elements of their lives that only intensive participant observation might otherwise have revealed. And as we were gaining insights into their worlds, they were gaining insights into ours.

These initial activities were more than the first stages in theatre. They offered information and insights that complemented what we had learnt in the Venn diagramming exercise, enhancing our understanding of the everyday lives of women in their communities. The theatre activities were enjoyable and stimulated participants' imaginations, which served not only as an ice-breaker but also as a change from the more cerebral PRA exercise.

### Play-making

The group was asked to create a series of scenes to build a story about some of the key issues that had emerged from the Venn diagramming. The stories were to represent what happened to an illiterate family in a situation in which they had a problem concerning either health or agriculture, and what the consequences of such a problem might be. The plays that emerged further demonstrated issues facing the communities. These went beyond material concerns, such as clean water, to address issues such as family relationships, alcoholism and gender inequalities.

While some women were more active in the Venn diagramming discussions and left little space for others to contribute, the theatre work offered those participants who were less vocal the chance to express their views through their characters.

However, the form that women chose for their plays echoed familiar models in which messages were delivered to the audience. None explored the range of objections and benefits that had been raised in the Venn diagrams. The next step, then, was to develop simple dialogues that would encourage participants to develop their arguments in role. By posing problems rather than offering solutions, the aim was to encourage the audience to offer advice and explore the possible consequences of that advice.

### **Back to PRA: improvisations**

Based on the information generated in the Venn diagram, participants worked in pairs to create an improvisation that illustrated one benefit and one objection. Each pair rehearsed a debate in which each individual was responsible for arguing a specific point. For example, one improvisation featured a father who felt that education was a wasted financial investment, since his daughter would soon leave the family and get married. The daughter, meanwhile, was keen to become literate to improve her chances of employment.

The aim of this exercise was to rehearse situations that might be incorporated into a play which would be taken around local villages. By finding new and persuasive arguments with which to confront their partner, participants introduced an element of conflict that offered interesting theatrical possibilities. The debating process also helped prepare the educators to respond with more confidence to any real life objections they might face in their villages.

During the improvisation process, participants reinforced their arguments by drawing on some of the other issues raised in the Venn diagramming exercise. When having to argue their point in character, participants identified interconnections between some of the issues that they had not previously highlighted. They also found that some issues which they had identified as quite important were difficult to maintain a strong argument for. The degree to which they were able to argue convincingly helped them to reassess their initial prioritisation. Equally, the debates which arose

around which arguments would and would not be used by women or men, provided insights into gender differentiation which the Venn diagram had not revealed.

### **The plays**

Several plays were created and performed by the girl-child educators. They varied in style and emphasis. Only some of them, however, effectively integrated the information from the Venn diagram and the techniques of Theatre for Development.

The plays that resulted from the workshop process fused the information provided by the Venn diagramming exercise, which provided the content of the play, and some of the dramatic skills acquired during the improvised debates.

As facilitators of the rehearsal process, we were able to introduce a participatory approach known as *Forum Theatre*, in which members of the audience take an active part in determining the outcomes of the action. This new and unfamiliar style of drama challenged the more didactic style to which the participants were used. Because they retained ownership of the material, however, the actors were familiar and comfortable with the dramatic material, bringing many of the points raised during the improvisation to the attention of the audience.

The educators returned to their villages and created their own plays with local people as the cast, with no direct assistance from ourselves or the PREPARE staff. Although the women had access to the information in the Venn diagrams to inform these plays, their inexperience in theatre-making made it very hard for them to connect the two activities. The tendency was to revert to the traditional style of theatre in which any points to be made were highlighted in a monologue at the end of the performance.

The PREPARE staff also devised a play. But it did little to complement the participatory research process. Although the Venn diagrams were referred to for information, the staff members selected an issue to concentrate on which had been identified by themselves,

rather than the women, as a priority. They then devised the plot themselves and allocated parts to participants. The players did not therefore have real ownership of either the content or the process of play-making. As a consequence, the arguments that they put forward lacked both confidence and conviction.

### • **Lessons learnt**

PRA and TFD provided complementary approaches to exploring the issues surrounding girl-child education in Tamil Nadu. While the Venn diagramming exercise highlighted the issues at stake and enabled participants to analyse their key concerns, theatre work deepened the analysis and provided a number of further insights. By taking on a role and arguing it out, participants were obliged to consider in greater depth the priorities they had arrived at earlier.

The introduction of Venn diagramming as a means of participatory analysis was completely new to participants. Theatre, however, was not. They had experience of the traditional performance form in this area of Tamil Nadu in which a monologue propounds a moralistic and didactic message. We made plays to address issues which touch on concerns about which there may be moralistic responses from people, or no response at all. Thus, it was hard for the participants to move away from the traditional medium and draw on the more unfamiliar forms of Theatre for Development.

Within a relatively short time-scale, insights were gleaned from the theatre and PRA work that offered the basis for further development. Progress in putting together the plays was, however, slow. This demonstrated the need for time to build participants' skills and confidence and to enable them to successfully use the techniques in their own work.

Even after so short a time, participants were more confident and able to find, and use, their voices. Where PRA highlights issues, the enhanced confidence that can come out of theatre work may empower individuals and collectives to address these issues, first by playing them out to explore what impact and potential repercussions they might have, then

taking action. Without a commitment to genuine participation and empowerment, however, theatre can become yet another way of telling people what they ought to do without engaging them in analysis or action.

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