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Beyond the Wounds of the Fall: Exploring New Positions of Communication for Social Change through disciplinary disruptions

Más allá de las heridas de la caída: Explorando nuevas posiciones de la Comunicación para el Cambio Social a través de disrupciones disciplinares

Além das feridas da queda: Explorando novas posições da Comunicação para a Mudança Social por meio de disrupções disciplinares

Abstract

This article explores alternative epistemological perspectives in the context of Communication for Social Change (CfSC), drawing from ethnographic research findings on Jana Sanskriti's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' practice in West Bengal, India. It challenges conventional approaches to development and social justice, aligning with the radical ideas proposed by scholars like Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) and Avijit Pathak (1998). A departure from reactive stances is advocated in the article, and an epistemological shift is called for to foster a holistic understanding of development and social change. The article also highlights some overlooked aspects in the field of communication for social change, emphasising the need to identify and explore potential blind spots that may have been neglected but play a significant role in the social change processes. The author argues that bringing these aspects to light could significantly enrich the field, further advocating for the exploration of unconventional ideas—such as integrating spirituality with academics—that are often constrained by traditional academic norms. The discussion calls for a space that transcends the fear of normative disqualifications through certain necessary disciplinary disruptions, and finally proposes a new position and role for CfSC in such a new movement. Moving beyond its conventional supportive and apologetic role in development and social change practices, this shift signifies a radical leap and emancipation for the field itself. Such a radical approach aligns with the contemporary push for social justice through cognitive justice.

Key words: Communication for Social Change, Alternative Development Approaches, Social Change, Social Justice, Cognitive Justice, Spirituality and Development, Intangible forces.

Resumen

Este artículo explora perspectivas epistemológicas alternativas en el contexto de la Comunicación para el Cambio Social (CfCS), basándose en los hallazgos de una investigación etnográfica sobre la práctica del 'Teatro del Oprimido' de Jana Sanskriti en Bengala Occidental, India. Desafía los enfoques convencionales del desarrollo y la justicia social, alineándose con las ideas radicales propuestas por académicos como Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) y Avijit Pathak (1998). El artículo aboga por un alejamiento de las posturas reactivas y propone un cambio epistemológico que fomente una comprensión holística del desarrollo y el cambio social. También destaca algunos aspectos pasados por alto en el campo de la comunicación para el cambio social, subrayando la necesidad de identificar y explorar los posibles puntos ciegos que han sido descuidados pero que desempeñan un papel significativo en los procesos de cambio social. El autor argumenta que sacar a la luz estos aspectos podría enriquecer considerablemente el campo, defendiendo la exploración de ideas no convencionales—como la integración de la espiritualidad con el conocimiento académico—que a menudo se ven restringidas por las normas académicas tradicionales. La discusión aboga por la creación de un espacio que trascienda el miedo a las descalificaciones normativas a través de ciertas disrupciones disciplinarias necesarias, y finalmente propone una nueva posición y papel para la CfCS en un movimiento de este tipo. Superando su rol convencional de apoyo y justificación en las prácticas de desarrollo y cambio social, este giro significa un salto radical y una emancipación para el propio campo. Tal enfoque radical se alinea con el impulso contemporáneo por la justicia social a través de la justicia cognitiva.

Palabras clave: Comunicación para el Cambio Social, Enfoques Alternativos de Desarrollo, Cambio Social, Justicia Social, Justicia Cognitiva, Espiritualidad y Desarrollo, Fuerzas Intangibles.

Resumo

Este artigo explora perspectivas epistemológicas alternativas no contexto da Comunicação para a Mudança Social (CfMS), baseando-se nos resultados de uma pesquisa etnográfica sobre a prática do 'Teatro do Oprimido' de Jana Sanskriti em Bengala Ocidental, Índia. Ele desafia as abordagens convencionais de desenvolvimento e justiça social, alinhando-se com as ideias radicais propostas por estudiosos como Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) e Avijit Pathak (1998). O artigo defende uma ruptura com as posturas reativas e propõe uma mudança epistemológica para fomentar uma compreensão holística do desenvolvimento e da mudança social. Também destaca alguns aspectos negligenciados no campo da comunicação para a mudança social, enfatizando a necessidade de identificar e explorar pontos cegos potenciais que podem ter sido ignorados, mas que desempenham um papel significativo nos processos de mudança social. O autor argumenta que trazer esses aspectos à tona poderia enriquecer significativamente o campo, defendendo a exploração de ideias não convencionais—como a integração da espiritualidade com a academia—que muitas vezes são restritas pelas normas acadêmicas tradicionais. A discussão propõe a criação de um espaço que transcenda o medo das desqualificações normativas por meio de certas interrupções disciplinares necessárias e, finalmente, propõe uma nova posição e papel para a CfMS nesse novo movimento. Superando seu papel convencional de apoio e justificativa nas práticas de desenvolvimento e mudança social, essa mudança representa um salto radical e uma emancipação para o próprio campo. Tal abordagem radical alinha-se com o impulso contemporâneo por justiça social por meio da justiça cognitiva.

Palavras-chave: Comunicação para a Mudança Social, Abordagens Alternativas de Desenvolvimento, Mudança Social, Justiça Social, Justiça Cognitiva, Espiritualidade e Desenvolvimento, Forças Intangíveis.

Introduction

Taking advantage of the growing recognition of other epistemologies in the field of communication for social change (CfSC), in this paper I attempt to offer a couple of epistemological perspectives within the context of seeking a better alternative for doing communication for development and social change- both research and practice. Contemplating these perspectives would require us to imagine the possibility of dismantling certain disciplinary barriers, expansion of the scope, and engaging with some of the overlooked aspects within the field hitherto. These ideas stem from the recent discoveries in my doctoral research combined with my own lived experiences. Conducted through the lens of CfSC, the research examines the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (TO) practice of Jana Sanskriti (JS), a group of local activists based in West Bengal in the eastern part of India. TO is a theatre technique devised by Brazilian theatre activist Augusto Boal inspired by the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Personally, I could articulate and share these insights only in the wake of the favourable environment fostered by Sociologists like Boaventura de Sousa Santos with his revolutionary ideas presented in his book, 'Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide' (2014), pertaining to global south, and Avijit Pathak in his book 'Indian Modernity - Contradictions, Paradoxes and Possibilities' (1998) and alike in the Indian context. With their radical propositions they have created a space for expressing unconventional ideas that we often hesitate to share fearing disqualification as 'non-academic', and therefore silently abort those ideas cognitively, leading to, in Santos' words, 'waste of experiences' (Santos, 2014, p.120). Many valuable reflections, ideas, perspectives, debates, and dialogues often remain in the shadows due to apprehensions of rejection. Their translation into scholarly resources requires them to pass through certain academic norms. The ideas presented here are within the framework of contemporary advocacy for social justice through cognitive justice.

Background of the research

Jana Sanskriti is a local 'Theatre of the oppressed' group operating since the early 1980s in some parts of rural Bengal located in the Eastern part of India. JS has been engaging with various local social and political issues using primarily TO as a tool of participatory communication. There are different forms of TO, JS specialises in the Forum Theatre (FT) variant of it. Their practice, characterised by its democratic and participatory nature, challenges top-down politics, monological approaches, and oppressive cultures. JS's practice seemed to offer an exciting case to investigate along the lines of current CfSC debates.

JS's initiatives fostered critical thinking in communities, empowering villagers to deconstruct oppressive ideologies and challenge deeply ingrained abusive norms, such as patriarchal norms. For instance, a study shows that long-term exposure to JS, lasting at least 10 years, significantly increased the number of abuse-free marriages, dramatically reduced alcohol-related domestic violence, and enhanced the role of wives in household

decision-making. The proportion of men who believed it was acceptable to beat their wives was halved, weakening the feedback loop that equates manhood with toughness and potentially ending the cycle of oppression (Hoff, Jalan, & Santra, 2021).

However, most importantly, JS could empower rural women, who were once under the subordination and exploitation, through theatre-based activism. Forum Theatre, performed by oppressed women, has not just been a performance but a catalyst for mobilising oppressed women. The first step in this empowerment was breaking their silence and enhancing their capacity for critical thinking and independent action. One of JS's major achievements is their success in establishing and maintaining several local all-women Forum Theatre teams that actively combat oppression in rural areas. Over time, these women have liberated themselves and now serve as agents of social change, continuing their fight through Forum Theatre. This movement has created a democratic space where women can collectively voice their concerns, express themselves, and lead, driven by a shared sense of injustice and the recognition of their collective power. Forum Theatre has become a collective as well as a personal, creative, and constructive space for these women, helping them define their independent identity and self-worth (Dutta, 2015).

With all these findings available, I sought to understand retrospectively how these developments occurred by placing JS and Forum Theatre within their larger complex socio-political and media contexts. I conducted a thorough qualitative process analysis.

Location: I did my fieldwork in two districts - South 24 Parganas, where JS has long standing work, and Purulia, a recent intervention. This allowed me to gain insights into JS's consistent efforts, identification of active participants, and their challenges. JS is functioning only in a few localities within these districts depending on the participation of interested local people.

Fieldwork period: 2018-2020

Method: I conducted an immersive ethnography in the living areas of local FT actors to understand their work pattern, organisational structure, and processes. I also spent some time in JS's headquarter at Badu situated at the outskirts of Kolkata city. Staying in Digambarpur village, located in Patharpratima block of South 24 Parganas district, allowed me to observe and interview the informants, and also to understand the cultural context of JS interventions.

Additionally, I spent some time in Puncha town under Puncha block in Purulia district, where I could engage with the field team members, observed rehearsals, accompanied them to live performances, and conducted interviews with them and also with other local residents. I employed various qualitative data collection methods, including Personal in-depth interviews, Focus group discussions (FGDs), group interviews, conversations, Participatory observations, Go along and Hang outs.

Informants: It was a grounded research and I ended up interviewing broadly two groups of informants- JS category, those who are directly or indirectly involved with JS's

works in the communities, and non-JS category, local people who are not involved in JS activities. I could interview pioneers and active JS leaders, the local FT team actors, field supervisors, senior members who are now retired, members of the local groups formed by JS called Responsible Citizen's Committee (RCC), local social workers and activists, senior citizens, government officials, front line workers (FLW), local political leaders and several adolescent groups formed by JS in different villages in those two districts.

How does Forum theatre work?

Forum Theatre is an interactive and participatory form of theatre aimed at promoting social and political change. In this process, a short play, often depicting an oppressive situation happening in real life in their community, is crafted and performed by local actors, ideally the real oppressed ones. The audience watches the initial performance. After that, the scene is replayed, but this time, the audience can intervene, stop the action, and suggest alternative actions or solutions to address the issues presented in the play leading to a constructive debate and dialogue called Forum. The intervening audience members are called 'Spect-actors'. This interactive and dynamic approach allows the audience to engage directly with the narrative, offering them the opportunity to explore, challenge, and transform oppressive situations. Forum Theatre serves as a catalyst for dialogue, critical thinking, and social awareness, empowering individuals to envision and enact change in their communities. Action plans are developed later on with continued discussions after the show in the community to address the identified social problem.

Influenced by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), Augusto Boal invented TO in the mid-1970s against the backdrop of political turmoil in Brazil. Boal's philosophy revolves around dismantling the culture of monologue and promoting dialogue at all societal levels to cultivate a democratic culture. Forum Theatre, one of the variants of TO, facilitates intellectual growth through 'Conscientization' (Freire, 1970). It engages participants in active problem-solving through critical thinking, with an aim to empower the oppressed and humanise the oppressors. This interactive format ensures joint learning and fosters a democratic critical analysis of social issues. Departing from the traditional theatrical method, Boal transforms spectators into active participants. His innovative techniques reshaped the theatre landscape, influencing the work of many, with his commitment to empower people through participatory theatre.

Sanjoy Ganguly, JS's founder and artistic director, skillfully merged Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre with Indian philosophy. According to Ganguly, the synergy between Boal's ideas and Indian philosophy highlights the inherent talents and cognitive capacities within each individual. They believe that individuals possess immense strength for personal emancipation as well as collective problem-solving for driving their desired social changes (Abbas, 2015).

A Hopeful encounter with Intangibles in the Field

Some of the findings that emerged from my doctoral research have been eye opening for me in terms of the ongoing struggles in the field of Development and CfSC for finding better alternatives. For instance, insights on what I tentatively have been calling 'Intangible forces' led me into a tangential route of investigation out of the mainstream conversations in CfSC. Following it took me into another world of seldom noticed and sparingly mentioned aspects related to communication and social change despite their critical significance. When I am referring to Intangible forces, I am talking about things like Hope, Courage, Love, Empathy, Solidarity, etc. (Brahma, 2022). While each of these constructs holds distinct characteristics, they share a common characteristic of being intangible, yet exerting a profound influence on humans and human related initiatives and processes. However, this beautiful encounter with those intangibles was also a bit disheartening at the same time as it also meant I just encountered some blind spots or, at least, blurry spots in the field (CfSC).

Currently, in the field of CfSC some notable shifts are occurring. There is a growing recognition of the limitations inherent in traditional methods of both understanding and implementing CfSC. CfSC scholars, especially from the Global South, have introduced new lines of critique through their intensive works. They have delved deeper and expanded the scope of critique surrounding the dominant paradigm of development and communication. Their critiques and suggestions are mainly characterised by inclination towards structural issues and the critique of behaviour change communication (BCC) approach.

A common critique shared by prominent CfSC scholars from global south like Pradip Thomas (2015), Thomas Tufte (2017), Linje Manyozo (2017), and Mohan Dutta (2011)—is the narrow focus of CfSC on individual behaviour change at the expense of addressing broader structural and political contexts. They argue that institutionalised CfSC practices, driven by technological determinism and media interventions, overlook the larger political economy, power dynamics, and structural inequalities that underpin development challenges. Another shared critique is the instrumentalist approach to communication, which fails to critically engage with the oppressive systems and ideologies, like neoliberalism, perpetuated by development agencies and international organisations.

However, some of them also acknowledge that behaviour change is vital in certain contexts, such as during the AIDS pandemic or in case of maternal and child care because it can make the difference between life and death. But, they argue that focusing solely on behaviour is problematic since behaviours are shaped by context. To avoid advocating impractical solutions, like promoting healthy diets to those who cannot afford basic food or condom use in marginalised communities, it is essential to examine the broader context and structures that support the status quo in any social change process (Thomas & van de Fliert, 2015).

While these critiques unravel important broader structural politics from local to global levels, they overlook the complexities of behaviour change at the ground level. The arguments seem to suggest that addressing structural issues will automatically enable behaviour change communication to work more effectively, ensuring behaviour change is approached in a more just, sensitive, and rational manner.

On the other hand, BCC delves deeply into the individual level, aiming to change behaviours while becoming entangled in the complex social, cultural, and political contexts of the localities where individuals are situated. Although BCC efforts extend somewhat to relevant policy levels, they remain confined by institutional norms and boundaries, such as those imposed by multilateral organisations and central or state governments, leaving little room to address or challenge larger structural issues. Behaviour change initiatives are externally initiated, often found struggling to unlock individuals' informed and willful choices for the desired (by external agents) behaviour change.

In my review of both structural and behavioural approaches, the Intangible forces I refer to are notably absent—perhaps unnoticed or underappreciated. Yet, these forces are powerful, always present, and working behind the scenes. They have the capacity to empower individuals to create personal change and break oppressive norms. These Intangible forces drive internal transformation, which then translates into external change, from the individual to the collective level, with the potential to influence even structural issues. I have witnessed these dynamics in the field and describe below how they manifest in the social change practices of JS through the use of Forum Theatre.

While delving deeper into these intangibles was beyond the scope of my research, recognizing the presence of this blind spot in CfSC itself serves as a significant revelation and lays the groundwork for future research in this area. Discussion on those intangibles even at this stage contributes to the epistemological shifts I am proposing in this paper.

Members of JS vocally acknowledged in my interviews with them the pivotal role of these forces in guiding their actions and shaping the organisational ethos. For example, Sima Ganguly (Personal interview, 2019), a pioneer who continues to actively participate in the JS's works stated plainly- *"either you do this kind of work out of love, or you don't do it."* Satya Ranjan Pal (Personal interview, 2019), another senior member, also articulated the significance of '**Love**' in their work, by saying - *"To establish democracy, dialogue and love for one another is required. For dialogue one has to come in love, or in other words to dialogue is to love. Love is not a mere emotion but with reasoning. When one comes in love and engages in dialogue the environment changes. This creates conditions for democracy in society"*. These sentiments are echoed by various other informants based in different locations of rural Bengal mentioned above. Many explicitly mentioned gaining '**Courage**' after their encounter with JS. This newfound Courage, catalysed by witnessing JS's Forum theatre performances, appears to have empowered these individuals to take steps against oppression, both individually and collectively.

These Intangible forces acted as powerful drivers for several transformative initiatives, permeating JS's organisational core philosophy and practices. Below, I present a few case studies from my fieldwork to show how it seems to work.

How Courage & Hope enabled Rebika and others to fight Oppression?

Stories of individual empowerment

Rebika Chakraborty (a pseudonym), a tall and elegant middle-aged woman, hails from Lakhipasa village, Keoratala Gram Panchayat (GP) under Kulpi Block of South 24 Parganas district. Coming from a conservative Brahmin Bengali family, cultural norms made her wear Sari from a young age. Despite her desire to continue her education after completing the 10th grade, societal expectations led to her early marriage. In a family where girls were deemed ready for marriage by the age of 14, Rebika's plea to pursue further studies fell on deaf ears. Her prospective in-laws assured her the opportunity to study after marriage, but the reality turned harsh. Trapped behind a veil and confined to the kitchen, she faced mistreatment and restrictions on her movement. She endured both physical and emotional abuse, and at times, was even denied meals. The demands of extensive household chores added to her struggles, as she grappled with the overwhelming expectations placed upon her at such a young age.

In her case, as informed by Rebika herself, while watching a Forum Theatre show *Shonar Meye* (Golden girl), she thought- "that's my story" (Rebika, personal interview, 2019). In that event she saw her own story of oppression being debated. By witnessing the 'Forum' (debate) that happened after the play she understood that oppression is constructed by people and it can also be deconstructed and that it is possible to alter the power dynamics in an oppressive condition, which involves her response too in the situation. This demonstration of deconstruction of an oppression in the theatre space helped Rebika to critically analyse her own real-life situation. When she saw the people engaging with her story and arguments coming in the oppressed girl's favour, and spectators coming and enacting alternative responses to the oppression, she got a new perspective about her own life. She could envision an alternative pathway for her life, rather than merely surviving under the oppressive condition. She returned home as an internally changed person. From that day on she decided to continue her education which was stopped due to her early marriage. Negotiating with her husband, she secured his support to return to school, though with the condition that she must still fulfil all her household responsibilities. Thus, she went back to school while also managing household responsibilities. Her in-laws though initially tried to suppress and break her newly gained confidence by giving her more household works and by applying different tactics of torture, like not keeping food for her. Even then she did not give up. To pursue her studies, she dedicated her nights to learning, waiting until everyone had fallen asleep. Even burning a lamp late at night became a concern, as it increased the consumption of kerosene oil, given that her village had no electricity supply during that

time. In this manner she completed her education till higher secondary level. Her family started accepting the new Rebika, she said. She also took up a job as a school teacher in a neighbourhood primary school. She fulfilled her dream of studying and getting a job. She said, "I got a new life due to Forum Theatre and Jana Sanskriti" (Rebika, personal interview, 2019). She is currently training her daughters to overcome oppressions, as she did, and to become self-reliant and strong. Many other women whom I have interviewed have similar stories. It wasn't easy for them but they took the challenge in the pursuit of their own freedom and for the sake of others like them (Rebika, Manoshi, Malati, Kavita, personal interviews, 2019-2020). They are now acting as local leaders, social workers and activists, also leading Forum Theatre teams and women's groups in their localities.

However, the new pathway was not free from the previous tortures and challenges for Rebika and the other women, in fact, Rebika asserted that it only intensified. Yet, what distinguishes this new pathway, and why did Rebika persist in choosing the more arduous route? Rebika herself reported that it was precisely due to the '**Hope**' of a better future that she envisioned on the horizon. The new path she has forged for herself involves constant negotiations with her family and community in her everyday life, carefully balancing the power dynamic. The intentional actions taken toward that Hope brought Rebika to her present, and similarly for others. The process of their emancipation, as it appears to me, interestingly aligns with Snyder's (1994) Hope theory in Psychology that says Hope has three parts- Goal, Pathways and Agency. The first component, 'Goal' is the clear identification of a specific and achievable goal. The second component, 'Pathways' involves identifying multiple routes or pathways toward reaching that goal. The third component, 'Agency' is the belief in one's capacity or agency to initiate and sustain the actions required to reach the goal. These three elements work together synergistically in fostering a sense of hope in individuals. As per my understanding, the critical consciousness induced by that Forum theatre event might have birthed Hope in Rebika's heart, which inspired her to consider alternative pathways to her life. In between Critical Consciousness and Hope, there was also a role of Courage. They are interconnected, and jointly fuelled her determination to pursue a different path.

Researches conducted on these constructs reveal their interrelationship and the potential of each of these for emancipatory actions and transformative impact at both the individual and collective levels. For example, a study revealed that Critical Consciousness (CC) is identified as a transformative force among marginalised youths. CC has been found to reshape developmental trajectories for individuals aged 12–22 facing oppressive social conditions. Individuals with elevated CC levels experience enhanced mental health, increased academic engagement, success in higher education enrolment, and improved career development. CC also contributes to collective outcomes, empowering marginalised youths to lead actions addressing various issues in their communities. In a career intervention that was informed by CC, women survivors of domestic violence demonstrated more advancement in their occupational objectives compared to other survivors participating in a conventional career intervention, although CC may have different meanings for adult female survivors of domestic violence than for marginalised youth. With ongoing researches, CC is considered a remedy for oppression, fostering positive development and well-being. Advances in measuring CC

aim to assess its dimensions, evaluate interventions, and contribute to a more cohesive conceptualization, guiding program design for the benefit of marginalised communities (Diemer et al., 2016). Likewise, Courage has been defined in many ways and there are theories on Courage leading to emancipatory actions. According to Daniel Putman (2001), Courage involves deliberate choice for a worthy goal. Maya Angelou[1] says - "Courage is the most important of the virtues, because without courage you can't practise any other virtue consistently. You can practise any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage".

Acknowledging the complexities inherent in individual and social change processes and taking into account the ongoing debates and the evolution of the field of CfSC, and while also considering the tentative nature of the transformation theory presented above— yet Rebika and several other men and women's experiences cannot be overlooked. It raises an important question: with the norms, family dynamics, and community environment unchanged, why did they suddenly experience such a transformation after watching a Forum Theatre show, and why do these Intangible forces consistently emerge in their narratives in a similar manner? Besides emphasising the significance of intangibles, this also underscores the necessity for further research in this area.

Similarly, there are other emancipatory stories rooted in Solidarity and Love. While Hope serves as the primary driving force for the oppressed, those not directly experiencing a specific oppression depicted in a FT play can still undergo a conscientization process that fosters Empathy. I have interviewed individuals who diverged from certain norms and practices, choosing to act in favour of the oppressed out of Solidarity and Empathy. Archana Si is one such person. She said - *"I worked in a school, at that time I was not into acting. After seeing their plays, I understood what kind of theatre JS does. After watching their plays I felt so good, I thought that through such plays people can be made aware, so I will also do... Change has definitely happened. When we used to go to perform plays in the beginning women used to come to watch with fear. They used to listen, they would not say anything. They used to think if they speak up anything about their husband, they feared their husband might say something at home and inflict torture upon them. Now I see that women are very much interested, they have learnt to speak up. By seeing this change I feel so good, and this is our achievement".*

Furthermore, empowered individuals like Rebika and Archana discussed above come forward to lead or actively participate in collective actions. Sanjoy Ganguly, the artistic director of JS, believes that an internal revolution within a person leads to an external revolution. He refers to this concept as the 'Total Revolution' (Sanjoy Ganguly, personal interview, 2019). This all supports the idea that those Intangible forces significantly contribute to individual and collective empowerment to deviate from oppressive norms and systems, fostering local mobilisation and facilitating social change. Below are some examples of collective-level changes facilitated by these Intangible forces.

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[1] *Courage is the most important virtue, says writer and civil rights activist Maya Angelou at Convocation | Cornell Chronicle. (2008, May 24). Cornell Chronicle.* https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2008/05/courage-most-important-virtue-maya-angelou-tells-seniors

How Courage, Love & Solidarity mobilised local movements?

Stories of Collective empowerment

Sikha from Sri Narayanpur Purna Chandrapur Gram Panchayat, under Patharpratima block of South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal, currently serves as a local ASHA worker (front line health worker under the government of India). She shared her experience of gaining *Courage* after her encounter with JS activists to protest against the illicit liquor business and associated domestic violence prevalent in her locality during 2001-2005. Alcoholism was widespread in her community during that period and it was a business worth millions. People were scared to raise their voice against the alcohol mafia as they had money power and political connections. Witnessing JS's works, Sikha felt empowered to work in her community with their support, engaging in movement-oriented activities. She went on for sit-in protests with school children (13-14 years of age) since she was working with school children as part of JS's local project, and women and children were mainly suffering due to alcohol abuse, but no one came forward to resist. She strategically sat on the road through which liquor was transferred. *"We broke 70 liquor making units in the entire Gram Panchayat (Sri Narayanpur Purna Chandrapur). Every unit made a business in Lakhs of rupees. Liquor used to be supplied from here to outside"*, Sikha (Personal interview, 2020). She also spoke about the changes she saw in her locality - *"Changes have happened. People, men and women, coming up and speaking out in Forum theatre itself is the beginning of the change. After the FT, meetings happened, people got together and mobilisation happened. This coming together of people for change itself is the change. Now good facilities are there in the community. People can speak, ask for their rights. If there is any problem, they can go and talk to authorities directly. Now people can speak up"*- Sikha (Personal interview, 2020).

There are numerous stories of anti-liquor protests in other areas where JS worked, which eventually evolved into local mass movements. Another informant, Tapash Kopat, from Village Dakhin Durgapur, Patharpratima block, described the challenges faced by his community due to widespread alcohol abuse during 2003-2004. Alcoholism led to domestic violence, affecting mainly women and children and also caused disturbances in the neighbourhoods. The local liquor business persisted for 10-15 years, and a protest initiated by a women's group, supported by JS, led to its eventual halt. During the protest, some of the JS members were even arrested but were released soon under public pressure. JS played a crucial role in raising awareness about the issue, in mobilising the local people through theatre performances and providing organisational support.

Of course, these movements are not solely due to JS or FT. Various agents were involved in those movements. JS's approach goes beyond giving direct and material assistance. Chittaranjan and Rabin, local activists and field supervisors of JS, said – "JS doesn't provide fish but teaches how to fish" (Personal interviews, 2020). They actively promote critical thinking, nurture democracy, and create cognitive, cultural, and material spaces for oppressed individuals to address their issues within the community. Through their consistent facilitation of critical thinking, dialogue, and post-theatre community

level engagements, JS contributes to the mobilisation process of such movements. They also offer direct support by being at the forefront of those movements. However, the focus here is not on JS's contribution itself but on the overarching forces driving these movements. It emphasises the role of the forces—such as solidarity, love, hope, courage, and empathy—that activate and empower individuals and collectives. These forces, I believe, are central to understanding how people are motivated and empowered to pursue freedom from various forms of oppression and injustice.

Other avatars of Intangible forces

In the behaviour change theories, we caught glimpses of some of these constructs, but the BCC approach has been critiqued for its narrow and individualistic nature as discussed above. Such Psychological elements related to social change processes have been almost discarded, akin to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Moreover, these constructs go beyond Psychology. Paulo Freire, in his ontological call, laid emphasis on Dialogue, Love, Empathy, Hope, and Humility, recognizing them as powerful political forces. These principles have been extensively discussed and debated in the recent centennial celebration of Paulo Friere through a series of webinars followed by publication of a book (Suzina et al., 2022).

Despite being potent catalysts for social change, these forces are often not given due consideration. There is a need to delve into how these forces can be intentionally generated, harnessed, and effectively utilised in social change initiatives. Can we dare to imagine introducing Love into service systems? For instance, envision hospitals providing care with genuine compassion, when it's common for patients to face hostility in public hospitals. Could values like compassion and empathy be more tangibly included in a country's constitution and supported by laws to translate them into reality? We have the examples of the constitution of Bolivia and Bhutan, how they have included some unconventional elements in a major way in their constitution including rights of nature and happiness of the people. Can a social norm be created around Love in the communities? According to social norms theories, although time-consuming, it is possible to dismantle existing norms and establish new ones (Biccherri, 2017). JS provides a tangible example of the possibility to evoke and nurture these Intangible forces using tools like Forum Theatre, illustrating their capacity for driving meaningful social change.

Counterfeits and abuses of Intangible forces

Moreover, if not for using them for development and social change interventions, we must study the abuses of those forces, having witnessed the recent abuse of social media and advancing Information technology based on psychological and behavioural theories in manipulating voting behaviours of people by political parties. I am referring to the Facebook and Cambridge Analytica scandal. There were allegations about

Cambridge Analytica's influence on voter behaviour in both the U.S. and India. These manipulative tactics pose a significant challenge of our time, demanding a global effort to safeguard democratic principles in the digital age.

There is also a need to be able to identify fake and counterfeits of those Intangible forces in order to prevent their abuse of another kind. For example, Paulo Freire (1970) discusses the concept of 'false generosity' in his Pedagogy of the oppressed. False generosity refers to actions or behaviours that may seem benevolent on the surface but actually perpetuate oppressive structures and maintain the status quo. True generosity, or true love for other humans, involves a mutual exchange of knowledge and a participatory, dialogical approach to education and communication. It goes beyond one-way charity or paternalism and aims to empower individuals to critically analyse and transform their social conditions. False generosity, in contrast, merely reinforces existing power dynamics and keeps individuals in a state of dependence rather than fostering genuine liberation and autonomy (Freire, 1970).

In nutshell, these forces demand a deeper examination in the context of social change— as psychological, political, or even spiritual forces.

The Spiritual dimension

In some worldviews, for instance in Christianity, Love is the fruit of the Spirit of God (Bible, Galatians 5:22). [2] It flourishes in humans in communion with God. God, being Love, can only fill human hearts with pure love for others. People may desire to love and possess the knowledge, conducive environment, and everything necessary to love others in various ways, but they may still find it difficult to practise love consistently.

In Hindu philosophy, love is seen as a spiritual force that connects the individual soul with the universal soul (Brahman). The Upanishads describe Brahman as the source of all existence and the embodiment of infinite love. This divine love is the unifying force that connects all beings and permeates the entire universe, expressing itself through service. Thus, love is a fundamental aspect of the divine nature and inherently spiritual in character (Plummer, 2023).

This implies that the spiritual dimension cannot be overlooked when studying Love and other Intangible forces, discussed above, as transformative political forces.

Co-incidentally, I found JS's ideological foundation to be deeply rooted in a fusion of spiritual and political beliefs, drawing from both Eastern and Western philosophies. Influenced by Indian thinkers like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Kabir, as well as Western figures like Freire and Fanon, JS's approach bridges spirituality and politics.

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[2] In Bible in the book of Galatians chapter 5 verse 22

Ganguly, the founder of JS, aligns Vivekananda's concept of equality, which recognizes the divinity in every individual, with his democratic political beliefs, creating a unique framework for social change. This fusion is evident in how Ganguly connects Vivekananda's teachings with Boal's Forum Theatre, both of which aim to empower individuals through critical thinking. JS's ideology emphasises the innate potential within each person, reflecting the Vedantic belief in the strength of the human spirit, and positions spirituality and politics as inseparable in the pursuit of human liberation. By integrating spiritual beliefs, democratic values, and participatory politics, JS has crafted a unique and innovative approach to social change.

Above all, various faith systems suggest that the material world is governed by spiritual principles. Does this imply that developmental and social justice issues are fundamentally spiritual in nature? If the world is indeed facing a spiritual attack, are we equipped to address these spiritual challenges? Then we need spiritual approaches that require us to go beyond current epistemic boundaries.

The Bible says, spiritual things can be discerned by spirit only (1 Corinthians 2:14)[3] This is a profound epistemological statement meaning to understand spiritual things spiritual method of knowing is required. As a believer who has witnessed and personally experienced spiritual transformations and manifestations in my own life and in the lives of fellow believers, I know what it means but there is no tacit language to communicate this to people who have not experienced such things yet. But such rich experiences cannot be dismissed merely due to the absence of a shared language. Santos has argued strongly the importance of intercultural translation in challenging dominant knowledge systems and constructing alternative epistemologies (Santos, 2014). If these experiences could have a significant positive impact on so many individuals and communities, it would be prudent to consider exploring such alternatives and experimenting with issues related to development and social justice. But academic norms religiously keep these alternative epistemologies away and keep the academicians in sanitised secluded secular cells where only scientific modernist knowledge is allowed and applied to solve the problems of the world.

This is the second disciplinary issue that I want to highlight in this paper and turn the discussion now towards the on-going debate for radical alternatives being asked for in the field of development and social change.

Santos (2014) emphasised the necessity of an epistemological break for political resistance and argued that there can be no global social justice without global cognitive justice. There is even a need for alternative thinking of alternatives (Santos, 2014, p.133). Perhaps better alternatives to approach life, development and social justice might be lying outside the current terrain and notion of development altogether, from where CfSC is also operating and responding. Answers might be lying there beyond the abyssal line (Santos, 2014) that historically divided the world.

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³ In Bible in the book of 1st Corinthians chapter 2 verse 14

Other ways to Life, Development & Social Justice

Linje Manyozo (2017), a CfSC scholar, has critiqued the 'spectacles of development,' and calls for a politically conscious deconstruction of the very concept of development. Drawing on Said and Escobar, he urged a re-evaluation of development practices, a reconsideration of development theory, and the transformation of training institutions. His arguments emphasise alternative practices that empower marginalised groups to develop their own concepts of development. He encouraged a deeper understanding of the real experiences and challenges faced by the subjects of the development and social change initiatives and called for more inclusive approaches to development. Santos (2014), on the other hand, has critiqued the limitations of the western critical tradition, including Marxism.

Science, modernity, and secularism often restrict the free and comprehensive expression of diverse worldviews. If not oppressive, it feels suppressive in secular space. Instead of fostering inclusivity, it becomes exclusive, privileging only perspectives dictated by science and modernity, resulting in a narrow and reductionist approach. Avijit Pathak (1998) discussed the concepts of militant and soft secularism in his book, portraying militant secularism as an assertive and confrontational approach that vehemently opposes the influence of religion in public and political spheres. He emphasised the distinction between true religion, which is characterised by spiritual principles, and religionism, which overly emphasises dogmas and rigid moral codes. He argued that militant secularism is exclusivist and fails to recognize the emancipatory potential of religion. Instead, he advocates for a softer form of secularism that embraces dialogue and understanding of religiosity, even though he acknowledges the ambiguities of this approach.

Within the framework of militant type of secularism, there's a risk of losing valuable alternative approaches with innovative solutions to the problems of the world. Parallel worlds keep operating with their notions of life and development, while believers of such secularism like to believe all are going in the same direction and are on the same page with a consensus on how to approach life, including development issues. The truth is the majority does not actively engage in such secular politics, participating only half-heartedly and merely for the name sake. Whom does such secularism truly benefit? Eager to steer people toward progress and a peaceful fulfilling life, it finds itself without genuine followers.

However, communalism is not being advocated here. To understand this, consider the example of Hindutva in India, as discussed by Pathak (1998). Hindutva has been critiqued for its focus on gaining political power and establishing a modern Hindu nation, which is different from Gandhi's spiritually-oriented politics. Critics argue that Hindutva has several drawbacks, including turning religion into a political tool, promoting a restrictive ideology that curtails other groups' freedom to practise their faith, and being linked to oppressive practices resembling fascism. Those supporting Hindutva are accused of opposing equal opportunities and neglecting essential concepts like equality and human rights. Secularists, who advocate for the separation of religion

from politics, express concerns about the hidden dangers of fascism within Hindutva. They caution against lauding critiques of secularism, worrying it may embolden the communal forces.

Meanwhile, it's becoming increasingly unclear whether secularism means treating all religions equally or advocating for no religion at all. Such ambiguity has become evident in some countries, such as France, where the concept of Laïcité often suppresses religious expressions rather than ensuring equal space for all religions.

If the concern is that allowing all religions to express themselves might lead to conflict, does this justify forfeiting the immense diversity of knowledge contained in various sources of knowledge? The fear of conflict should not be a reason to lose access to the rich sources of alternative knowledge, diverse ways of knowing, and varied approaches to life, development, and social justice. It is crucial to allow these alternatives to emerge because certain life approaches have much to offer in a turbulent world and can greatly contribute to improving the quality of life on Earth. For instance, it might be surprisingly interesting to know how, within a secular world grappling with challenges, such as deteriorating developmental indicators, rising crime rates, and increasing corruption and conflicts, those who believe in and live by the concept of Abundant life (Bible, John 10:10)[4] promised to the true followers of Christ (not just a 'Christian') are moving in a different direction with their faith and practices. They lead lives imbued with hope, supported by tangible evidence of its fulfilment in their everyday life, even while navigating the harsh realities in the world. Even amidst the chaos and crisis, they receive supernatural provisions and protection. Despite their concerns and prayers for the world, they remain firmly hopeful by trusting and witnessing the scriptures' consistent unfolding. I am saying this, as alluded to earlier, from personal lived experiences and from witnessing the lives of those around me. Facts that are too consistent to ignore. Churches, especially Pentecostal churches, are flooded with such testimonies (also available on-line on youtube and websites). As a Social science student and an Indian born Hindu follower of Christ, I am aware of the colonial critiques of Christendom circulating since centuries and the prevalent corrupted forms of Christianity, which I am still learning to discern. To be specific, I am referring to churches that embody the true Spirit of Christ and operate with integrity. However, at this point, my intention is to highlight the wisdom and knowledge about life found within Christianity, likewise in other knowledge systems that are often overlooked. I see this as part of the call for cognitive justice.

Navigating the fear of the unknown

The secular, modern scientific community may struggle to fully grasp these realities, and individuals and institutions with a strong affinity for science and secular modernity (Pathak, 1998) might be inclined to reject such ideas outright.

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[4] In Bible in the book of John chapter 10 verse 10

Santos (2014) underscores the need to value diverse forms of knowledge, emphasising that, despite its advantages, modern science is constrained by many limitations. Furthermore, there are theories suggesting that science and spirituality are not necessarily in conflict. Steve Fuller (1988) explores this notion in his work on 'Social Epistemology'. However, science and secular modernity often keep spirituality at arm's length, hindering academics from engaging with it openly and freely.

Santos (2014) has also critically analysed the limitations of scientific knowledge distribution and proposes an ecology of knowledges to challenge the monopoly of science. He explores various perspectives on modern science, alluding to an alternative approach that acknowledges the intricate interplay between science and non-science constructs. Historical analysis challenges the traditional view of a unified scientific revolution, revealing diverse forms of inquiry of the 16th and 17th centuries. The alternative approach incorporates post-Kuhnian and postcolonial approaches, valuing cognitive diversity but critiquing them for insufficiently embracing diversity and neglecting sociocultural aspects of paradigmatic transitions. His arguments delve into historical contexts, emphasising shifts from anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles to contemporary complexities involving diverse experiences. The discussions broadly highlight the importance of recognizing alternative knowledge systems, and also moving beyond simplistic categorizations (Santo, 2014).

Thus, dismissing these alternative realities and the rich lived experiences of people of different groups as purely utopian or mere placebo phenomena would be an act of epistemicide that has persisted until now (Santos, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to find ways to create spaces for those suppressed voices, marginalised or erased alternatives and facilitate dialogue among different ideas of development and social justice. That's where I see the role of CfSC: giving voice to diverse worldviews and facilitating the discovery of better approaches and solutions to development and social justice issues. This involves drawing from various sources of wisdom that resonate with people and are chosen by them in an informed manner.

What kind of alternative then?

Given these realities, we may need to reconsider the very position from which we traditionally approached developmental issues. For CfSC, this would entail transitioning from merely aligning with, opposing, or operating under the current concepts and approaches to development, to actively facilitating the discovery or construction of new ideas and approaches to development. This is where I see a new role and position for CfSC. Moving beyond its conventional supportive and apologetic stance in development and social change, this shift would signify a radical leap and emancipation for the field itself.

At present, the world, above all, requires **epistemic justice**, enabling diverse views on life and development to be both visible and heard. I argue in this endeavour, CfSC has a key role to play. CfSC has a crucial role in establishing secure and strategic communicative

spaces where each worldview can freely emerge, express itself, and showcase its unique approaches to development and social justice. CfSC can be instrumental in facilitating dialogue among these alternative ideas, and in innovating ways to prevent conflicts during the dialogue.

Yet, would such an initiative be feasible? JS gives a small yet significant example of such a probable initiative. JS could create democratic and emancipatory space in communities using FT as a tool and a strategy. Similarly, other appropriate tools can be adopted according to local context and culture. JS could also create a dialogical communicative space that hosts genuinely contradictory voices—of the oppressed and the oppressor. In this safe space provided by theatre, realities can be debated and discussed, worldviews can be deconstructed and co-constructed through consistent efforts of local people, gradually influencing and shaping their actual reality. Their model may not be flawless—the power dynamics are challenging even in such spaces, but further study and refinement could enhance its effectiveness.

Pathak (1998) also envisioned such a possibility in his book and suggested the co-construction of an alternative inclusive worldview illustrating it through the example of Indian context. In India, three predominant worldviews are shaping the nation's destiny: Liberalisation, Hindutva, and the rising Subaltern voice challenging the established hegemony. He examines how liberalisation drives society from traditional structures toward modernity, while Hindutva seeks to redefine secularism by infusing it with Hindu nationalist ideals. This redefinition alters the understanding and application of secularism in India. At the same time, the subaltern voices, particularly those of Dalits (lower castes), challenge the entrenched privileges of upper castes and classes, pushing for greater equality and justice. Pathak's analysis reveals the complex interplay between these forces, highlighting how they collectively influence the direction of societal change and progress. He says, these conflicting worldviews present visions of the future that suggest a landscape filled with conflicts. This prompts the crucial question of how to navigate this crisis. Pathak (1998) encourages the development of a new vision for India's future, emphasising Gandhian principles. He urges a re-evaluation of established ideas, also advising against blindly celebrating everything deemed 'new.' He underscored the significance of critical thinking in the reconstruction of worldviews. The suggested new worldview prioritises egalitarianism, recognizing the importance of Dalit politics in addressing the persistent issue of caste oppression in Indian society. However, he asserts that any effective egalitarian project should support the struggles of oppressed groups while steering clear of exclusivity and power-focused politics. In other words, the pursuit of equality should not lead to the exclusion of other groups or become overly focused on gaining or wielding power. The goal should be to uplift the oppressed without creating new divisions or perpetuating cycles of power struggle. An effective egalitarian movement should promote inclusivity and justice for all, rather than simply reversing who holds power or excluding others from the process. Emphasising inclusivity, he finally advocates for a proposed worldview that allows for diverse voices, fostering a shared consensus. Drawing inspiration from the Gandhian struggle in colonial India, he endorses the pursuit of such a grand vision despite inherent contradictions in the Indian context and in general.

There will be challenges, but we won't know what they are until we start the journey.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how - as demonstrated by Jana Sanskriti's practice of Communication for Social Change through the Theatre of the Oppressed, and supported by research in fields such as Psychology and Education - Intangible forces like Love, Hope, Empathy, Courage, and Solidarity seem to play a significant role in driving emancipatory social change. These forces have the power to empower and transform individuals and groups, who are then voluntarily motivated to engage in transformative work at the social level. Through examples, I even attempted to show how these Intangible forces, when aligned with the logic of social movements, can also lead to structural transformation. This is why JS's founder and artistic director, Sanjoy Ganguly, refers to their work as a 'Total Revolution,' signifying that internal transformation within an individual sparks external revolution. The transformed and emancipated individuals become agents of change within their communities. In terms of CfSC, this suggests that individual-level behaviour change, driven by these Intangible forces, ultimately leads to broader social change.

I have also tried to highlight the importance of considering alternative ways of knowing and doing development and social change, transcending disciplinary boundaries and academic norms. In particular, I have briefly discussed the spiritual approach to life, development, and social justice in this context. Drawing from scholars like Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) and Avijit Pathak (1998), I have argued that while approaching developmental problems and social justice, alternative knowledge systems and solutions are often overlooked in modernist scientific and secular spaces. These spaces tend to hinder other ways of understanding the world, emphasising the need for a more inclusive and open approach that breaks down various traditional barriers. This calls for an epistemological paradigm shift in the field of development and social change —one that gives voice, space and opportunities not only to alternative narratives but also to alternative knowledge systems. This aligns with the suggestions of CfSC scholars like Dutta (2011), Manyozo (2017), and Tufte (2017), who are consistently advocating for voice, agency, space, and dialogue as key components of social change initiatives. However, these aspects, like Intangible forces and spiritual approach to development, social change and social justice are overlooked and do not appear in CfSC discourses. In initiating and advancing this revolutionary project of achieving social justice through cognitive justice (Santos, 2014), I believe CfSC has a crucial role to play and a significant amount of work to undertake.

Given the abundance of alternative knowledge systems, I argue that we may need to reconsider the traditional perspectives from which we approach developmental issues. For CfSC, this would mean shifting from simply aligning with, opposing, or operating within current development concepts and approaches, to actively facilitating the discovery and co-construction of new ideas of development and social change. Moving beyond its conventional supportive or apologetic role, this shift would signify a

radical transformation and liberation for the field itself. CfSC would play a critical role in creating safe, strategic communicative spaces where diverse worldviews can freely emerge, express themselves, and present their unique approaches to development and social justice. It would also facilitate dialogue between alternative perspectives and innovate methods to prevent conflicts during such dialogues.

In our quest to find solutions to developmental problems and social justice issues, we as a human society have tried, fallen many times, and are still in the process of recovering from those falls. Critical discourses are filled with lamentations of betrayals, marginalisation, and the pain and suffering of oppressed people in various forms. This article is a raw, unpolished proposal—a genuine attempt to help us look beyond the wounds of the falls by offering insights that, through my research and lived experiences, seem to carry some answers. Once again, in light of these insights, I suggest that things like Faith and Hope are powerful and effective and therefore worthy of exploration in the pursuit of social justice and the advancement of humanity.

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."
(Hebrews 11:1).

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