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Theatre for peacebuilding: transforming narratives of structural violence

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on two under-explored domains in peacebuilding: structural violence and art. Structural violence, despite its pervasiveness and positive correlation with violent conflict, is often overlooked within key debates in peacebuilding. Arts, despite its prevalence at ground level, continue to remain outside the mainstream approaches to peacebuilding. In this article, I bring these two domains together and explore the potential of sustained engagement through theatre in building peace within violent structural narratives at community level. Based on an empirical study in West Bengal, India, I argue that theatre has the potential to bring prevalent but less-heard narratives of structural violence into communal discourse. I identify two key elements in this process: first, theatre offers a space where onstage resistance to structural violence is performed. Second, the performed resistance leads to triggering transformation within the violent structural narratives.

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Introduction

Peacebuilding incorporates a range of activities within its umbrella that take an immediate focus on ending direct violence to a long-term focus on addressing root causes of violence, including structural injustices. In our concentrated focus on the more visible manifestations of violence, we tend to overlook the embedded violence within societies that is experienced at an everyday level. Johan Galtung marks a milestone in peace and conflict studies in arguing that violent social structures of a society unfairly affect a given category or categories of people living in that community.¹ Scholars continue to call for a broader of conceptualisation of violence and conflict that allows for the inclusion of protracted narratives of silent yet visible violence that takes place at an everyday level.²

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This article draws from a chapter in my forthcoming monograph 'Theatre for Peacebuilding: The role of arts for peacebuilding in South Asia'

¹See Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,' *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969); and *Peace and Social Structure* (Copenhagen: Ejlers, 1978) for a further discussion.

²See Robin Luckham, 'Whose Violence, Whose Security? Can Violence Reduction and Security Work for Poor, Excluded and Vulnerable People?,' *Peacebuilding* 5, no. 2 (2017); Amber Huff, 'Black Sands, Green Plans and Vernacular (in) Securities in the Contested Margins of South-Western Madagascar,' *ibid*; and Helen Berents, 'An Embodied Everyday Peace in the Midst of Violence,' *ibid*. 3(2015).

Arts offer interesting possibilities within peacebuilding. As recent international peacebuilding initiatives testify, the processes for building peace need to access and work at people's level. Approaches that champion predefined structures and frameworks of peacebuilding are found unsustainable in the long term. While policy-level decisions can be crucial for the cessation of violence, peace requires more. Peace that sustains in the long term and prevents a relapse into conflict calls for approaches that work within the communities. These approaches need to have access and legitimacy to work at the grassroots level. The 'local turn' in critical peacebuilding scholarship continues to explore this dilemma.³ To move beyond essentialist and binary understandings of the local, we need empirical studies and multidisciplinary approaches that are capable of providing a nuanced understanding of the processes and actors involved in peacebuilding.⁴ Art, as a powerful vehicle with established political significance that often attracts local approval given its aesthetic appeal and the possible participatory nature, requires further study as a possible peacebuilding approach.

The influence structural violence has upon the manifestation of violent conflict and the potential of art as a peacebuilding approach establish the significance of studying the intersection of the two. Through this article, I examine how theatre works as a peacebuilding approach in addressing structural violence at community level in West Bengal, drawing from an empirical study conducted on the theatre approach and work practices of the theatre group Jana Sanskriti (JS).

I collected the data for the article through participant observation and semi-structured in-depth and focus group interviews with the core members of JS in various locations. Interviews were conducted in local vernacular with a translator's support, and in English. Based on the empirical evidence, I argue that theatre has the potential to bring prevalent but less-heard narratives of structural violence into communal discourse.

The article is structured as follows: I will provide a brief overview of peacebuilding as addressing structural violence, and then introduce JS as a theatre group engaging with issues of structural violence in West Bengal. Having provided this background, the article identifies and analyses two steps in JS's process of peace building through theatre: JS performs resistance to embedded narratives of structural violence in order to create a tension, and then uses that tension as a platform to trigger transformation in the community.

Peacebuilding as structural violence

Structural violence occurs at an everyday level. It entails the everyday manifestations of injustice, discrimination, abuse and exclusion.⁵ Structural violence refers to the

³See the work of scholars such as Oliver Richmond, Susanna Campbell, David Campbell, Roger Mac Ginty and Thania Paffenholz for a discussion on the development of the 'local turn' in peacebuilding. Further, the term 'local' has been used and understood in different ways within peace and conflict studies. While acknowledging the problems associated with the term, I use it here to refer to the actors who are from the community or the conflict context. This excludes international staff and also, to a large degree, the urban elite layer of the civil society. Therefore, my use of 'local' in this paper is similar to the concept of 'local-local', or the 'deep civil society' that Oliver P. Richmond presents. See Oliver P. Richmond, 'A Post-Liberal Peace: Eirenisism and the Everyday', *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009).

⁴Thania Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment Towards an Agenda for Future Research', *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015).

⁵See Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.'

limitations, differences and ‘even deaths’ that result when ‘systems, institutions, or policies’ meet some people’s needs and rights at the expense of others; and it becomes a matter of peacebuilding when these structures foster inequality between groups – be it ethnic, religious, caste, class, gender, language or age, thereby propagating direct and indirect violence.⁶ The resulting inequality and discrimination of violent structures breed resentment and create a tension that often manifests as interpersonal, intergroup or intercommunal conflict.

The locus of peacebuilding from a perspective of structural violence is often the everyday. Peacebuilding through addressing structural violence takes on the task of addressing the visible and invisible violence that is embedded within social structures.

There is a clear correlation between structural violence and direct conflict. Structural violence reproduces itself, ultimately culminating in direct conflict unless there is an intervention. Take economic disparity for an example: studies verify that there is a strong correlation between economic disparity in a community and the prevalence of everyday violence.⁷ Economic disparity is both an indication of structural injustices and a main contributory factor for other root causes of structural violence. It often serves as a fundamental factor for latent conflict and, if allowed to continue unaddressed, manifests as structural violence that inevitably leads to violent conflict. There is also a statistical correlation between structural violence and ‘higher levels of secondary violence’ such as ‘civil wars, terrorism, crime, domestic violence, substance abuse and suicide’.⁸ Even at a surface-level examination, many armed conflicts reveal that they have roots that go down to structural issues such as unfair resource distribution and inadequate political representation. Schirch argues that violent public structures infect the entire culture.⁹

Addressing and transforming narratives of structural violence is a prerequisite to a culture of peace. Peacebuilding in this broader form seeks to ‘prevent, reduce, transform, and help people recover from’ violence of all forms, including structural violence that is yet to lead to large-scale ‘civil unrest’.¹⁰ This holistic approach is what Lederach perceives as peacebuilding when he terms it as a process of moving a given population from a condition of extreme vulnerability and dependency to one of self-sufficiency and wellbeing.¹¹ Bringing the prevalent but less-heard narratives of structural violence into the communal discourse, therefore, is an essential component of establishing sustainable peace.

⁶Lisa Schirch, ‘Strategic Peacebuilding – State of the Field,’ *Peace Prints: South Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (2008): 7.

⁷See Hanne and Gudrun Østby Fjelde, ‘Economic Inequality and Inter-Group Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990–2008’, in *Unpublished paper presented at the Inequality, Grievances and Civil War* (Zurich November 2011); Christopher Cramer, ‘Does Inequality Cause Conflict?’, *Journal of International Development* 15, no. 4 (2003); Dia Da Costa, ‘Introduction’, in *Where We Stand*, ed. Sanjoy Ganguly (Kolkata: CAMP, 2009); and Carles Boix, ‘Economic Roots of Civil Wars and Revolutions in the Contemporary World,’ *World Politics* 60, no. 3 (2008).

⁸James Gilligan, *Preventing Violence* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 39.

⁹Schirch, ‘Strategic Peacebuilding – State of the Field’, 7.

¹⁰*The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding: A Vision and Framework for Peace and Justice* (New York: Good Books, 2004).

¹¹John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, D. C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1997).

Jana Snskriti: addressing structural violence in West Bengal

JS is a grassroots theatre-activist group from West Bengal. The group's work emerged in response to palpable structural disparities within their environment and continues to address narratives of structural violence felt within the community.

Among the many issues of structural violence JS touches upon, two distinct directions emerge for their relevance to peacebuilding in West Bengal: violence in the political and socio-cultural spheres.¹² The elitist and inefficient structures of representation in the political sphere are a key issue that affects everyday life in West Bengal. Election violence is rampant as state statistics reflect.¹³ Residents point at entire villages where being political hatchet men – or goondaism – is an inherited profession.

Manifesting at family and community levels, socio-cultural narratives permeate everyday life. Take gender: West Bengal consecutively led all 28 states in India in Crime against Women statistics in 2011 and 2012.¹⁴ Broken down into population statistics, West Bengal, constituting 7.5 per cent of the Indian population, account for nearly 12.7 per cent of the total reported crimes against women in the country. In 2015 and 2016 statistics, the state comes second in overall Crime Against Women, but it is the highest in 'Cruelty by husband or his relatives'.¹⁵ These figures indicate the pervasive acceptance for gender-based violence in West Bengal at a daily level. Though with reduced impact, practices like the dowry system still prevail over the years. Rape statistics for the state is also high when compared across India. In 2011, West Bengal reported the second highest number of rapes as a state. These statistics indicate the pervasiveness of structural violence in West Bengal. The narratives in different realms create a tight web that reinforces itself. This results in cyclic process that reproduces further violence unless addressed. JS's peacebuilding challenges this cycle.

Background

JS started in 1985 in West Bengal as an independent organisation using political theatre.¹⁶ Despite working internationally and countrywide with a number of satellite groups, the group considers rural West Bengal as its primary base. Group membership largely consists of male and female agricultural workers. The organisational structure of JS reflects its bi-fold intentions, with two interrelated teams – one for performances and another for related political action – established in each village. Individuals can become members of one or both depending on their interest. A core team takes key decisions

¹²Economic sphere is another key area JS addresses. This is often seen as an outcome of the already established hierarchies in the socio-cultural or political spheres, and as such, the group approaches unequal economic or resource distribution from the perspective of the socio-cultural and political spheres.

¹³See Staff Reporter, 'Violence Mars Municipal Elections in West Bengal', *The Hindu*, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/violence-mars-west-bengal-municipal-elections/article18451094.ece>. (accessed 14 May 2017).

¹⁴National Crime Records Bureau – Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Crime in India – 2011 Statistics', (New Delhi: National Crime Records Bureau, 2012).

¹⁵'Crime in India – 2015' (New Delhi: National Crime Records Bureau, 2015); 'Crime in India – 2016', (New Delhi: National Crime Records Bureau, 2016).

¹⁶See Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon, and Lesley Pruitt, 'Putting Participation on Stage: Examining Participatory Theatre as an Alternative Site for Political Participation', *Policy Studies* 36, no. 6 (2015). for a discussion on the democratic potential of JS's theatre practice.

pertaining to the organisation. Each core team member represents a sub group at regional level, which in turn represents members from a given village.

JS strives to empower the oppressed through 'scripting power on and off stage',¹⁷ addressing issues of social and political justice. The group initiates its political work within theatre, which is then carried forward through the political mobilisers. The political mobilisers actively rally the community on issues that affect them. JS's work closely engages with rewriting the established power hierarchies at an everyday level. The so-called 'oppressed' communities in rural districts and working classes are the primary focus of their work. Thus, peacebuilding here is connected with empowerment.

The emphasis on justice and fairness strongly relates to JS's take on peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is 'as much' about exposing those that hold power in a given situation and working to bring about a more equal relationship among all parties¹⁸ as it is about addressing direct conflict. Preserving surface-level harmony and political order at the cost of justice and fairness fails to make sense as sustaining peace. Actions that merely attempt to prevent direct violence in instances of oppression do just that.

JS uses theatre as a medium to challenge oppression due to its aptness in promoting a culture of dialogue. Oppression in its community, as the group argues, is made possible by the pervasive 'culture of monologue'. A culture of monologue promotes the interests of an elite few and curtails dialogue and discussion in general. Dialogue between and among different factions of society is an essential faculty of and a crucial first step towards equality and justice in a democracy. JS works to establish this culture of dialogue where the marginalised factions of the society speak for themselves and stand up for their rights.

Theatre approach

JS uses Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed.¹⁹ This is an umbrella term that includes a number of theatre forms with social action at its core and initiates social change by creating a space that encourages the 'oppressed' to speak. Forum theatre, the theatre form JS uses predominantly, is the defining theatre form in the collection. In forum theatre, the play invites the audience into the play to explore the reality of their lives and the stories they tell themselves about it. Called spect-actors, the audience strives to create new narratives that are emancipatory; or stories that transcend the familiar oppressive narrative. Joker, an appointed facilitator for the play, introduces and guides the process. Forum theatre encourages dialogue, furthering theatre's existing potentials.

JS adapts Theatre of the Oppressed to serve its particular working context. Local conditions and aesthetics drive these adaptations. The adaptations in turn enhance theatre's potential for incorporating multiple voices and initiating dialogue. Working in collaboration with an own cohort of political mobilisers is an interesting development that highlights JS's focus on transformation. JS further emphasises this point by

¹⁷'Scripting power on and off stage' is a commonly applied term for JS's work among its members, and publications by and about the organisation.

¹⁸Kevin P. Clements, 'Peace Building and Conflict Transformation', http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:10398/Peace_building_a.pdf1997.

¹⁹Theatre of the Oppressed is sometimes categorised as applied theatre due to the applied nature of both the theatre forms. Given the wide scope of theatre forms deriving from each, and the specific characteristics of Theatre of the Oppressed, we consider them as separate genres in this paper.

referring to its audience as spect-activists. A forum theatre performance and discussion is usually a one-off event but JS makes a fundamental change in this practice by holding repeat performances at every village until the discussion comes to a point where its political mobilisers can take it forward. This is a structural adaption in JS's use of forum theatre. Another adaptation is incorporating elements from traditional theatre forms. Unlike the classic format of forum theatre, JS's plays start with a song and also have song and dance incorporated into its body. These are elements where the group borrows heavily from the traditional drama forms in West Bengal such as *Gadjan*. The ensuing multivocality brings JS's performances close to the community. The aesthetic appeal of the adaptation resonates with and captures local interest, thus facilitating acceptance for the unfamiliar elements of forum theatre in West Bengal.

The scripting process of JS's plays enhances the multivocal and dialogic potential of theatre.²⁰ JS's plays focus on communal issues. These could either apply to all of its members or only to a specific group. In scripting a play on a shared issue such as domestic violence or election violence, the core team gets together. The voices of village teams enter the scripting process since the core team members are, in turn, representatives of the village teams. The core team, including the team members and the director, decide upon the script and the particular action sequences that bring out narratives of structural violence through a process of dialogue. The place for dialogue constrains positional hierarchy within the organisation to a certain extent. The embedded multivocality and dialogic of the process, therefore, facilitates voicing specific narratives of structural violence that might not come out in a more power-over setting.

Multivocality and the dialogic embedded in the scripting process continues until it reaches the village-level audiences. Once a script is finalised, the core group members take it to the village team and provide coaching on the performance. Even here, the script is flexible to a certain extent: the context might require adapting words, characters or plot twists that differ from the agreed-upon original script. The village teams are free to make these changes as long as the central message of the drama remains intact. Thus, JS's performances are flexible. They evolve with the context to better respond to and reflect the exact location. Also, the play can develop with each performance to better adapt to the changing situations in the locale.

The permitted flexibility within group processes transcends the centralised power structures in the outside community to a considerable extent. JS's group processes recognise the need for context-based approaches and work to transform the power hierarchies involved in the scripting of a play. Together, the core group members wield a considerable amount of power in the group. This is remarkable as the members come from a broad range of educational and social backgrounds.

The theatre space also symbolises a transgression into the public space, drawing a parallel with the process of bringing out narratives of structural violence into the communal discourse. Sticks – *lathi's* – frame JS's performance space on the ground, and these sticks are also used as a symbol of power, often oppression, in the forum play. Inviting the spectator onstage is an invitation to shake oneself free from the barrier of oppression and enter into the sphere of power. Crossing the line of sticks to enter the

²⁰Mark Chou, *Greek Tragedy and Contemporary Democracy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012). for a discussion on the democratic potential of the multivocal form of theatre.

theatre space becomes an act of transformation for the audience members. Spect-actors claim the public space to express themselves, turning the action into a symbolic act of momentarily defying and being free from the structures that silence and prevent the voice of rural Bengali's from accessing public spaces.

JS emphasises the narratives of structural violence by bringing together everyday performativity alongside staged performances, where ideological boundary between reality and fiction is disrupted. The action of entering the theatre space becomes a vehicle for questioning the moral and political divisions that keeps afloat societal norms and structures such as gender, caste, religion and state.²¹ Transformation of reality and fiction is therefore the connecting thread between onstage and offstage mobilisation of JS. These blur the ideological division between reality and fiction. Thus, the moment of stepping onstage and rehearsing an alternative power relation and norms initiate transformation of the reality of spect-actor's lives. The tension created in disrupting the ideological boundary between fiction and reality is what opens up space for contemplation and action that transforms violent structures. JS provides a rare case where staged performativity is placed alongside with everyday performativity, resulting in an interactive and often progressive 'making and unmaking of power relations'.²² Bringing together the everyday performativity and staged performativity is an element of theatre that strongly comes out in JS, as the members live and perform in the same communities.

The composition of JS's plays lend to the philosophy that drives the group's work. The striking scenes of oppression created at the beginning and invariably at the end of plays, scenes interposed with evocative folk-songs, and interposing sequences with local dance patterns, all contribute: this particular way of 'framing and sectioning' invites a fresh, critical perspective.²³ The aesthetic elements allow the audience time to process what they see onstage and engage with it from a perspective that balances emotions with a critical, analytical mind. Thus, the dances and songs interspersed at critical points of the drama facilitate emergence of different perspectives.²⁴ It creates the space for and facilitates the resistance provoked by JS dramas to emerge as transformation.

JS's unique theatre approach raises certain concerns as well: key here is an issue related to performative labour.²⁵ Unlike a professional theatre group, performance is not the livelihood for most of the JS actors. Engaging in political theatre, for them, is something that has to be squeezed into everyday responsibilities. This 'squeeze' is especially visible with the women's theatre group members. The rehearsals, meetings and group discussions all result in lengthening their workday. The group is aware of the fact and strives to facilitate the process as much as possible. Nevertheless, with its complex scripting and adaptation process, JS's theatre approach can ask for a higher performative labour input from some members.

²¹Da Costa, Introduction, 11.

²²Ibid., 12.

²³Ralph Yarrow, '[People Playing People in India: Sanjoy Ganguly] in Sanjoy Ganguly', in *Where We Stand: Five Plays from the repertoire of Jana Sanskriti* (Kolkata: CAMP, 2009), 7.

²⁴See *ibid.*

²⁵See Shirin M. Rai, 'Political Performance: A Framework for Analysing Democratic Politics', *Political Studies* 63, no. 5 (2015) for a further discussion on performative labour.

Performing resistance

JS's peacebuilding takes place through an overarching two-step process: peacebuilding as resistance and peacebuilding as transformation. These steps are often complementary. Peacebuilding through theatre emerges as resistance to the embedded narratives of structural violence. JS's theatre creates a space to express less-heard narratives of structural violence and bring them into the communal discourse through embodying multivocality. The performed resistance gives rise to the tension within which peacebuilding as transformation emerges. Thus, JS's theatre brings out and creates tension in existing violent and exclusive structures, aiming for their transformation at a community level.

Performing resistance at JS, again, is a twofold process: firstly, it is carried out onstage as an expression of the multivocal form of theatre. Secondly, it is carried out offstage, through the group practices and community level political activism.

Narratives of gender discrimination – a prevalent but insidious element of structural violence in West Bengal – provide a fertile ground. How JS elicits the narratives and the ways in which the group engages with existing patriarchal practices to resist and create a tension within patriarchal structures deserve particular attention.

Performing and encouraging onstage resistance

JS's onstage resistance is a combination of provoking resistance through the performances and encouraging resistance from the audience. Key tools in this are the scripting and performance of the play and the on-site forum discussion.

The script makes the narratives of structural violence explicit, grounding it in the experiences of people from the community. To achieve this, JS adopts a joint scripting process with the core group members who are part of and share the everyday realities of the communities with and for whom they perform. The resulting scripts are accessible and relevant in content and expression. The narrative of gendered violence usually comes from where it is felt powerfully: from the intersection of multiple narratives of structural violence. In performing this script back to the community on stage, in the format of a rapidly tightening web of structural violence, the performance challenges the veneer of social acceptance a little further, each time.

Take the play *The Brick Factory*:

The Brick Factory is from the regular repertoire of JS that touches upon many facets of interconnected structural violence. The protagonist of the story is Phulmoni, a female working at a brick factory where everyone is exploited and women are paid lower. The workers unite in an attempt to ask for fair wages. The contractor strategically uses the patriarchal rhetoric of 'keeping women under male control' to undermine workers' unity, thereby effectively curtailing joint action. Phulmoni in the next scene is pressured into granting sexual favours to secure her job and to protect her husband from being taken to the police. Her husband, though aware of the situation, is helpless. In the final scene, an all-men village *Panchayat*²⁶ judges Phulmoni to be guilty of 'polluting the

²⁶*Panchayat* is the official administrative division in the village, similar to a village council.

culture' by working in the city and having a sexual relationship with the contractor. Her husband is also punished for his compliance.

In this play, the layered oppression Phulmoni has to undergo and the contentious content disturb and provoke the audience. Urban migration is a common occurrence and, as such, is a pertinent issue in regional West Bengal.

The forum discussion is another site where provocation takes place: the Joker invites and encourages the audience to express resistance. The actor playing the oppressor also provokes the spectactors to go deeper with their responses. This engagement potentially results in a dialogue that becomes a possible turning point for the drama to unfold in a different path.

In performing resistance to the established structural narratives on gender discrimination, the forum discussion facilitates dialogue. The forum discussion of *The Brick Factory* I witnessed in Shyamnagar brought out multiple voices into dialogue, expressing complexities, perspectives and questions. The Joker encouraged expression from and facilitated dialogue among the audience, utilising the flexibility and space of theatre to accommodate different voices. The interventions touched upon different dimensions and complexities associated with gender equality in work. While one spectator voiced that 'girls are also a part of life, so they are equal', another claimed they 'provide equal labour'. In response to a comment that women cannot work as much as men, a woman asked 'why not provide appropriate work for women? You give everyone the same work'. The forum theatre format and JS's encouragement of expressing resistance created a space safe for these different voices in the community to emerge and engage in a dialogue. A 10-year-old boy demonstrated the potential of this space in a much-lauded intervention: 'both work equally, why are they [women] low? Everyone's hunger is the same'. These probing questions during the forum discussion arise from the tension created in performing resistance to the narratives of structural violence people experience at a daily basis.

JS's forum discussions enhance the audience's analytical skills in engaging with narratives of structural violence. The community in Shyamnagar went beyond the immediate situation to discover the underlying narratives of structural violence. Pradeep, the core group member who played Joker in this performance, points out that JS goes from the 'particular to the general', that it connects from the 'incident to the system'. They encourage the audience to recognise the connection between isolated incidents of oppression as performed in *The Brick Factory* and the larger web of structural violence – such as gender discrimination and economic exploitation – that fosters such actions. The Joker plays a central role here in leading the discussion from particular to the general.

JS's continued engagement facilitates progress in the communities. The interventions I observed indicate that the spectators chose a strategic approach towards the interventions. In an article published in 2004, Mohan discusses the tendency of the spect-actors to provide conventional or magical solutions to Phulmoni's plight, such as leaving the factory, or refusing the contractor's sexual advances.²⁷ As she elaborates, these solutions fail to comprehend the complexity and systemic nature of the issues. The interventions

²⁷Dia Mohan, 'Reimagining Community: Scripting Power and Changing the Subject through Jana Sanskriti's Political Theatre in Rural North India', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 2, no. 33 (2004).

I witnessed for *The Brick Factory* in 2012 progress beyond this initial point. Instead of waiting until the last scene where patriarchal narratives get stronger, interventions started at the initial stages when the contractor started using patriarchal rhetoric to undermine workers' unity. The violence of the structures, though subtle, was recognised. Locating the root of the issue and performing resistance to the underlying violent structures is a skill the community had developed over the years in.

JS's audience is particularly adept at challenging narratives of structural violence. They intervene before the narratives of structural violence intertwine become harder to tackle. In building peace within structural violence, locating and starting from the weak links of the narrative makes the intervention relatively easier. The difference between interventions made for *The Brick Factory* that Mohan commented on in 2004 and the interventions I observed eight years after indicate the spect-actors' growth from a personal to a systemic approach. In 2012, the audience is capable of identifying and picking out threads of patriarchy at the early stages where it is yet to be reinforced by the traditional and political authorities of *Panchayat*. As an individual that attempts to divide the workers by drawing on patriarchal rhetoric, the contractor is relatively easier to engage with: he is an individual, not an institution. His exploitative practices relate to men and women, thus making him a weak link in the interconnected web of structural violence. In the 2012 interventions, it is here that the community first intervenes. Spect-actors draw from multiple counter narratives to patriarchy and keep the play from moving towards its climax.

JS's onstage performance of spect-actor resistance thus revolves on themes of fairness and equality. In the forum discussion for *The Brick Factory*, spectactors clearly connect Phulmoni's predicament with the underlying violent patriarchal structures. Asserting the depth to which this connection is made would require further research. Yet, it is clear that JS's performances and forum discussions achieve the connection from 'particular to the general' in relation to prevalent patriarchal structures.

Encouraging offstage resistance

JS brings out structural narratives by encouraging offstage resistance. Group practices play a key role in leading the performed onstage resistance into community-level political activism. The group's standpoint on the practice of dowry – traditionally offered by the bride's family to the groom – is an example. Male members of JS refuse a dowry when they get married. To refuse the dowry, the groom often has to stand up against his family network. Almost every household in JS's working areas have extended families, many with more than three married siblings sharing the ancestral home. Refusing the dowry automatically becomes a public declaration of non-compliance with multiple established structures of power in cultural, economic, religious and personal realms. At times, the pressure can be overwhelming. Mohan refers to a JS member who chose to elope with his bride when his family insisted on a dowry.²⁸ Another offstage resistance to the patriarchal norms at the group level is the formation of women's theatre groups. The women's groups in public spaces serve as role models and pushes gender boundaries. These actions 'breach the normative order of

²⁸Ibid.

domination²⁹ and, as such, become acts of performing offstage resistance to violent patriarchal structures. JS's offstage activism draws public attention to the prevalent but less-heard narratives of structural violence that operate at a daily level.

JS's political mobilisers encourage and rally the community to take a stand on key issues, thereby carrying forward the offstage resistance. Take the issue of alcoholism, assumed to be at the root of extensive domestic violence in the area: in late 2011 and 2012, JS mobilised the community to protest against illegal alcohol production in the area and to take concrete action against the issue.

JS welcomes performing resistance offstage, even when it is directed at its own work. *The Brick Factory* came into being as a result of such resistance from the audience to another drama, *Sarama*. In *Sarama*, the unmarried female protagonist is raped. She chooses to press charges against the rapists and raise the baby herself, thereby defying convention and social norms. An NGO supports her, and the story ends positively. A woman in Birbhum challenged the ending for its credibility. Rape from authority figures was a daily reality for the women in the brick factory where she and her family worked. Protest was hardly a choice since the livelihood of entire families depended on the exploiter himself. There were no NGOs to support them. This woman's vocal resistance to what she saw as an unrealistic story brought out the prevalent but silenced narratives of structural violence many underwent on a daily basis into the communal discourse. This act of resistance expressed by the community resulted in the production of *The Brick Factory*. JS performs and encourages resistance to the embedded structural narratives onstage as well as offstage.

Through performing resistance on and off stage, JS continually tests and pushes the boundary of what is permissible. It is a constant process of performing resistance in the public and private spheres, bringing the insidious politics of social and political structures into the public space of theatre and communal discourse. As Scott points out, resistance expressed in public is irrevocable: once the act of public defiance is done, it will 'fundamentally alter' the social relationships unless it is beaten back; even when it is beaten back and forced to retreat, an irrevocable change has already occurred.³⁰ He observes that the act of being staged moves the questionable ethics associated with relations of subordination from a shadowy existence to the public limelight, thereby stripping away its veneer of acceptance and pseudo legitimacy. With the persistent showcasing of violent structures in public, believing the injustices do not happen, and that we are helpless at the face of it, becomes a luxury that we can no longer afford. It unsettles and creates tension among the unjust narratives. This process of resistance aimed at freedom from structural violence or structures of conflict gives rise to local, embedded processes of peacebuilding. It is a process that enables the 'subjects to produce peace' instead of 'producing subjects'.³¹ The resistance JS performs onstage and offstage addressing narratives of structural violence is the foundation of the peace they build at the community level. The tension created herein prepares the ground where transformation takes place.

²⁹James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 203.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 215–16.

³¹Oliver P. Richmond, 'A Pedagogy of Peacebuilding: Infrapolitics, Resistance, and Liberation1,' *International Political Sociology* 6, no. 2 (2012): 115.

Triggering transformation

Peacebuilding as transforming narratives of structural violence

The second level of JS's peacebuilding process is initiating positive transformation in narratives of structural violence. The tension created from performing resistance to the embedded narratives of structural violence brings these up into communal discourse. JS's peacebuilding process involves taking the performed resistance and the resulting tension forward to positively transform the narratives of structural violence in rural Bengal.

I specifically look at how JS's theatre engages with narratives of structural violence in the socio-cultural sphere. The issues result from a multi-layered web of structural narratives. The process of transformation JS aims for, too, is multi-pronged.

Onstage and offstage activism works in tandem to transform the narratives of structural violence. Firstly, onstage spect-actor interventions initiate transformation within individuals. The extended impact of the intervention creates ripples in the communal discourse. Secondly, onstage performance extends to offstage activism that in turn leads into transformation in the socio-cultural sphere.

Gender in general, and domestic violence in specific, is a domain where JS's performance related transformation of socio-cultural narratives becomes apparent. Focusing on a single issue facilitates looking at the different ways in which JS initiates transformation in this particular narrative. More than 30 per cent of all reported crimes against women in India are a result of cruelty by husband and relatives, and West Bengal records the highest number of incidences in this category.³² Domestic violence is therefore a key narrative of structural violence in the socio-cultural sphere.

Transformation through onstage spect-actor interventions

Onstage spectator responses to the violent gender narratives voiced at JS's performances indicate the transformation that has taken place within the socio-cultural sphere. The patterns of responding to patriarchal systems are changing. This transformation is evident in how certain performances were received by the audiences during the field-work for this paper. Spect-actor responses have transformed over the years, probably as a result of the continued engagement and encouragement of JS. The disparity between the spect-actor interventions to *The Brick Factory* as Mohan noted it in 2004 and the interventions I observed in 2012 arises due to this transformation. As discussed earlier, the more recent interventions were hardly magical or excessively conservative. The spectactors demonstrated a strategic take on the extended network of patriarchy and intervened at the initial stages of its manifestation in the play. They touched upon key points of contention to initiate a dialogue instead of simply providing a solution for the character in the story. Thus, a progressive transformation in the spect-actor responses over the years in engaging with violent socio-cultural narratives is evident.

The spect-actor interventions for *A Story of One Girl*, a play about a child bride married off without a full dowry who later fall sick and is abused by her alcoholic husband, indicate a transformation in the passive acceptance of domestic violence. The

³²National Crime Records Bureau – Ministry of Home Affairs., 'Crime in India – 2016.'

spect-actor responses come from different points of view, such as the wife's parents, the husband's parents, a neighbour, the wife and the extended families. Thus, the spectators identify a range of intervention points throughout the course of the play. Though the play was at its early stages of performance, the interventions point towards standing up to the violence and injustice. The audience challenge the culturally conditioned and sanctioned responses of submission and tolerance. Thus, spect-actor interventions indicate a transformation in the narratives of passive submission to the violent structures within the socio-cultural sphere. Villagers trace a link between this on-site performance of resistance and the reduction of domestic violence in the community. Chittaranjan notes that it is difficult for women to speak out since they are trained to remain silent, but he also notes that things are changing: 'Now they protest. In the intervention part of the drama they come out and protest. And when they go home in their family they protest. This is why the domestic violence is now reduced'. Thus, the community perceives the spect-actor interventions that transform patriarchal narratives onstage to have an impact on their private lives.

Onstage interaction leading to offstage transformation

The process of triggering transformation within violent structures in the socio-cultural sphere extends beyond spect-actor interventions: as indicated earlier, community and group members acknowledge that onstage transformations of violent patriarchal narratives are consciously carried offstage and have resulted in contributing to broader changes in pertinent practices within the community. Take personal narratives of JS and community members: several women mention organising marriages without dowry for themselves, their sisters or cousins and trace the link back to the impact of the performances and forum discussions. Malathi's personal story is a case in point: 'We managed to get my own sister married without a dowry. I have taken part in JS's work and forums and when the groom asked for a dowry, I told them about this play we saw in the village, *Shonar Meye*. And I shared some of the things we discussed at the forum about [the practice of] dowry. Afterwards the groom agreed to marry my sister without a dowry'. Forum discussions work as a point that initiates transformation, and offer a resource for people to draw from in negotiating dowry requests in real life. As in Malathi's case, it gives people the courage and an avenue to question the practice. This is one example of a concrete change that is traced back to the forum discussions and participation. Many others exist at the community level. With each story, onstage performance effectively extends into offstage transformation of discriminatory patriarchal structures.

Offstage negotiation and transformation of domestic violence is a delicate process. It often takes the personal intervention of a group member. The issues come up during the performance, but not necessarily during the play. Chittaranjan recalls an incident where the performers pointed out a person in the audience who regularly beats his wife. Kavita, another core team member from the same area, tells me of an incident when a woman spoke to her during a forum and said that her husband beats her after consuming alcohol. An audience member notes an attempt by a chronic alcoholic to justify the husband's violent behaviour in an intervention. The approach of the team is the same in each instance: the group members visit the family at an appropriate time

and speak with the abuser, and if required, with the elders. Though this is insufficient to stop the abuse, the visits considerably reduce the violence. Almost all the team members I spoke with recall many similar incidents. Thus, personal intervention stemming from a moral responsibility is common among the field members of JS, and this forms a crucial part of bringing out silenced narratives of gender violence into the communal discourse.

The impact of this responsibility and the commitment to embody the transformation is evident among many a group member. Once again, take a prominent core team member who married a woman from the same village, a woman who was abused and deserted by her husband. Mohan also refers to a similar case.³³ These are radical moves in the rural Bengali context where there is little possibility of a second marriage for a woman, and widows and deserted women are shunned and marginalised. In response to my observation that this could not have been easy, the core team member asks ‘what is the meaning of it if we do not live according to the values we talk about?’ Thus, the personal action is not solely personal: it is seen as an embodiment of the values they stand up for, through JS’s work. There is a clear connection and awareness between the group work and personal action. JS embodies the values of democracy and equality through its group practices, and the actions of the individual members in turn reflected the fact. Especially in a close-knit community, such concrete actions pioneer social transformation. The transformation triggered through these practices is highly effective, as it leads from example. It creates model stories of transformation that bring in the underlying narratives of structural violence into focus and constantly challenge them within the communal discourse.

JS’s link with emotion is what facilitates transforming narratives of structural violence through its theatre practice. The power of emotions in shaping collective and political action is widely accepted.³⁴ However, in order for positive transformation, the driving emotion has to result from a dialogic process. An immediate, reactive response to oppression or resistance is insufficient. The post-performance tension created in the embedded narratives of structural violence helps JS take the expression of resistance towards a point of disquiet. Transformation resulting from this expression can be positive or negative, and communal emotions determine the path. The campaign against illegal alcohol production JS carried out in 2011 and 2012 illustrates the point. The group moved into mobilisation too early: they held a series of performances on alcohol addiction and domestic violence, generating resistance for the corresponding narratives within the community. However, as it became evident from spect-actor responses at the time, JS’s political team moved into mobilisation before the emotional transformation took place. The community rallied around anger instead of empathy, and destroyed illegal alcohol production points in the area at the end of a public protest. Here, performing resistance led to action after an inadequate process of dialogue. The pent-up collective pain, when tapped into, broke free in the form of anger: a familiar way of responding that perpetuates structural violence. Thus, rage and similar emotions fuelled the actions. Instead of being non-violent, this transformation resulted in violent action driven by an overall community consciousness. While the expression was

³³See Mohan, ‘Reimagining Community’, 200.

³⁴See Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, ‘Theorizing Emotions in World Politics’, *International Theory* 6, no. 3 (2014).

sufficient to gain community attention for the particular types of structural violence perpetuated through alcoholism, the dialogue was insufficient in depth and process to bring the community towards a point of disquiet, to a point of deeper contemplation. Devoid of a systematic understanding of the pain healing can be more about retribution and revenge than peace.³⁵ Thus, engaging in a dialogue on the violence at community level is important for positive transformation. Otherwise, the process of performing resistance simply leads to retribution or revenge that replicates familiar narratives of violence instead of peaceful transformation.

Conclusion

This article brought two under-examined domains within peacebuilding into conversation: structural violence as peacebuilding and the role of theatre for peacebuilding. The analysis, grounded in the case study of JS from West Bengal, demonstrated that the group uses theatre to bring prevalent but less-heard narratives of structural violence into communal discourse. The two overarching steps in JS's peacebuilding process is performing resistance and initiating transformation. In performing resistance, the group embodies multivocality and actively brings in less-heard narratives of structural violence into the communal discourse through its plays. At the second step, JS primarily relies on dialogue as a tool for initiating transformation. The dialogic faculty embodied in forum theatre comes to the fore here. JS uses the forum discussions to initiate verbal, performed and symbolic transformation onstage. The local community offers ample examples where transformation is carried offstage. However, the action offstage is not always positive: it can be reactive instead of transformative and, as such, can lead to violence.

Performing resistance and initiating transformation are only the overarching steps in the process of bringing out less-heard narratives of structural violence into the communal discourse through JS's theatre. The process of peacebuilding it leads to is rather complex and multi-layered. The turning point in positive transformation through JS's theatre practice is in continuing with the dialogue until it generates empathy. Empathy comes to the fore as what sets apart the successful examples of transformation with JS, both onstage and offstage. This process is not easy; it commands a considerable amount of time, resources and skills as well as insight into the communal psyche. Merely being convinced of the worthiness of the idea or the need to transform narratives of structural violence is insufficient. It requires a deeper understanding of the relations between the oppressive structures and oppressed that generates empathy within the community consciousness. It is this empathy that pushes the problem beyond a certain person or a group to the abstract social structures at the root of the problem. In peacebuilding within structural violence, the individuals who perpetuate violence are almost always a part of that system. To transform conflict dynamics, the focus needs to be at the systemic level and not the isolated incident. JS uses forum theatre to initiate peace that leads to systemic change, at an everyday level in West Bengal, by opening up less-heard narratives of structural violence into communal discourse.

³⁵Hutchison Emma and Bleiker Roland, 'Emotional Reconciliation: Reconstituting Identity and Community after Trauma', *European Journal of Social Theory* 11, no. 3 (2008).

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Notes on contributor

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