



Villagers watching a show of performance on the need for planned families, Jharkhand



# Darpana's community theatre

Renowned dancer and cultural activist **Mallika Sarabhai** describes her work in the arts for social transformation

**She was a striking 78 year old, toothless but with a merry grin and a hearty laugh, the Headwoman of a cluster of villages in Sabarkantha District, Gujarat State, India.**

We were at a wrap up meeting of a seven year project in a hundred villages in this tribal area of Gujarat, a project to empower women to control their own bodies – and child bearing. The project, called Parivartan (Change), had started off in 30 villages with a group of villagers auditioned as performers and trained over many months as actor-activists. Tribal customs are complex. Several individuals belonged to tribes that had blood feuds against each other. Some would not be able to enter some of the project villages because of old enmities. Luckily though, as in most tribal societies, there were no gender issues – women and men were equally empowered – or not.

In India, and I am sure in many parts of the world, one doesn't go into a traditional village or community and start talking to women about birth control. The success of projects lies in gaining the trust of the entire community, not to let them feel that we are instigating the women to work against the men or their traditional roles. So we started by creating performances about issues that plagued everybody in the village, like alcoholism, or the way city middle-men came and cheated them of the valuable forest produce that they had. Three performances a year, and many visits by the group – their own >



Newly developed performance by autochthonous groups, talking of the need for planned pregnancies and four or five year intervals between children, Jharkhand

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people, not city slickers – led to a deep empathy within the villages for the actor-activists. By year two, we could move closer to our target message and start talking of family health issues. By now the activists were being treated as mentors, guides, counsellors and had access to practically every member of each family where it was now safe to talk about all issues regarding family planning.

The project had marked many successes, and this meeting was to summarise. The old woman, mother of eight, turned to me and said, “So where were you when I was bearing all these brats? Had you come then, I would have stopped at two”. And she let out a huge guffaw.

Darpana was founded in 1949 as an arts institution for the teaching and propagation of classical dance and music. Over the years it started faculties and performance companies

of theatre and puppetry as well, and by the time it celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1999 24,000 graduates had passed through its doors. But as early as 1963 individual artists started showing a penchant for using their arts to tackle some of the issues facing this new nation of India. The puppeteers started working with the central Ministry of Rural Development in teaching village women the use of a smokeless stove that was safer than the fires they burned to cook. The theatre department created a play called Ma ‘mother’, to rally people to the war effort and to encourage them to donate generously to the war chest. My Mother, in a radical departure from the spiritual core of the classical Bharata Natyam dance, used the style to talk of the horror of dowry violence that she saw around her for the first time.

In 1982, we felt that a more concerted drive to use the arts to fuel

social change, attitudes and behaviour was needed, and brought various committed artists together in a new department called Darpana for Development.

The department started work on projects that members felt strongly about, sometimes using traditional art forms, sometimes inventing new things, sometimes combining these and more. Work to preserve certain dying artforms merged with these. For many years the work was unfunded as people found it difficult to believe that the arts could be used for something other than entertainment. (This, in a country that has always used the arts for education, albeit of values and things spiritual, and never, till perhaps the 16th century, merely to entertain.) It was not till the ‘90s that some organisations, funders and governments started seeing the validity of what we did as a way of promoting behaviour change.



Meanwhile, with access to all the performing arts, Darpana for Development's pilot projects widened the scope of which forms we used, and who the people were who ran the projects.

We work on four distinct levels. At the grass roots, we try and get people from the specific communities and skill them up to intervene in the community rather than send in people who are looked upon as outsiders, and thus 'do-gooders' unacceptable to rural audiences. At the next level is our work with traditional performers, snake charmers who are trained to educate the public on the need to protect snakes, folk painters who create new paintings on the need to use clean drinking water, folk singers who sing the dangers of tobacco and more. The next level is our use of professional actors, dancers, puppeteers and musicians to go out to specific audiences. At the top of the pyramid is

the main performance company, one that travels the theatres and festivals of the world. They too are often used, especially when a project is aimed at urban audiences, government officials, the judiciary or Parliamentarians. In addition, we have a film and video department – Darpana Communications, which does similar work but through TV; virtual community outreach work through the use of the most popular genres of television. Besides this, performances, games, songs, posters and other means are used to mobilise and excite audiences.

Darpana for Development's work has ranged from issues of domestic

violence and human rights abuse, to health, the environment, legal education, hygiene and more. Each project is looked at individually to assess what would work best for specific groups. The new is mixed with the old, and often the known with the strange. After 35 years, we remain a laboratory to create modules for behaviour change that can be scaled up and replicated. And we remain the only arts organisation in India totally committed to the use of the arts for a better world.

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