

# Theatre in Education: a way of generating people's empowerment

*Sisir Dutta\**

## INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, on the northern coast of the Bay of Bengal, is bordered by India on the west, north and east, sharing a small common border with Myanmar in the southeast. The country is a low-lying riverine land. Bangladesh is the second largest river basin in the world (behind the Amazon). With a population of 160 million, Bangladesh is the most densely populated agricultural country in the world. Bangladesh's culture has a long history – the land, the rivers, and the lives of the common people form a rich heritage with marked differences from neighbouring regions. It has evolved over the centuries and encompasses the cultural diversity of several social groups of Bangladesh.

## CASE STUDY

The video clip below contains the story of a rural girl from Bangladesh. You can view it here <<https://youtu.be/kNJRAXGYpOE>>.

The girl's name is Nandita. She resides in Laksmipur, a district of south-western part of Bangladesh. This is one of the coastal areas of the country. Nandita comes from a lower middle class family. She is a domestic and agricultural worker and a member of the local Theatre for Development (TfD) group.

### IN THE VIDEO CLIP NANDITA SAYS:

*My brother was a victim of unsafe migration. In the course of issue/theme selection for a theatre production, I proposed this personal story of my family's distress to my TfD group members. We included the story into our production through a participatory way.*

*We organized ourselves. And Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA) facilitated and encouraged us to intensify our capacity. BITA contributes to enhance our capacity for dialogue making, scene making and so on.*

*We presented a pre-test show in front of some of the villagers. They acknowledged our effort. We endeavor to do the best... In this way, our theatre was recognized.*

*Once, we experienced a problem in our village regarding the early marriage of a girl. Then, I along with other group members took the initiative to urge her mother not to go ahead with her marriage. Eventually, we stopped the early marriage of that girl.*

*Was my journey very smooth? Whenever, I was involved with the TjD group, the neighbors always criticized me. They used to tell me not to mingle with male members in the group. But I was very determined and confident and I kept at it. The social pressure never frustrated me. It is true that I had to face obstacles to become such a phenomenon.*

*Despite these obstacles, I never lost my spirit.*

*Eventually, I could take over the leadership of the TjD group and organized rehearsals. My family has faith in me. They allow me to pursue theatre. I have the courage of speaking out regarding the wellbeing of society. BITA supports me and creates a space for us to continue. This could be accomplished only by theatre. And a favorable environment has been created.*

*Throughout the process, I have been confident. I think that as women we have overcome neglect. Now, I can enjoy freedom. I could explore myself. And I desire, that all the women from our country will be able to enjoy freedom like me. I anticipate that I will become a good TjD activist.*

Nandita became an effective leader of the group. She could explore her creativity as well as mentored other fellows to develop themselves.

She interacts with the people immediately after a theatre performance. Finally, she has spread powerful messages amongst the villagers like: All the children must be sent to school. Education is the main power. The video clip shows the rising of a human being's spirit to make change happen.

#### EDUCATION: SELF MOTIVATED POWER OR LEARNING PROCESS IN DEVELOPMENT?

Theatre-In-Education has long been used as an exploratory tool in development. It has also accounted for a means of moral education and socialization, which is well rationalized by all levels of the young and adults. It is a globally recognized process of enhancing the knowledge and information of people through a composite learning process. Hence this process could be a means of education for common people as it instills trust and confidence instead of spreading fear and uneasiness. Hence the process has the potentiality to propagate ideas and thoughts on people's rights, interests and liberation through education. Theatre-In-Education has got the significant acceptance as a holistic learning process of a two-way communication between the instructor and the learner. As result of its success of reaching people's heart with messages, the intervention has been included as one of the most significant ways of people's mobilization.

#### UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT IN THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Awareness raising is a precondition of a value based society that is based on positiveness and contributes to the well-living condition of everyone. The core of this value is people and development. When people get into the process of self-actualization; their judgment guides them to analyze their own position and identify ways of improvement.

The basis of development intervention in BITA follows a rights based approach. BITA has sequentially developed an empowerment process, which starts its journey with building a relationship with communities through communication, supports them with raising their awareness levels, facilitating them in transforming their trust into internalization capacity to visualizing self development, makes

them confident to become actors from observers. This confidence also helps the community to make the right decision for their well-being; as a result the community development process builds in within them, which ultimately brings recognition for them as change makers of the society. In this way people initiate their organic way of development and bring a broader change in their life.

#### CHALLENGES FOR A SPECIFIC CONDITION AND WAYS OUT

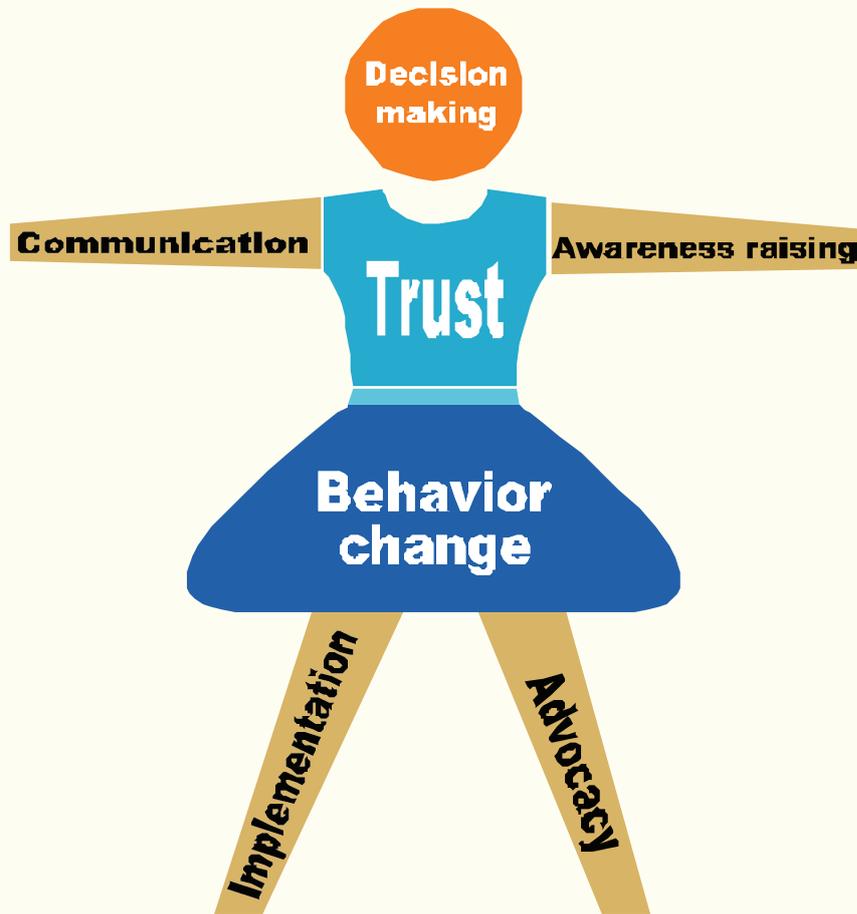
For any specific community living in extreme marginalized conditions, economic empowerment becomes a center point from where they begin their discussion of development and change. It often becomes a difficult task for the facilitators to make the community realize that poverty is not merely the absence of food and commodity to meet the basic needs but also the question of powerlessness. When they focus on their individual ways of development they do not realize the sense of collectiveness and solidarity towards common interest.

Then there may apply some innovative learning processes like Theatre-In-Education that creates space for them to deepen their understanding. We had a workshop on dignity and self esteem with oppressed women (destitute, divorcees and contract labourers). The participants asked us how they would gain by participating in our program. We had a feeling of doing our social responsibility towards them. To reduce these different standing points between both parties we changed our work strategy and started a one to one interaction. We tried to show them how this work would contribute to their life, especially when they work at road construction sites in temperatures above 40 degrees centigrade in summer time, and that time they face various kinds of exploitation and physical and mental harassment. And for their self-protection unity is a must. And their cohesiveness brings many possibilities of increasing their self-confidence and protects them from violence. Initially they thought that performing theatre is an additional burden for them. They were also worried about time-management. And lastly their working-authorities may not see it positively. At that point, we started dialoguing. When we could bring them into the workshop, we started the work with story telling which makes the situation more engaging for the participants. We always prefer for them speaking about themselves. We would listen to their story and all of them would tell us their own story uninhibitedly. This 'tell us' increases their interest of participation and we pick up the momentum. They start their story of oppression and we listen to them attentively. We had to stay with them for much more time than that we planned. However, eventually they could organize themselves and actively involve with their movement of establishing rights and entitlements. Their voice for land rights, proper wages had influenced their living standard. After this performance-based work, they sent their children to schools, and made the local government accountable for obtaining public services. To some extent, they also raised a debate with the road contractor about their proper wages and finally they could conquer it.

#### DEVELOPMENT THEATRE: A PROCESS OF EDUCATION FOR EXCHANGE

BITA has been working on a culture-based approach where marginalized and deprived communities are program participants. BITA believes that the most effective entry point of any community depends on communication. This communication

goes both ways, BITA interacts with marginalized people about the issues that affects their life especially rights violation. BITA always emphasizes on gathering messages and information from communities in addressing or promoting any issue and it is also known that each community has its distinct cultural forms, which can be used as effective means of communication for the same community.



An effective communication raises a level of awareness among the communities to determine the problems and prioritizes the issues that need to be addressed in improving their lives. Sequentially, a trust develops among the people to work collectively within the community with the facilitation of BITA. This trust also makes them feel the importance of BITA's culture based approach in upholding the community initiatives. Following trust, there grows an internalization capacity within these people, which helps them in changing their behavior towards the family and community. This process explores creativity and instills confidence in these people in playing his/her desired role as a social actor. It also helps them imagining their self development, thus in a way he/she actively participates in its implementation. Along with this, when these people raise their voice on different social issues including rights based issues their views are recognized by local authorities and other communities and they become a part of the change makers towards better lives. This is the way the community does local level advocacy for improving their everyday condition.

BITA wishes to denote the total process as human development. The steps, which have been illustrated above, if can be practiced by human beings, the capacity of decision making would then be possible for him/her followed by his/her family

and society. If they can make the right decision, they can move towards community development. BITA believes that through this process BITA works for change.

## CONCLUSION

In case of social mobilization, the role of Theatre-In-Education contributes so boldly in the decision making process that it apparently comes up as a consensus building among the community. So, this happens when the issue or the subject matters are being decided by the group and reflect participants' views. Presentation style is different. So here in this process agreement within the group is seen differently than that of many other development processes. Since the people whom BITA works with belong to the same community, they themselves are leaders; they have potential enough to oversee their roles over the problems and are also enthusiastic enough to accumulate their experiences for mitigating their problems. We only stay there as catalysts. We do have some instruments to sensitize them, which gradually we hand over to them in the course of time. It can be said that the process increases their ability towards change and each of them independently becomes a social educator.

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*Sisir Dutta* is the founder of BITA (Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts). He has been working at different fields of performing arts for last 35 years mainly works with marginalized and deprived community, and grassroots artists.

You can view his complete profile and the organisation he is associated with at: [http://www.learn2change-network.org/?About\\_Us\\_\\_Our\\_Network\\_\\_Activists#anker\\_sid](http://www.learn2change-network.org/?About_Us__Our_Network__Activists#anker_sid)