

Theatre: A medium of development communication: Case Study of two Theatre groups in Jammu

Ramiyan Bhardwaj

PhD Research Scholar, Lovely Professional University Punjab

Abstract

Over the ages, Theatre has played a vital role in spreading development communication among the societies. This paper attempts to introspect the role of Theatre as a mode of Development Communication in Jammu. This paper portrays the historical contribution of the Jammu Theatre. The paper is based on case study of two prominent Theatre groups of Jammu namely Natrang and Natraj Natya Kunj. The paper focuses on the part of theatre messages and its dissemination among the people. Interview method was used to collect the information from two focus groups. Information was further used to frame the conclusion, with reference to the role of theater directors, and their strategies behind the communication to create awareness in society. The theatre groups were chosen based on their track records as well as their popularity. The paper also highlights light the concept that Theatre is an important medium of communication that depicts community development and generating awareness among the people of Jammu.

Keywords: *Theatre, Development Communication, Awareness, Natrang, Natraj Natya Kunj*

Introduction: Theatre is a traditional form of communication in India's vibrant culture. Folk or Traditional theatre is an art composed of music, dance, drama, graphic and plastic arts, religion etc. Folk theatre has roots in innate culture, is anchored in regional identity and societal ethics, and serves as a natural form of intergroup, inter-village, and interpersonal communication in Indian society.

Development represents ideas and practices designed to bring about positive change in human societies (Olalekan Ganiyu Akashoro, 2010). A solid theoretical framework for comprehending the connection between theatre and development is provided by Development Media Theory, which discusses media institutions and performance in developing cultures. This is so because the theory covers a wide range of sociocultural, economic, and political conditions that touch on the efficient use of the media for development goals, as Folarin (1998) put it. The idea, in particular, views the media as having a crucial role to play in fostering and sustaining societal progress in areas including cultural, social, economic, political, and technical development.

One of the most successful methods for using theatre to spread development messages is called "Theatre for Development." This method is especially useful in places where issues with mass media accessibility and media literacy, education, hygiene, and modernization are prevalent (Sourav Gupta, 2018). Due to the

communication that is established between actors and audience members, theatre is a type of participatory communication. It provokes thought in the audience and calls for internal and societal transformation.

Theatre is more than entertainment; it is an overall emotional practice and generates a state of receptiveness of messages on social issues among audience. Folk theatre is a historic method of communication in India and has the capacity to spread messages about social, economic, and cultural development, all of which contribute to the country's overall development (Das, 2013). Folk communication techniques offer a potential channel for the dissemination of messages for social and economic advancement. Folk music, folk dance, folk theatre, and other traditional forms of expression are used by society and its members for social, political, health, and family welfare campaigns, as well as for local development initiatives.

Since ancient times, theatre has played a significant role in Jammu and Kashmiri culture. Its origins in Kashmir can be traced to the 12th century, when works like Kalhana's Rajtarangini and the Nilmata Purana exhibited the splendour of that era's theatre genre (Archana Kumari, 2014). Theatre uses inventive new ways to convey traditional dramatic styles in an effort to attract youthful audiences. Its communication approach draws a lot of interest. In Jammu and Kashmir, however, theatre still has a long way to go before it can reclaim its timeless beauty.

The manifestation of regional modern theatre practise in Jammu and Kashmir is based on a strong foundation of theatre that was established during the early 19th century alongside time-honored folk theatre genres like Haran, Bhagtaan, and Jagrana as well as the existence of Naqaals, Bhands, and Miraasis (Gupta, 2012). From the 1890s until the 1930s, notable Parsi theatre companies including Victoria, Alfred, Madan, Surya Vijay, etc., paid visits to Jammu and Kashmir. Public theatre was launched by the Snatan Dharma Natak Smaj and stage construction at the Deewan Mandir in Jammu.

First Dogri Play, Baba Jitto was performed during the Farmer's Conference at Udhampur as part of the Dogri Renaissance movement in Jammu. Though the first Dogri drama 'Acchut' was performed at Ramnagar in 1935. The traditional (folk) forms of Jammu & Kashmir are rich in their content and act as a daily dose of entertainment and education for the people in Jammu and Kashmir.

Purpose of the present study

- a. What are the changes in the forms of Theatre and development communication in Jammu since Independence (1947-2022)?
- b. To what extent Jammu's age old theatrical heritage has piqued the curiosity of the younger generation?
- c. What difficulties must be overcome by theatre groups if they wish to restore Jammu's Theatre?

Methodology

Interview method was used to collect the information from two focus groups. Information was further used to frame the conclusion, with reference to the role of theater directors, and their strategies behind the communication to create awareness in society. The theatre groups were chosen based on their track records as well as their popularity.

Information was gathered through meeting and having in-depth conversations with the theatre group members, which allowed us to not only collect information but also closely observe their work. The information was acquired from the organisations' official websites. All of this was helpful in understanding

the two theatre companies chosen, their modes of communication, as well as their innovations and successes.

Case Study I : Natrang Theatre Group

The youngest theatre director in India, Balwant Thakur is credited with founding Natrang Theatre Group and participating in more than 200 National Theatre Festivals, which is a record for the nation. He was awarded the highest performing arts honour in India, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Direction in Theatre (Kumari, 2017).

Excerpts from the interview provided by the founding member of this group i.e. Balwant Thakur. . He was asked about the Natrang and its origin. Events hosted by the Natrang Theatre Group were also highlighted by the director. He also differentiated how Natrang Theatre group is unique from other theatre groups and what does it communicates.

According to Natrang theatre group director, Natrang Theatre Group is one of the professional theatre groups in Jammu & Kashmir. Natrang is also known as an important supporter of peace in J&K. Padamshree Balwant Thakur started Natrang in 1983. On May 15, 1983, when he was still a student at the University of Jammu and with the help of his friends, Natrang staged two legendary plays at Jammu's Abhinav Theatre: "Neeli Jheel" and "Nahen Kandhey Nanhen Pair." The first significant event Natrang organised was "Jashen-e-Kashmir" in Delhi Haat, which featured the various performing art societies of Jammu & Kashmir in appropriate chronological order. The state of J&K witnessed the start of a new age of skilled performances based on the various varieties of the performing art traditions of J&K with the unveiling of this new wing in Natrang. When the people of Jammu saw "Jammu Festival-2007" at Mini Stadium Parade Jammu on a showcasing 500 artists representing the traditional strengths in front of the audience, this initiative had attained its pinnacle. A succession of presentations, including "Rangla Jammu," "Bhaderwah Festival," "J&K Utsav," "Jammu Mega Cultural Show," and "Celebrating Diversity," came before this.

Natrang has emerged as a significant advocate for peace in J&K. It arranges workshops and employs theatre as a therapeutic and transformative tool for change in the area. Natrang's primary goal is to make J&K the ultimate destination for thinkers, authors, artists, performers, and art enthusiasts by making it one of the most artistically active locations in the nation. Natrang is on a quest to turn Jammu into a popular theatre destination around the world.

Natrang will be regarded as one of India's most innovative and lively cities in a few more years. a unique location for lovers of culture. a location that will not only have the necessary human resources and facilities but also the capability to host national and international events. A place where kids can express their creativity and develop artistically overall.

Case Study 2: Natraj Natya Kunj Theatre Group

Excerpts from the interview provided by the director of this group i.e. Dr. Abhishek Bharti. He was asked about the Natraj Natya Kunj and its origin. Events hosted by the Natraj Natya Kunj Theatre Group were

also highlighted by the director. He also told how Natraj Natya Kunj Theatre group is different from other theatre groups and what does it communicates.

According to Natraj Natya Kunj director, Natraj Natya Kunj is a Theatre institution which has been working from last 40 years. It highlights various issues of society that are relevant to public, educate public and entertains audience. Natraj Natya Kunj was established in 1984 with the aim to take the culture of Jammu and Kashmir to international heights. It has spent 33 years engaged in uniquely collective creative process. Headed by Kumar A 'Bharti' Natraj Natya Kunj owns a Studio Theatre, Resource centre and a Theatre Laboratory. Under the able guidance of Kumar A 'Bharti' Natraj Natya Kunj has performed 52 Plays all over the India. From 1998 Abhishek Bharti is directing plays for Natraj Natya Kunj.

Natraj Natya Kunj group has performed plays like Visarjan, Agni Barkha, Gagan Damama Bajyo, The Government Inspector, X- Reflection, The last Colony, Blood & Beauty, Macbeth; The Crown Of Blood and all are the award winning plays from the Jammu and Kashmir Academy Of Art Culture And Languages Jammu. It is said that "Kaho ki Theatre bolta hai sabki pol kholta hai". Keeping this phrase in mind, Natraj Natya Kunj educates public about all the good and evil issues of society.

Group is continuously winning the state award for best plays from last seven years which is a record in state itself. This troupe of artists, who have travelled to India, dazzles audiences with physical illusions and high-jinks that defy gravity while incorporating dancing. Instead of using their practised movement vocabulary. It was the founding principle of Natraj Natya Kunj that each performer should convey his particular life experiences to the stage. Despite having a strong technical and acting foundation, NNK artists incorporate any movement that communicates to the audience. They develop the ideal procedure if one doesn't already exist.

Conclusion: Despite the humorous theatre training that is provided in Jammu and Kashmir, the society today does not support its growth. Natrang's experiences have demonstrated that young peers are interested in theatre and that many of them want to make a profession out of it, but their families do not encourage them to do so. Additionally, there is no money for such interests. Theatre offers programmes to train young people, but they were unable to draw in a significant number of participants. In an effort to keep up with the changing times and public interests, Natraj Natya Kunj presents old classic theatrical styles with a fresh modern flavour in an effort to draw in young people. It draws a lot of attention thanks to its creative communication methods. However, Jammu's theatre still has a long way to go before it can regain its former splendour.

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