

An Assessment of BRAC's Popular Theatre: Knowledge Grounding and Effects

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Table of contents

Acknowledgements	v
Abstract	vii
1. Introduction	1
2. Methods	4
3. Conceptual framework	7
4. Findings	14
5. Unfolding the discourse	24
6. Recommendations	27
7. Conclusion	28
Bibliography	29

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Abstract

Popular theatre as a communication medium has gained immense attention and is widely practiced in Bangladesh by various NGOs for raising consciousness in achieving rights and justice required for social development. Likewise, BRAC has been using popular theatre as a communication channel to disseminate development messages among the people for whom development is addressed, and felt the necessity to assess to what extent the knowledge packed by such messages is grounded into people's cognition besides evaluating the strengths and weakness of popular theatre as practiced by BRAC. This study presents such an assessment conducted by using a triangulation method comprising survey, focus group discussion, and case studies. The study observes that knowledge is grounded at a high moderate rate and people have no problem in identifying popular theatre as a distinct form for entertainment and communication. People at a large considers popular theatre as a means for extending education unveiling social ills while also suggesting ways out of such underdevelopment. Drama group is viewed as a change-maker. There is a need for post-performance dialogue, which is not practiced regularly. Nevertheless, popular theatre, if properly addressed and practiced in combination with other development programs, is likely to help develop a counter discourse that is required for a sustainable social development.

1. Introduction

Popular theatre, also known as theatre for development (Kalipeni 1996), is a communication medium to construct, disseminate and interpret messages for raising awareness at community level required for BRAC's Community Empowerment Programme (CEP). As practiced, popular theatre involves participation of community members at three stages: pre-production, performance and post-production. Through discussions with the community members a theme or topic is selected that has community significance. Subsequently, a story is developed and performed by the community members who generally do not have any prior experience in acting in theatre. Often audiences spontaneously intervene—by raising questions or offering verbal support—during a performance when audience is emotionally or intellectually triggered. It is also usual to convene a post-production dialogue with the audience where messages of the drama performed are discussed, interpreted and contextualized. All these are done with a purpose to increase people's awareness required for Community Empowerment Programme (CEP), and the core spirit here is people's participation. Therefore, one may call popular theatre a participatory awareness building communication medium. The success of such an awareness generating endeavour primarily depends on effective knowledge grounding, i.e., to the extent messages are understood by the addressed audience. An assessment of such programme further needs to evaluate message's functional value, i.e. whether performance has affected people's behaviour, or, in other words, brought change in behaviour to positively reshape social institutions.

Popular theatre is widely practiced in Bangladesh by various NGOs of which BRAC is not an exception (Rafi and Rahman 2007). Having a successful initiation of popular theatre in 8 *upazilas* in 1998, BRAC's popular theatre has now expanded to a phenomenal level covering 61 districts with 358 theatre groups. Popular theatre is a key activity of CEP that views popular theatre as "an innovative communication medium focused on raising awareness of the social and political issues that affect the rural poor in Bangladesh." Since July 2003, CEP uses popular theatre as a communication medium to address ultra poor issues at community level to make society aware of the ultra poor and also to make the ultra poor aware about social ills (such as early marriage, dowry) that obstructs their development. It is observed that the poorest of the poor lack the capacity for not having access to social resource and community support — to identify the social ills. As a consequence a status quo is maintained and CEP gets obstructed. The problem has two dimensions: the ultra poor are not aware of the rights and entitlements that they should have and relatively affluent community members are not aware of their responsibility to support the ultra poor in overcoming their situation. CEP addresses this problem with an attempt to raise awareness among community members, both ultra poor and others, by disseminating appropriate messages through popular theatre with an expectation that this awareness would be translated into social action.

An assessment of BRAC's popular theatre is necessary to understand whether popular theatre is fulfilling its purpose to increase awareness of the target people and thereby making positive changes in the community's social behaviour. Such an assessment is further required to identify the strength and weakness of the programme necessary for its improvement.

Assessment of popular theatre, like any communication medium, categorically requires examining to what extent knowledge is grounded, i.e., to what extent messages are understood by the addressed audience and evaluating message's functional value, i.e., whether performance has affected people's behaviour as evident from their community action. Following the core principle of popular theatre participation in every stage such an assessment requires to take community's view in assessing the effect and evaluating BRAC's popular theatre.

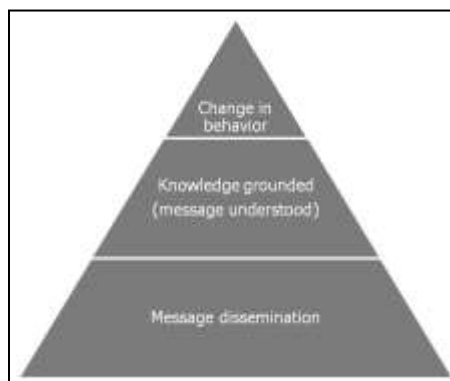
Operationalizing the problem

In a previous research Rafi and Rahman (2007) found the BRAC popular theatres to have the capacity of conscientizing the target people while failing to transfer their consciousness into action. Rafi and Rahman, besides other things, have attempted to figure out the impact, i.e. the end and desired outcome of popular theatre. Outcome of any programme targeting social change has three dimensions: 1) tangible outcome, 2) intangible outcome or effect, and 3) sustained outcome or impact of the programme. Tangible outcome is a set of targets that can be quantitatively measured (shown in Figure 1). Programme's target activity is a tangible outcome. Intangible outcome or effect of a programme is the initial change in the domain of knowledge caused by implementation of a programme. Effect unravels the way messages are cognitively processed or in other words to what extent knowledge is grounded. Impact is the ultimate outcome that assesses sustained change in behaviour. Impacts are institutional, behavioural and system level change. Impact analysis requires baseline data to sketch the change. Function and effect of any media, seen from a communication perspective, can be operationalized as shown in the following pyramid.

Therefore, it is important to examine the nature of message disseminated and as well as how the disseminated messages are understood before one may develop an understanding about the effect of such dissemination.

BRAC's popular theatre does not have any baseline data. Therefore, an impact analysis would be difficult to do. Rather, developing an understanding of popular theatre's effect—knowledge grounding, people's opinion about the programme in the context of their media behaviour—is a

Figure 1. Operationalizing media effect



reasonably appropriate research. This study is an attempt to understand the effects of popular theatre from a communication perspective.

Mannell and Chowdhury (2005) emphasized on a communication theoretical understanding of information dissemination programme aiming social change. We have adopted a discourse analytical communication approach to examine the effect of popular theatre. More specifically, we tried to see how the messages of popular theatre are perceived by the target people and analyzed this by referring to the discourse that the given epistemic or knowledge domain of the target people of popular theatre is a product of. Besides, we identified visible changes as an immediate effect of popular theatre while also explained the structural reason that may have worked as resisting any positive outcome.

Effect is an immediate change as much as it is a process. A process cannot always be measured, but some patterns can be identified, which requires a qualitative investigation. Whereas knowledge, to what extent reception at destination matches with the message at source, can be measured, which both cognitive and communication scholars often investigate with quantitative technique.

Objectives

The general objective of the study is to assess whether the popular theatre of BRAC is affecting people's knowledge and social behaviour, and thereby, to examine the programme's strength and weakness. The study has three specific objectives:

1. Evaluate the levels of beneficiaries' understanding of messages disseminated by popular theatre,
2. Identify whether popular theatre has any effect on community's social behaviour, and
3. Identify the areas of the programme that require further improvement.

2. Methods

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative method of investigation for knowledge grounding and functional value of message.

Grounded knowledge can be assessed by comparing message's meaning with audience's understanding. This was done by conducting a questionnaire survey. Questionnaire, besides having demographic and media behaviour variables and indicators, especially projected the messages of a drama displaying a particular theme—dowry for example—and the audience of that drama were evaluated to what extent they understood the message and its meaning. Audiences were surveyed within a week after a drama was performed to measure their immediate understanding. Thus, the study attempted to make indication of the difference of understanding, if any, between the ultra poor and other members of the community and across gender.

Assessment of behavioural change, in other words the functional value of message, is a qualitative domain that can be understood by conducting focus group discussions (FGD) with community members across different sections of a community. Through facilitated discussions community members reported on the effects of theatres that were performed a year ago. They presented evidence of social action in support of their opinion and argument. Besides, such an extensive discussion with the audience was likely to provide audience's opinion about BRAC's popular theatre, its pros and cons and the way the programme can further be developed.

Population characteristics

The study comprised residents of village where popular theatre was performed and TUP* population existed. Sample frame was comprised of adult (18 years and above) villagers who watched BRAC's popular theatre. The study area was divided into four clusters on the basis of differences in their socioeconomic and geographical characteristics. Furthermore, each of the clusters comprised four stratum: a) TUP member (female), b) male member of the TUP household, c) general female villagers, and d) general male villagers. Audience under 18 years were considered as an auxiliary stratum.

* TUP (Targeting the Ultra Poor) is a term used by BRAC programme to denote a certain section of the poorest people in the society who have been targeted for programme intervention to reduce their poverty and vulnerability.

Sampling

The study drew on the technique of stratified sampling. Primarily four stratum (pockets) — Gaibandha, Netrokona, Bagerhat and Patuakhali—were selected on the basis of population and topographical differences. Within each stratum, which is the study population, three villages, where similar theme based popular theatre was staged, was chosen for the survey. Everyone who watched a theatre during data collection period was included in the sampling frame and enumerators surveyed every spectator.

Instruments

The questionnaire was developed by reviewing several BRAC studies on popular theatre and critically examining 10 theatre scripts. Examination of scripts was necessary to identify the messages on which knowledge grounding was tested. Protocol was constructed that guided FGD's.

Data collection

As a triangulation method, data were collected through a survey, FGD and case study. Survey data was collected from 2285 popular theatre spectators across four stratum and the distribution is as follow (Table 1):

Sixteen focus groups — 4 in each stratum comprising 1 from each stratum — were conducted. Discussants discussed about the effects, if any, of the theatres that were performed a year ago. Theme for theatre was of those that were structurally embedded, for example dowry, early marriage, etc. As popular theatre is evolving and currently focusing on themes of personal

hygiene, like washing, the study conducted four additional FGDs. In addition, another four FGDs were conducted on audience aged below 18 years being a major cohort attending the theatre and future generation who would translate knowledge into action. Four FGDs were also conducted with drama group members to unravel what they perceived about popular theatre: its uniqueness as a medium, effect on the audience and the society and about the functional aspects of popular theatre. In the FGDs the discussants also discussed about the strengths and weaknesses of BRAC's Popular Theatre.

Case studies were conducted to complement the findings from FGD. The survey respondents were all available adults from each of three villages from each cluster who had seen theatres focusing a common theme.

Table 1. Distribution of samples

Pocket	Respondents
Gaibandha	513
Netrokona	464
Bagerhat	676
Patuakhali	632
Total	2285

Data analysis

Data were analyzed with the help of descriptive statistics to get an overview of the demograph of the population, media behaviour and above all to what extent the knowledge conveyed through popular theatre was grounded, i.e., the degree of understanding of the messages conveyed through different dramas. Transcriptions of FGDs — both speech and non-verbal cues — were interpreted by using a discourse analysis technique, which, as we will see in the analysis part, will mark the effect of popular theatre and the strengths and weaknesses of the programme. We interpreted and used case studies as complementing the findings of survey and FGDs. In other words, case studies mark the positive outcome of popular theatre.

Limitations

The study, as initially planned, required collecting data from the spectators of a common play performed in every village. Administratively it was not possible. Therefore, we collected data from the spectators who watched performance of different plays having similar theme. Besides, not every stratum had a social drama staged two years back, which hindered us evaluating people's longitudinal memory. This study does not examine the script — narrative, dialogue, etc. — and therefore, no such analysis will be made.

3. Conceptual framework

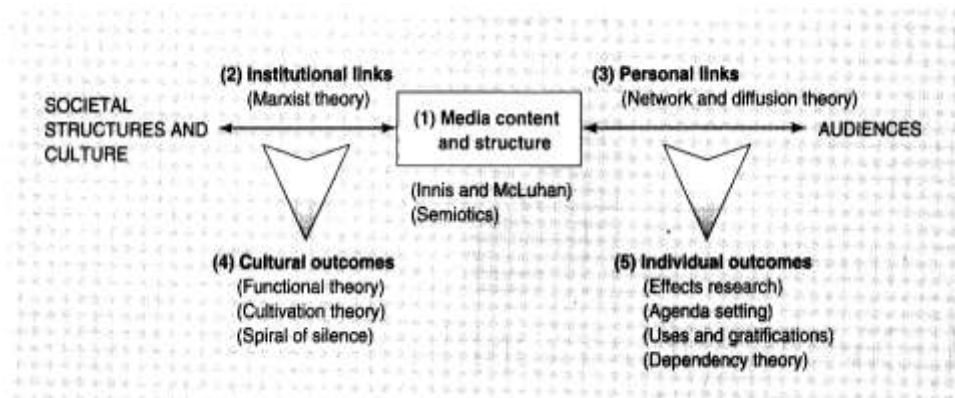
Communication media and theatre

Communication scholars like, Fiske (1982) have a restrictive definition of media, viewing a medium as a physical artifact or channel of communication. This is an artifact-centric projection of media. Focusing on how people make meaning out of a mediated process provides a receptor perspectives on how communication generates meaning (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989). The receptor perspective on media is a phenomenological approach that understands media, not as texts or structures of production, but as practice (Couldry 2004). In using media, people become part of a constructive process and thus “new media blurs the distinction between author, text, and audience, foregrounding the author-audience struggle” (Threadgold 2004, p.113).

Hansen (2006) conceives a medium as an environment for life. His understanding of media is divided into two dimensions: the technical dimension deals with the materiality of medium and the experiential dimension focuses on its phenomenality. The second, experiential, dimension sees the medium as an operation of mediation between a living being and the environment. Artifacts work as communication media only when coupled with the human. It is a common gossip among anthropologists that a group of Micronesians who had no concept of ‘photograph’ could not figure out what they were seeing when shown a family picture of a European anthropologist. They stared at the picture for quite a long time and said, “Your family members are so small and flat.” Through structural coupling an artifact becomes a part of our experiential domain and only then does that artifact qualify as a medium we can use to communicate.

Media is context-dependent and is located at a crossroad of individual biography, institutional settings and socio-cultural context. Littlejohn (2004) examined different theories and perspectives on media and graphically showed how artifacts, society and individuals are all important in understanding media as an integrated process of communication. Media as an integrated process, as shown below, is a product of a given socio-technical setting consumed by people who are also a construct of a given socio-institutional context (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Organizing model of media



Source: (Littlejohn 2004,p.304). Theories of Human communication, p.304.

This integrated process suggests that media mediate between people and their environments, allowing people to self-referentially observe form; which we observe and distinguish self-referentially. Taking this view of communication, one may argue that media provide the mediation through which we make distinctions about our environment. From these distinctions meaning emerges and the emergent meaning may also become form when expressed to communicate in a community. It is also further argued that the dominant discourse in a community shapes the way people make distinction of their environment, endorse meaning to the message received and alters their behaviour.

Emergence of meaning fundamentally depends on knowledge grounding. Knowledge grounding is a prerequisite for a message to have an effect—an immediate outcome, i.e., understanding the message advancing towards consciousness building—and impact, i.e., sustained change in behaviour. Message becomes information when interpreted; else it remains a data (Pervez 2009) without having any ability to make any outcome. Information is phenomenological as its meaning may vary due to different interpretation on the basis of an interpreter’s socioeconomic and existential context. The very context may obscure the functional and pragmatic value of a message and therefore, it will remain improperly grounded; in other words, the message will not attain the status of information capable of producing effect and impact. The following model illustrates the mechanism of knowledge grounding.

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Figure 3. Knowledge grounding model

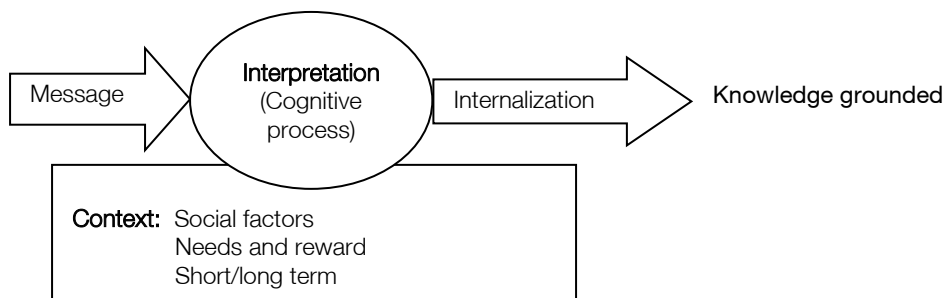


Figure 3 shows a message needs to be interpreted and internalized for knowledge grounding. Interpretation is a cognitive act determined by socio-psychological factors positive or enabling and negative or defiant factors, needs and reward, and short or long-term significance. Notable that short-term but immediate needs fulfillers tend to work as stronger enabling contextual factors for interpretation and internalization of a message with higher potential for knowledge grounding. Reverse is the case for long-term but distant needs. This is often the prime reason for people not being able to cut on consumption required for protection of environment.

Theatre is a communication medium, the prime purpose of which is providing entertainment along with a scope for education. The mainstream theatre is a *simplex* (one-way) communication offering no interactivity, and it is inherently narrowcasting. In course of development theatre has also taken a *duplex* (two-way) form of communication that allows not only audience's expression of applause but also expression of opinion in a form of dialogue between audience and actors during performance. Popular theatre belongs to the *duplex* form of communication the purpose of which is information dissemination for consciousness building required for social and institutional change.

Popular theatre in Bangladesh

For three decades popular theatre has been used in the various processes of development communication as part of adult education programmes (Mugira 2008; Ali 2009), primary health programme (Kalipeni and Kamlongera 1996), raising people's awareness (Mugira, 2008), human rights (Sganga and Visser 2006) and conflict resolution (Slachmijlder and Tashibanda 2009). Popular theatre is essentially a people centric entereducation—educating through entertainment—medium where through workshop and training an inventory of local problems is made for later use in the plays packed in the language of the locals (Eyoh 2002). In each play one problem theme is explored for the local community. At the other end of the scale is television, still to be regarded as a powerful and far-reaching medium for information and entertainment in developing countries. Unlike popular theatre, television provides a continuous flow of information from the top-down, from the city to the countryside,

from the rulers to the people. This top-down flow is produced by the broadcasting organizations. Video, which is television, is part of this flow. But it is not necessarily so. Video as a small audience medium in developing countries is fast gaining ground.

Though never known as popular theatre, the same genre of performing medium existed in Bengal for centuries (Murshid 2006; Nygren 2009). Bengal is known to have different forms of performing arts—*Kobi Gan*, *Panchali*, *Gajir Gan*, *Pot Song*—the purpose of which is to make people conscious about social, political, environmental and spiritual phenomenon mainly in an entertaining form sometime with a scope for duplex communication. During the resistance movement against the British in the beginning of the 20th century, roaming theatre groups performed street theatre to make people aware conscious about the need for independence (Mukhopadhyay 2007). The tradition is not totally extinct, though gradually fading away, traces of which are still found in the performance of *Pot Song*, *Gombhira* and *Gazir Gan*¹ in different places of Bangladesh (Seely 2010; Nygren 2010).

During the 1980s some NGOs, being influenced by the pedagogy of the oppressed as theorized by Paulo Freire (Freire 1972) and Boal's (1985) concept of theatre for the oppressed, introduced popular theatre for promoting development in Bangladesh. The pioneers were Proshika and Gono Shahajjo Shangstha (GSS). Since then, they developed three different models of popular theatre. The first model, as adopted by Proshika, work in collaboration with theatre groups in the locality and the second model works with trained volunteer theatre workers. The third model, as developed by Rupantar, employs a group of fulltime theatre staff travelling around their work area performing fully developed scripts. BRAC follows the second model and works with local people who are basically volunteers receiving a small honorarium for each performance.

BRAC popular theatre

Popular theatre is a major component of BRAC Community Empowerment Programme (CEP). Information dissemination is one of the four major aims of CEP where the main objective is to inform communities through entertainment. Popular theatre is used as a tool under this objective. CEP began in 1977 focusing on social discrimination and inequalities particularly in rural Bangladesh. By launching the programme it has realised that people do not have enough knowledge on rights, information on the rules and procedures of local government and information on available resources. Information dissemination through different communication media has become Community Empowerment Program's core activity matching its broad aim, which is illustrated in the following matrix (Fig. 4).

¹ *Pot* (*Pat*) is a performance of scroll painting accompanied by songs usually depicting mythical stories. *Gajir Gan* is a form of *pot* where songs are presented while unfolding a scroll depicting different events in the life of *Gazi Pir*. *Gombhira* is a singing performance popular in the district of Chapainababganj where a grandfather and his grandson comically present social issues with solutions.

Figure 4. Overview of community empowerment programme



In 1998 CEP started popular theatre to stimulate the audience about their surroundings, create awareness, build communication and generate dialogue on various social and political issues that affect the rural poor in Bangladesh, especially women. Activities of popular theatre were started in eight thanas of two districts and gradually it covered 61 districts including all thanas. At present 358 theatre groups are regularly performing. Each group consists of 10 members with 7 male and 3 female. Every group has a leader in charge of performing the theatre in the villages. Most of the group members are amateur, but they have multifaceted quality such as ability to sing, perform tabor and perform open-air opera. They are paid a little amount of honorarium for their performance. Performing theatre is not the principal occupation of any member of the theatre group. Basically they are farmers, day labourers, boatman and employees and are from villages of a thana where the theatres are performed. A five-day training is given to a performer at BRAC Learning Centres before stage performance. They play theatre without having any script. Therefore, performance has an option for improvisation even when it is performed. The same play is enacted each week in a different location, with 12-16 performances within seven to eight kilometers of an area office over 3 to 4 months. Gradually, popular theatre has become highly effective in building rapport and raising issues in local communities. It is a popular form of communication for rural people, providing entertainment and education.

Popular theatre programme is administrated by one sector specialist (SS) who works in the head office of BRAC. Whole operation of the popular theatre programme is carried out under his responsibility. Basically he closely supervises nine regional sector specialists (RSS), 11 Programme Organizers and supports them to improve the quality of theatre. RSS and PO's are assigned for area offices and ensure the quality of theatre. They are considered as technical RSS and PO, with knowledge about the functional, organizational and communication aspects of popular theatre. Twenty theatre groups are closely monitored by each RSS and POs who are responsible for quality control of theatre, i.e. language, props and developing scene

chart. They give training and rehearsal to the theatre group before stage performance. Furthermore, non-technical POs are responsible for theatre associated field management; spot selection performs, arrangement of theatre-related instruments, and arranging post-theatre dialogue. Simultaneously, they are doing other activities of CEP components. In practice they are without any knowledge about theatre and, therefore, are not qualified to render support in improving the quality of theatre: its script and performance. Nevertheless, they can offer suggestions that are to be endorsed by the technical RSS or PO.

Popular theatre and TUP

Targeting ultra poor (TUP) is organically connected to BRAC's popular theatre. It is believed that popular theatre has the potential to make ultra poor aware about their rights by identifying social ills and odds and inspire them to get rid of the poverty that they suffer from.

Bangladesh evidently continues to face a formidable challenge in poverty reduction. Population pressure along with inadequate resources have increased inequity in accessing basic services like education, employment and health care. In this circumstance a number of people have gone under the poverty line. In this context the government of Bangladesh and NGOs have taken a number of policies and programmes to eradicate poverty. But, it should be noticed that even effective social protection policies may benefit millions of poor people, but do little or nothing for the very poorest.

Since the very beginning, BRAC has been experimenting with different approaches for economic and empowerment of the poor in rural Bangladesh. Over the past three decades, through both its rural development programme and its research studies, BRAC has gained a deep understanding of how the poor are excluded or exploited from socioeconomic and political structure and how they secure their livelihoods. Consequently, many poverty reduction programmes have been taken to alleviate poverty but were not effective in targeting ultra poor households. The programmatic interventions have neglected to address the weak socio-political assets of the poor. A crucial lesson was that the moderate poor benefited from the widely available microfinance programmes; the poorest did not in most cases, either because they lacked access, or because they were too poor or vulnerable to make productive use of such services. This signaled the need for new approaches in tackling the specific livelihood constraints of the ultra poor. The resulted in the emergence of the CFPR programme.

After getting success with lessons from phase I (2002-2006), CFPR Phase II has been working from 2007 to 2011. In phase II, CFPR programme has been working in 40 districts: 20 districts with the highest concentration of poverty and extreme poverty, and 20 districts with the next highest concentration. Including the above-mentioned four components, human rights and legal services (HRLS) issues were also incorporated with the community empowerment programme. In all the 40 districts where the CFPR has been operating, popular theatre has been used as an

awareness-raising tool. It was designed in such a way that the performance of popular theatre would help raise awareness and confidence among the ultra poor and their household members about human rights, gender equity, legal and social issues. This awareness, which has been built through popular theatre, is expected to be translated into social action for social change.



A section of the audience mostly women thoroughly enjoying the show



The photo captures a special moment in the theatre where an old woman is expressing her pains and sorrows

4. Findings

The study surveyed 2,285 popular theatre spectators and conducted 24 FGDs with male and female TUP and non-TUP persons, and drama groups. Besides, 7 FGDs were conducted with male and female youth. Twelve case studies were conducted. The survey data gave an overview about the population's demographics, media behaviour and most importantly about the status of reception of messages conveyed through popular theatre. While FGDs provided in-depth scenario about peoples' opinion about drama- how they define and distinguish PT as a unique means of performative art to promote awareness required for change in behavior and the pros and cons of BRAC popular theatre. FGDs also give clue to map the effect of popular theatre. Case studies marked the effects as well.

Demographics

The theoretical population, to which the findings will be generalized, is the rural population of Bangladesh. Since this study is a discourse analytical attempt, which sees people as a construct of a given socio-institutional context as discussed in the conceptual framework section, it is reasonable that we map out the core and important characteristics of the population based on national census report. The population, according to the Bangladesh Population Census 2001 published in January 2007, had a literacy rate of 32.37%, which has been reported to have increased, as found in the survey, to 41.62% while 7.1% still remained illiterate. The population had a mean age of 26.66 and 70.34% had agriculture as their profession while 16.1% was housewife and 3% unemployed. The locality was over-populated as it is a normal scenario in Bangladesh. According to Census 2001 the population density was 725 per square kilometer with an annual growth rate of 1.40. Dependency ratio was 99.82, 78.83% houses were *kutcha* (not bricked) and 19.09% population lived in *jhupries* (small cabins made of bamboos). FGD confirmed that an average day labour's daily income was around Tk. 120. Seventy per cent people had seen popular theatre. A population with such characteristics with lower institutional education, poor living standard and lower income was likely to determine their media behaviour access to and consumption of media and as well as their awareness as a result of such media behaviour.

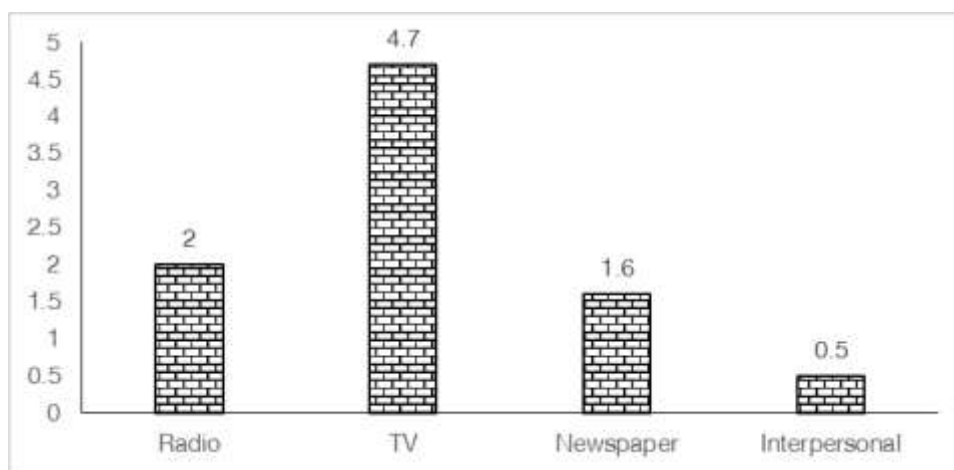
Media behaviour

Our finding is similar to two national surveys conducted by Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) of 2009 and National Media Survey of 2002 conducted by Bangladesh Center for Communication Programmes (BCCP). Both the surveys reported on the fast changing media behaviour in terms of ownership and subscription, consumption frequency, place and time. Similar to these findings, we have observed that the last decade media behaviour of rural Bangladesh

has significantly changed due to fast diffusion of electronic media and cheaper price of television, DVD and VCDs. People can now go to nearby tea-stall and watch TV or VCD. In other words, a public sphere seems to be emerging that has expanded people's access to mass media. Therefore, it is not an absolute requirement to have an apparatus to access the mass media programme.

But it is notable (Fig. 5) that among the owners who possess or subscribe to a mass media apparatus TV has a significant lead with 4.7% whereas, only 0.5% subscribes to newspaper. Radio is owned by only 2%.

Figure 5. Ownership status of media (In %, N=2285)



As discussed, access to media is no longer preconditioned by ownership of media reception apparatus, viewing is facilitated by public space equipped by TV or DVD/VCD player. Below is a matrix showing peoples' media viewing rate.

Table 2. Media viewing rate (in %)

Medium	Regular	Irregular	Never
Radio	5.3	11.7	83
TV	39.2	39.3	21.6
Newspaper	3	9.9	87.7
Cinema	2.2	15.2	53.7

It is worth noting that male has higher access to media compared to female, (5.3: 0.3), which is not unusual in a society dominated by patriarchal mode of discourse. Women are yet to gain access to public sphere. It is mostly evident in the case of TV. About 9% men and 36% women never watch TV. Male, by virtue of their social privilege, can assemble in a public space to consume medium like TV which is not the case for women who generally are the residents of private space.

People differentiate between different media, use them for different purposes and value them distinctively. The study examined across radio, TV, newspaper and Interpersonal communication as to what spectrum people value them differently.

The following graphs (Fig. 6, 7 and 8) show how people view about different media, or means of communication, as source of information, entertainment and consciousness development.

Figure 6. Source of information (In a scale of 4, n=2243)

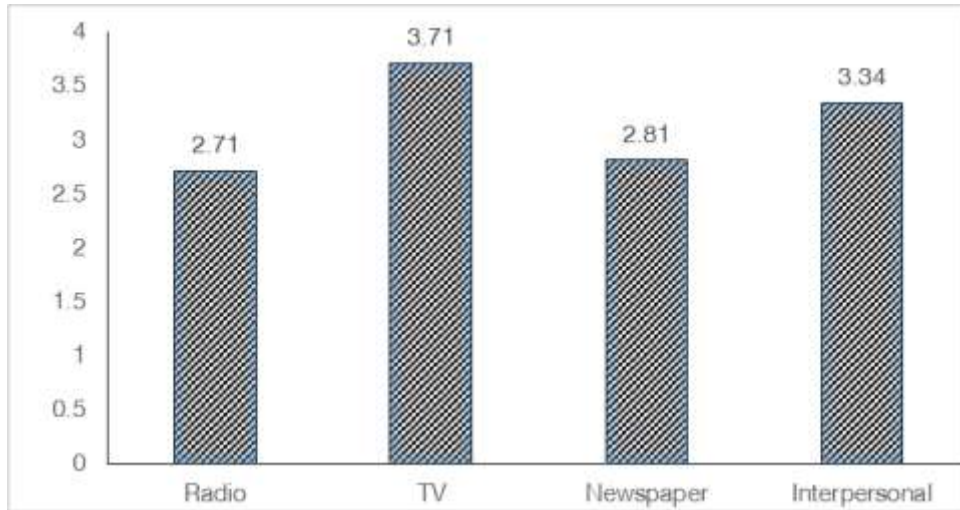


Figure 7. Source of entailment (In a scale of 4, n=2243)

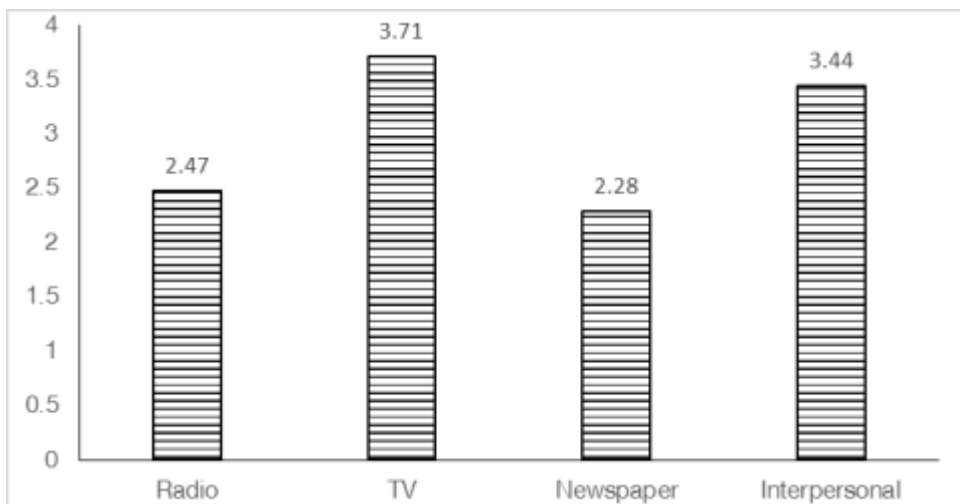
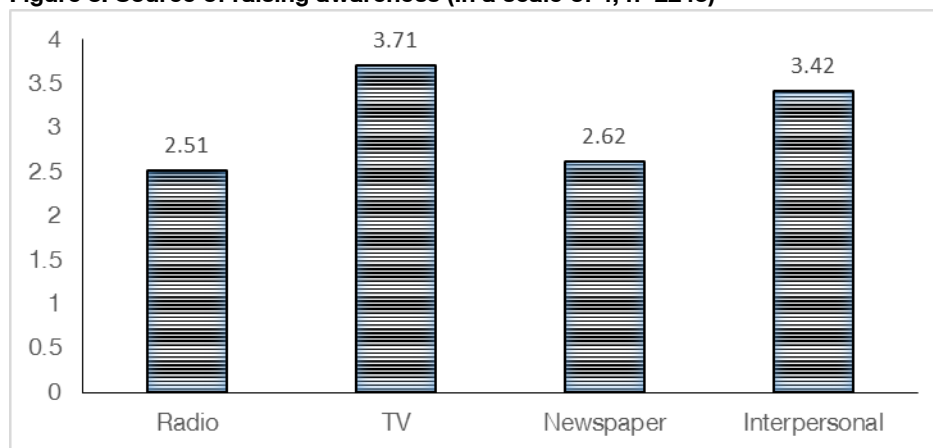


Figure 8. Source of raising awareness (In a scale of 4, n=2243)



Following Table (Table 3) shows a comparison among different media as source for gratifying people’s information, entertainment and awareness raising needs.

Table 3. Media viewing rate in (%) (In a scale of 4, n=2243)

	Information need	Entertainment need	Awareness need
Radio	2.71	2.47	2.51
TV	3.71	3.71	3.71
Newspaper	2.81	2.28	2.62
Interpersonal communication	3.34	3.44	3.42

TV is perceived as the strongest medium of source for information, entertainment and consciousness building; it scored 3.71 in a scale of 4 across all the needs. Interpersonal communication also scored high, respectively 3.34, 3.44 and 3.42. Radio ranked the lowest. It is an indication that people seem to communicate better and effectively with a media that is visual and immediate. Though mediated, yet TV has the potential to develop an aura that one usually gets from physical communication which is inherently visual and immediate. Radio and newspaper are mediated media in a complete sense. Besides, one needs to be significantly educated to read newspaper. The strength of interpersonal communication gives a space for dialogue that other media do not offer. Popular theatre, as discussed in the preceding section, is an immediate medium that creates loops for the audience to get emerged and involved into a dialogue. Usually, as practiced in BRAC, follow-up meetings carry over the dialogue helping knowledge grounding required for change in behaviour.

Knowledge grounding

Knowledge is grounded at a 95.55, which is high moderate. According to the semantic approach to information processing, which combines the concepts of

human cognition with the theory of information transfer, for strong knowledge grounding the optimum score should be >98 when test is carried within a week after a message is given. Messages that are structurally grounded, like “*Poverty cannot be an excuse for taking dowry*” and “*Bride’s opinion is not necessary*”, scored low, respectively 88.5 and 94.8. In general, messages relating to structurally embedded problem have weaker grounding compared to the messages that call for behaviour change with an immediate positive outcome. This was evident in the drama performed for WASH programme. Findings from FGDs reconfirmed this. On the contrary, taking dowry is a problem caused and maintained by a number of inter-related phenomenon for which a larger social transformation is required, which inherently poses restriction in an individual’s cognitive domain and as a result obscure knowledge grounding. Society dominated by patriarchal mode of discourse also weakens knowledge grounding for a message advocating equal right of women in expressing their opinion.

Popular theatre: making a distinction

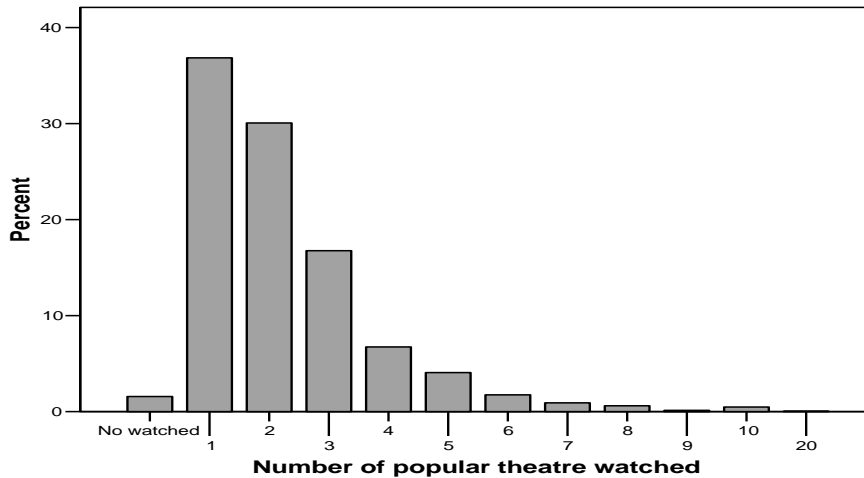
Audiences in the midst of consuming various mass media are remarkably aware of the distinctiveness of popular theatre. They recognize the uniqueness of popular theatre as a strong medium for disseminating message, packed in a mix of entertainment and education, enabling the transformation of consciousness towards a positive direction. FGD provides an in-depth report that confirmed audiences’ confidence in the strength of popular theatre.

TV, which is a hugely popular medium with its illusive power, cannot be an alternative to popular theatre in the way it depicts problems that people seamlessly identify as their own local problem. Interactivity in the form of dialogue between audience and actors during the show and follow-up discussions on the theme of the drama staged is pivotal in identifying popular theatre as an entereducating medium. In their own language:

- What we see in popular theatre gets straight into our head and soul and we immediately see ourselves in what is performed.
- TV is a distant medium which creates an illusion with its glamour, causing viewer to alienate, from the problem, whereas, popular theatre mirrors what viewer have in our unconscious mind.
- Popular theatre makes us critical which is required for solving our problem.

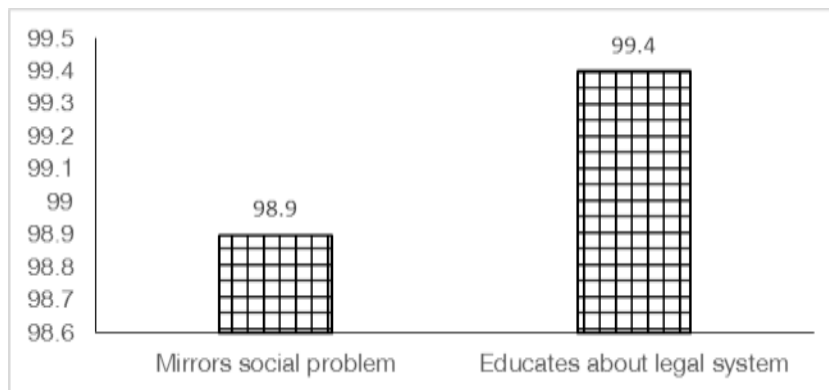
People appreciated popular theatre and they did not in general miss any opportunity of watching a performance. 37% have seen at least one popular theatre and 60% have seen more than one performance (Fig. 9). The following graph shows illustration of the rate of popular theatre seen as calculated from a population (n) of 2241.

Figure 9. Number of popular theatre watched



People have immense confidence in popular theatre’s strength in depicting social problems and especially its educating role about legal rights and procedure to mitigate social problems (Fig. 10). In their language:

Figure 10. Popular theatre’s strength (in %, n=2241)



When it comes to source for information gathering and awareness building, popular theatre is highly valued, 9.7 and 9.9 in a scale of 10. 17.1 percent % have been to neighbouring villages to watch popular theatre, which is an indication of the popularity of popular theatre. About 8% of people have watched other forms of theatre—*jatra*, street theatre, etc.—out of which 95.2% found popular theatre to be a better source for information gathering. It is mainly because popular theatre’s themes reflect reality that is not the case with *jatra* and other types of performances.

Case studies confirmed how people positively reflected on the depiction of their life in popular theatre. In many cases popular theatre brings positive changes to their life

and attitude, they feel encouraged and demand justice that otherwise they would not have done. Following is such a case study.

Box 1. Effect of drama

Rahima is an unmarried poor young girl living in a remote village in Durgapur. She hardly talks and stays in a constant gloomy mood. Her mother worries about her. One evening, local BRAC popular theatre group performed a play titled “*The Imposter*” that Rahima’s mother watched with her daughter. The drama showed how a young girl was raped by a village man and upon her complaint the village community forced the young man to marry her. Watching this drama brought significant change in Rahima; she told her mother that she had experienced the same fate as she was raped by Ripon, a married man. Rahima’s family, now encouraged with the lesson learnt from the drama, complained to the elderly of the village. Upon investigation it was found that Rahima was pregnant for three months. Village community, with the consent of Ripon’s wife, arranged marriage between Ripon and Rahima. Now Rahima lives with honour and financial security.

In spite of recognizing popular theatre as a distinct medium for enter education and appreciating its strength as a strong source for information gathering, the rate of attending post-theatre dialogue is quite low.

Figure 11. Rate of organizing post-theatre dialogue (In %, n=2238)

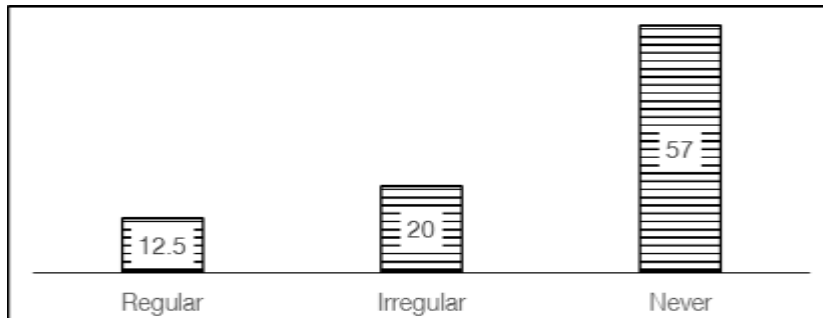
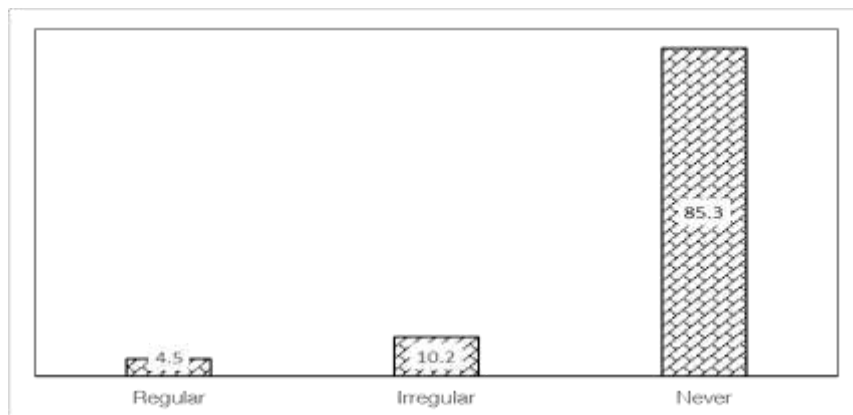


Figure 12. Rate of attending post-theatre dialogue (In %, n=2238)



It may be mentioned that people understand the significance of arranging such sessions that, according to them, enhances the possibility of understanding the message conveyed by the theatres. Only 10.2% have reported to attend post-theatre dialogues and it is striking that such session is not arranged regularly (Fig. 12). In 57% of the theatres no post-theatre dialogue was arranged (Fig. 11). Irregularity of such session, as found from FGD, decreases people's interest to attend post-theatre dialogue though they strongly identify and mark popular theatre's strength in passing messages to them in an effective way.

Observation of various popular theatres confirms that spectators spontaneously emerge in emotional and intellectual dialogue among themselves during the show. With loud speech they confirm their recognition of the characters acting in the show with the real characters in their locality. They also recognize how unaware they have been about these social problems and as well as their rights. Often the spectators start debating about the issues played in the theatre when the show is still in performance. Some even expressed the blankness of their consciousness by loudly uttering "*When will the people rise up?*" or "*How long can we afford staying unconscious about our right?*"

Feelings of the ultra poor

Findings that we have just described in the preceding section unfold how ultra poor generally feel about popular theatre. But they cannot confidently hope that popular theatre can make an effective mark on the mind of the rich people towards changing their attitude and action towards the poor. In other words, popular theatre may not be a means to lessen the gap between these two groups as the rich people will inherently uphold their attitude irrespective of what messages are being disseminated through popular theatre. Nevertheless, the poor feel spirited as an outcome of watching popular theatre that educates them about their rights and especially about what they should not do by unfolding the social reasons for their being vulnerable and victim of social injustice and disparity. In their language, "*We were blind, popular theatre has given us a new sight.*"

The ultra poor believes that popular theatre does not merely mirror the reality of their society rather it transcends their knowledge, which they feel as false consciousness, over to a social dynamics that is essentially negative and keeps them poor.

Drama group: the change-making agent

Drama group enjoys the respect that they receive especially from poor people. People in their impoverished condition contact drama group members for counseling. Artists feel highly rewarded, though they have a common claim that the honorarium should be raised, for being able to help people when they are in crisis. They also have the feeling of being empowered as they can connect people to BRAC, its PO and legal aid staff, to solve people's problem. They have the feeling of working for changing the society.

The most significant with the drama artists is their being able to inspire people for change, both through performance and through counseling. Therefore, one can call them change-maker. Following are two examples about how performance of drama brought changes.

Box 2. Effect of drama, social mobilization

There is a pond in a village of Mollarhat where people used to cultivate fish. But they no longer have any right to consume fish as part of their labour as the rich people do not allow the poor a share. Mollarhat drama group composed a drama depicting the situation and staged it in the village. The drama not only showed the reality, it also showed protest against such injustice. This inflamed people's mind and they demanded their right for fish. Ultimately they were successful in achieving their right.

Box 3. Effect of drama, bridging with BRAC

After watching a drama about domestic violence, a woman came to the drama group and shared her problem with them. She is married to a mason who has married another girl without her consent. Moreover, she is constantly beaten by her husband. She asked if the drama group could help her. Drama group took the women to BRAC's HRLS who resolved her problem.

As change-maker, the drama groups function at two levels: inspiring people through their performance and communicating between people in need and different organs of BRAC like *polly shamaj*, HRLS, etc. Destitute people, constrained by ignorance and lack of confidence, may have a distance with BRAC. There is a potential that this distance could be bridged by drama artists whom people identify as their own people and who speaks both the discourses - people's and BRAC's.

Artists, who have turned into a change-maker, feel that they would work better if BRAC enhances its support by raising honorarium, supplying with new and additional musical arrangements and issuing them ID so that they can safely travel with the group when it is dark and unsafe. They have reported to have been threatened by rich people as they portray them as villain in their theatres. They also felt the need for extended training.

Youth: extension education

Youth of both sexes are highly attracted to popular theatre. They find it significantly educative that teaches them what is not taught in their family, school, TV dramas and cinemas. Therefore, popular theatre to them is a means for extension education. It supplements institutional and traditional knowledge. Besides, popular theatre trains them to become a good human being. Some youths recommend having theatres advocating for education - formal and non-formal.

Snapshot of findings

1. People can mark the distinctiveness of popular theatre.
2. Popular theatre is a highly valued source for information dissemination.
3. Popular theatre is a means for transforming consciousness.
4. Popular theatre is a means for extension education.
5. Knowledge grounding in general is highly moderate.
6. Phenomenon that are structurally embedded, dowry etc., tend not to be effected by popular theatre.
7. Drama group plays a role of a change-maker.
8. Drama group decreases distance between BRAC and its beneficiaries.
9. Honorarium of drama artists is significantly low.
10. Post-drama session is not arranged regularly though there is a felt need for that.
11. Popular theatre cannot change rich people's attitude towards the poor.

5. Unfolding the discourse

Understanding discourse is understanding the practice of knowledge and meanings in concrete contexts and institutions (Talja 2005). Discourse analysis explores meaning behind text. It came to the attention of scholars in the humanities and social sciences in the late 1960s and 1970s. Communication and Information science began adopting this approach in the first half of 1990s. The new theoretical discourses, which emphasize the user's perspective, necessitate the exploration of meaning resident in the discourse uttered and constructed by the individuals. Communicative events such as writing and conversation, all of which have form, are known as discourse. Discourse analysis works on a huge range of variables, including intonation, gesture, syntax, style, lexicon, rhetoric, meaning, speech act, moves, strategies, turn taking, and other aspects of interactions. It also analyses the relations between text and context, discourse and interaction, and cognition and memory. In other words, discourse analysis serves an encompassing arena of action, interaction, and construction of meaning.

Discourse in Foucauldian understanding is the human action architected by the knowledge system that is the production of a larger institution marked by a dominant ideology. Therefore, it is argued that, human communication - its form, content, and above all the consumption of media and construction of meaning of media material represents the discourse in practice. How a community adapt to a medium of communication and how meanings are constructed from this communicative act is unfolded when discourse is used as the point of reference.

As described in the preceding section, the discourse of Bangladesh has always had a context for people to adapt to popular theatre. For centuries performing art of similar genres existed in this country and people are cognitively tuned in identifying the purpose — which is information dissemination in an entertaining form — of this kind of media. Most of the folkloric media in Bangladesh use performance both for entertainment and education. Therefore, it is not accidental that popular theatre is not only popular but it is also recognized as mirroring the social ills, unraveling the causes for poverty, and also as medium for extension education.

Any performing art is inherently an entertaining means, no art alone can bring revolutionary change in a society. What it can do is to complement other organized attempts for a change. Maxim Gorky's novels did not revolutionize Russia; rather it inspired people when Bolsheviks underwent a political upheaval leading to people's revolution. Revolutionary literature could work as a shake in the reader's consciousness, and thus pave a ground for other change-makers to accomplish their task. Therefore, it will be unrealistic to expect popular theatre to be catalytic in bringing institutional change despite its being so popular. However, there is example of popularizing oral saline with the help of media commercials (TVCs). Media played a

significant role, for which there is no denial, but one must not forget BRAC's field level interpersonal communication and campaign that played the major role when media was a supplementary force.

Changes that bring immediate reward and not constrained by deeper social factors seem to be easy to achieve. Use of oral saline to cure from diarrhea is an example of such change, and therefore, media had experienced such a phenomenal success. Our findings reconfirm this as we find the positive effect of popular theatre disseminating the messages of WASH programme is significantly successful. On the contrary, messages about problems that are deeply embedded into a social structure have difficulties to mark a significant effect. Dowry is an example in this case. A poor feels obliged to give dowry for her daughter though he is aware that dowry is not a positive social act. Without dowry it is still difficult in rural Bangladesh to marry off a daughter. That is why it does not make a huge positive effect on social practice even if dozens of theatre is staged advocating against dowry. Nevertheless, advocating against dowry in this way strengthens other means of fighting against dowry and other such problems.

In a society that have been, and perhaps still is, governed by the poverty of ignorance, popular theatre as a means for extension education is a small but significant step towards making people educated about their rights to legal system when there is a need. Legal system is also a product of a society's dominant discourse. More truly, the very discourse often blocks people's access to use the benefit of the system. The language of legal system in general is cumbersome and the procedure is complex. Therefore, people generally are not confident to access the legal system. The dominant class exploits this by making the discourse even more distant. Popular theatre makes people aware about the legal system by translating the cumbersome legal discourse into a comprehensible speech of people. Such a linguistic transfer is an important tool in order to ensure people's access to a complex system.

Such a linguistic transfer is required to make people get rid of the dominant discourse that shapes an institution. Linguistic transfer needs social capital and other organized support otherwise it remains an unsuccessful endeavour. It is positive that the drama groups are on the way to develop a certain social capital. They are respected, recognized as knowledgeable and above all a bridge between BRAC and the people. People in crisis often come to drama artists who in turn take them to respective BRAC office for support. It often happens that in rural problem mitigation meetings the drama group members are invited to join the adjudicators. This is an indication that popular theatre is making a small but important way in the rural power nexus.

There is no denial that popular theatre is an important medium of communication capable of supplementing other organized effort for achieving change in the discourse in practice. But popular theatre alone will not get that far; there is a need for making required improvement of popular theatre besides connecting its strength to other BRAC programme of CEP.

Severe irregularity of post-theatre dialogue needs to be addressed. Adapting to linguistic change requires community's brainstorming for which post-theatre dialogue does not have an alternative. Besides, the role of drama group member as change-maker needs to be understood. It is most reasonable that the strength of drama group can sustain only when they are better cared of. BRAC may employ more capital in drama groups in order to have the group mature their social capital. Such a social capital is necessary to challenge a dominant discourse.



A section of enchanted minors watching a Popular Theatre show



Staged in the evening each show draws a large number of people from the local community

6. Recommendations

As this study is not an assessment of impact of popular theatre but rather an understanding of intangible outcome, which is knowledge grounding and effect, we will restrict our recommendation more specific to the functional aspects to further improve popular theatre's effectivity.

1. There is a need for more and regular performance of popular theatre.
2. Every performance should have several post-theatre dialogues where both TUP and non-TUP members should be encouraged to attend. BRAC staff and different civil society members should attend the post-theatre dialogue and discuss the issues in reference to the local scenario.
3. Theatre should incorporate more themes about the importance of formal education. There is a severe lack of it and people have suggested having theatre on such themes.
4. Drama group requires higher honorarium.
5. Identity card should be given to the performers for their security, especially where female performer are involved in the drama group and very often they come back from the spot at 9 to 9.30 p.m. ID card helps performers having a legitimate identity and also uphold group spirit. Besides, it makes them feel that they belong to BRAC.
6. Performers need intensive foundational training, which is no longer the case, besides arranging regular follow-up training.
7. Lighting systems for performance should be improved. Due to lack of light some time the performance is not optimally visible. It was complained both by the audience and performers. Availability of better instruments is expected to give a better tone to the quality of theatre. Performers mostly have old and torn instruments obstructing production of optimum effect.
8. BRAC should work on finding a way how best to use drama group's emerging social capital into an organized structure. A suggestion is to make them as an organic part of BRAC rather than using instrumentally. In this way drama artists will be in a position to support the field workers more actively.
9. In this regard we feel the importance of strengthening the functional ties between drama group and *polly somaj*. They both should work as complementing each other. It is highly recommended that *polly somaj* president and secretary attend the performance and make themselves available to help people interpret the messages and find out a strategy to translate their consciousness into action.
10. As there is a pronounced indication that popular theatre is introducing a new discourse, at a smaller scale though, against the dominant discourse, we recommend a full blown research examining such counter discourse.
11. A baseline data is required to assess popular theatre's impact.



The performers take make-up using easily available, low cost materials to prepare for the show



Traditional musical forms and other folk elements are used making the shows more appealing to the rural audience

7. Conclusion

Folk media of Bangladesh has a match for popular theatre in the country that several NGOs have been using as a means of development communication. Popular theatre of BRAC has a huge coverage, but there is still need for extension. While extending its geographical coverage there is a need for BRAC to recognize popular theatre's communicative power in developing a discourse that counters the dominant one.

People are attracted to popular theatre not merely being allured by its entertaining aspect, rather very remarkably they identify popular theatre as a strong source for information gathering and consciousness building towards a positive direction. It is a means of education to them. Theatre performers, who act out the messages, are highly valued by the poor people; performers are marked as change-maker. Change is more likely to occur in the actions that have immediate reward. Problems that are complex and embedded into a larger social dynamics are not likely to be resolved no matter how conscious one is. To solve those problems one needs to adopt a holistic approach of which popular theatre qualifies as a supplementary force.

To be most pragmatic, BRAC needs to use theatre in coordination with other programmes. Theatre group's acceptance among the poor people and its strength needs to be used organically, which suggests to treat them professionally by extending necessary support like increased honorarium and other—to them while making a network between drama group, *polly Samaj*, and other POs of different sectors.

In conclusion, we will say that popular theatre, if properly practiced, in combination with other development programme would help develop a counter discourse that is required for a sustained social change.

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