

Theatrical Groups And Social Work: A Case Study Of Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj, Alwar

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Abstract:

Theatres Are Used Not Only To Depict Cultural Heritage, But Also To Represent Society, Social Norms, And Values Of A Particular Region. Theatre Is Not Just A Form Of Entertainment But Also A Powerful Tool For Social Change. Theatre Can Be Used As A Medium To Address Various Social Issues And Can Serve As A Catalyst For Social Reform. From Addressing Issues Like Gender Inequality And Racism To Highlighting Environmental Concerns, Theatre Has The Ability To Start Important Conversations And Raise Awareness About Critical Social Issues. Hence, Theatrical Groups Can Play An Important Role In Social Work And Addressing Social Issues By Using Their Art Form To Raise Awareness And Promote Social Change. This Paper Talks About One Of The Oldest Theatres In India, **Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj Of Alwar (Rajasthan)**. RRAS Has Not Only Excelled In The Field Of Theatrical Performances, But Also Undertaken Various Social Work Activities Activities Like Making Donations, Fundraising For A Cause, Organizing Camps, Distributing Medicines, Encouraging The Budding Artists From The Rural Areas Of Alwar, And So On. RRAS Is One Of The Inevitable Pillars Of Society Which Not Only Works As An Entertainment Entity But Also Caters To The Requirements Of Society. The Paper Highlights Not Only Their Conventional Activities Undertaken But Also Discusses The Various Social Activities By RRAS.

Key Word: Theatre, Social Concern, Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj, Philanthropic Activity.

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I. Introduction

“I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what is to be a human being.” - **Oscar Wilde**.

Theatre is the epitome of social art, functioning as a facilitator of social change and as an engine of integration. As an institution, the theatre has its roots in the societal structure, where it deliberately attempts to voice out various opinions generated by society itself. The theatre showcases an enlarged representation of society. To possess a relevant entity, theatre must have mutualism or rather integrated relationship with society. Therefore, it has been rightly said that art and society are closely connected. Theatres are instrumental in bringing major social changes, as it helps in enhancing cross-cultural communication. Moreover, it helps in empowering individuals to combine their theatrical skills with social activities, so that they reach out to wider sections of society. Theatrical platforms foster profound societal empathy, surrounded by vivid human relationships. It also helps in generating creativity with fresh insight, thereby assisting in resolving societal problems. The performing arts unite people for a shared cause while educating them about their current circumstances. Theatre has always been a powerful medium for social change and upliftment. It has the ability to communicate important social messages and stimulate critical thinking among its audience. The concept of theatre for social change and upliftment emerged in the early 20th century and has since then been used to address various social issues such as gender inequality, poverty, and discrimination.

Theatre for social change and upliftment aims to bring about social transformation through theatre performances. It is a form of applied theatre that uses theatre as a tool for social engagement and activism. The primary objective of theatre for social change and upliftment is to bring about awareness, mobilize communities, and encourage individuals to take action towards social justice. Theatre for social change and upliftment can take many forms, including street theatre, forum theatre, documentary theatre, and playback theatre. Street theatre involves performances on the streets, public places, and other non-traditional spaces, bringing theatre to the masses. Forum theatre is a participatory form of theatre that involves the audience in the performance and encourages them to intervene and change the outcome of the play. Documentary theatre uses real-life stories and events to highlight social issues, and playback theatre involves improvisational performances based on personal stories shared by the audience. Theatre has been used to address a range of social issues, such as violence

against women, caste discrimination, environmental degradation, and HIV/AIDS awareness. For instance, the renowned Indian theatre group, Jana Natya Manch, used street theatre to mobilize communities against social injustice and oppression during the 1970s and 80s. The group's performances addressed issues such as communalism, casteism, and labor exploitation, and had a significant impact on society. Theatre has the power to bring about meaningful social transformation. It can challenge dominant narratives, change perceptions, and empower individuals and communities to take action towards social justice. By promoting dialogue, reflection, and critical thinking, theatre can be an effective tool for addressing social issues and creating a more just and equitable society.

Theater has been an integral part of human society for centuries, serving as a medium for storytelling, entertainment, and artistic expression. However, beyond its role as a source of entertainment, theatrical groups have also played a significant role in social works. These groups have used their performances and productions to address various social issues, raise awareness, and bring about change. In this essay, we will explore the social works of theatrical groups and how they have impacted society. Theater has always been a powerful tool for social commentary, and theatrical groups have used this tool to bring attention to various social issues. One of the earliest examples of this can be seen in the plays of William Shakespeare, who used his works to comment on the social and political issues of his time. For instance, his play "Romeo and Juliet" portrays the tragedy of young love torn apart by the feud between their families, highlighting the negative consequences of social division and conflict. Similarly, in "Macbeth," Shakespeare depicts the consequences of unchecked ambition and power hunger, cautioning against the dangers of tyranny and corruption. In modern times, theatrical groups have continued to use the stage to comment on social issues, with productions ranging from addressing homelessness, domestic violence, mental health issues, and more.

Theatrical groups have also used their productions to promote social inclusion and diversity. Many theater productions have worked to increase representation on stage and behind the scenes, with the aim of reflecting the diversity of society. This has led to the creation of new works and adaptations that reflect a diverse range of experiences, identities, and cultures. For example, the Tony Award-winning musical "Hamilton" has been praised for its portrayal of America's founding fathers with a diverse cast of actors, challenging the traditional and exclusionary portrayal of history. Similarly, productions such as "The Color Purple," "In the Heights," and "The Lion King" have celebrated African American, Latinx, and African cultures, respectively, promoting social inclusion and showcasing the richness and diversity of these communities.

Theater has also been used as a means of promoting education and youth development. Many theatrical groups have created programs and initiatives aimed at providing young people with access to theater and developing their skills in the performing arts. These programs have been used to promote social skills, teamwork, creativity, and self-expression, with the aim of empowering young people and promoting their social development. For example, the Educational Theatre Association's JumpStart Theatre program has been used to bring theater programs to underserved schools and communities, providing young people with access to theater and promoting their creativity and confidence. Similarly, the Theater Development Fund's Stage Doors program has provided opportunities for young people to attend Broadway shows, take backstage tours, and participate in workshops, promoting theater education and youth development.

II. Theatres and Social Work: Global Examples

Many prominent theaters engage in social work activities as a way to give back to their communities and make a positive impact. Prominent theaters around the world engage in various social work activities that aim to make a positive impact on their communities. Here are some examples:

1. The Public Theater in New York City has a range of programs that support social justice and equity, such as the Mobile Unit, which brings free Shakespeare productions to underserved communities, and Public Forum, which hosts conversations on pressing social issues.
2. The Royal Court Theatre in London has an extensive community engagement program, which includes workshops and events for local residents, as well as partnerships with schools and prisons to offer drama-based learning and rehabilitation programs.
3. The National Theatre of Scotland has a number of community outreach projects, including the SHIFT program, which provides training and resources to people from underrepresented groups to create their own theatrical productions.
4. The Sydney Theatre Company in Australia has a range of social impact initiatives, including the Schools Program, which provides access to live theatre for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the Resident Artists Program, which supports emerging artists from diverse backgrounds.
5. The Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago has a robust community engagement program, which includes partnerships with local schools and social service organizations to provide educational and therapeutic theatre experiences for young people and adults.

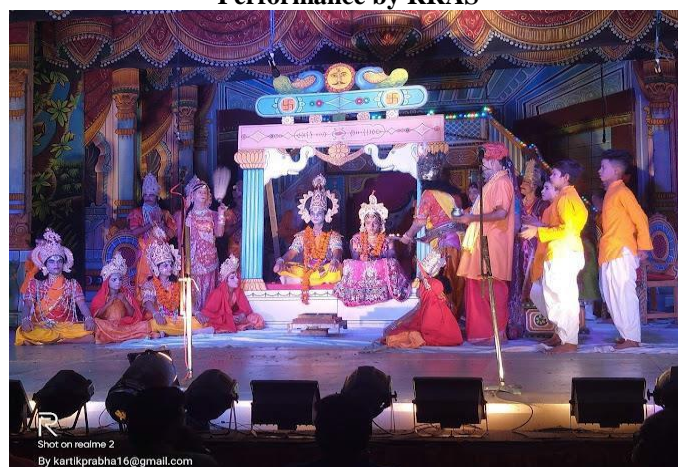
6. The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis has a Theater of Inclusion program that offers performances and workshops for people with disabilities, including sensory-friendly performances and workshops for people on the autism spectrum. The program also offers training for theater professionals on how to make their performances more accessible to people with disabilities.
7. The Goodman Theatre in Chicago has a Community Engagement and Education program that offers a variety of initiatives to support community members, including workshops, discussions, and partnerships with local schools and organizations. The program aims to foster a love of theater and the arts while also promoting social justice and community building.
8. The Young Vic in London has a Young Associates program that offers training, mentoring, and performance opportunities for young people aged 18-25 who are interested in pursuing a career in theater. The program aims to promote diversity and inclusivity in the theater industry by providing support and opportunities for underrepresented groups.

About Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj (RRAS)

Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj (RRAS) is one of the oldest and most eminent theatrical groups of Alwar excels in its duty to make significant contributions towards the enhancement of society. It is a prominent theater group based in the city of Alwar in the Indian state of Rajasthan. This theatre organization came into existence with the relentless efforts of Mr. Dwarika Prasad, Mr. Narayan Mukhia, Mr. Murlidharan Sharma, and Mr. Ramji Dangi. The present name of 'Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj' traces its history to the culmination of two organizations named Shri HarikirtanSamaj (1916) and Abhay Samaj (the 1920s). In 1931, these two organizations were merged to form a new one, which was the '**Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj**' as the title of '*Raj Rishi*' was awarded to the then **Highness Maharaja**. Hence to pay allegiance to him, the new name of the organization was kept as 'Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj'. It is worth remembering that Alwar's Highness Jai Singh was a constant appreciator and supporter of theatres organized by RRAS which used to provide financial support for several new establishments. For instance, in 1919, when Highness Jai Singh watched the **Ramleela** program by RRAS for the first time, he was so surprised and felt delighted to see such kind of emerging talent in the city that he gave a grant of Rs 300/-. Similarly, in the same year, he gave another grant of Rs 1000/-. Furthermore, in the year 1931, he made yet another grant of Rs 10,000/- for the maintenance of their theatrical activities.

Over the years, Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj has become an iconic name in the world of Indian theater, known for its socially relevant and thought-provoking plays. The group has performed extensively across India, and has also traveled to several international theater festivals. Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj's plays often address issues of social justice, gender inequality, communal harmony, and environmental sustainability. The group's performances are known for their creative use of music, dance, and visual elements, which help to engage the audience and convey powerful messages. One of the most famous plays of Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj is "Birju Maharaj Ki Raasleela," which explores issues of gender and caste discrimination in Indian society. The play is based on a folk tale and features powerful performances by the group's actors and dancers. Apart from its theatrical performances, Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj is also involved in various social work activities. The group runs a theater training program for underprivileged youth in Alwar, providing them with a means of creative expression and a path towards personal growth. The group has also been involved in initiatives aimed at promoting communal harmony and environmental sustainability in the region.

Fig-1.1
Performance by RRAS



While modern theatrical groups in Alwar like **Rang Sanskar (Rangam)** run in urbanized society and folk theatres are known for their prevalence in rural circles, **Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj** is one of India's handpicked Parsi theatres which is located in the Alwar city of Rajasthan. There are 12 to 13 theatrical groups prevalent in the city, of which the Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj has the credit of being the oldest which carries the legacy of Parsi culture hitherto. The theatre still runs after completing 105 years among all other modern theatres. Of many Parsi theatres prevalent in India, Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj holds a predominant place among all. Even now, Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj hosts drama that denotes the popularity of the site and its legacy in the history of theatres. It is the result of the constant support and dedication of the members of the Samaj to society.

This theatre group marked the true commencement of theatres in Alwar by enacting the scene of 'NaradMoh' (which is a part of Ram Leela). The success of this act led to the beginning of theatrical activities in Alwar. Moreover, RRAS has preserved the legacy of the Parsi style in its theatres. Parsi style has brought a new dimension to the theatrical activities of Alwar, an ancient theatrical style that conducts the Parsi style of plays.

Fig-1.2
Ramleela Contest organized on the Occasion of 100th anniversary of RRAS.



The major dramas performed by RRAS are **Ram Leela and BharathariNatak**. Due to the tremendous popularity of RRAS, it upholds the obligation for encouraging and promoting the tradition and culture of Hindu Mythology.

Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj is not only a theatrical group that propagates art and culture, but also understands its responsibility towards the general public. In this context, the present paper discusses and explores the social activities undertaken by RRAS so far.

Overall, Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj's contribution to Indian theater and social work has been immense. The group's commitment to using theater as a means of social change and upliftment has inspired generations of artists and social activists in India and beyond.

Social Works by Raj Rishi Abhay Samaj (RRAS)

This organization had made several contributions by helping and supporting people during major catastrophic events like wars, floods, etc. which affected humanity on a large scale. When the Indo-China war took place in the year 1962, RRAS organized the play 'Maharaja Bharthari' at Ramleela Maidan (Kishangarh) and Jaipur to make donations to 'The National Defence Fund'. RRAS raised 10,000/- rupees which were donated to the cause. Similarly, at the time of the Gujarat earthquake, the organization donated an amount of 11,000/- rupees to the victims of the earthquake. RRAS also built the statue of Swami Vivekanand on 01/08/1970, where Vivekanand Jayanti is celebrated every year on 12th January with huge fanfare. The members of RRAS distribute food to needy people as and when they. The above instance shows how RRAS also works in public awareness programs by commemorating events like this.

In 1998-99, RRAS got the temple Bharathari Dham constructed near their theatre. Temples are considered the most sacred place, where people find a union with God. In this temple, the deities of lord Rama's family, Lord Shiva's family, and Lord Hanuman were erected. The statue of the local deity "Baba Bharathari" was also enshrined. The entire expense of the temple construction and maintenance was done by the members of

RRAS. Temples play an important role in showing the culture and beliefs of the people. Apart from its concern for society, RRAS has been providing financial assistance to its artists on serious health concerns. It had also organized a regular ‘Eye Check-Up Camp’, which was free of cost.

Fig-1.2
Eye Check-Up Camp organized by RRAS



RRAS also intends to create job opportunities for artists and non-artist as well. When the theatres of Ram Leela and Bharathari take place, several people get employed daily. These include sound system operators, people who undertake the responsibility of seating arrangement, backstage, costumes, musicians, people who mend the equipment, and so on. Even on socio-cultural fronts, RRAS has always marked its presence by getting involved in inter-state competitions. For example, RRAS had participated in the Shri Ram Leela competitions of Bharat Bhavan that was held in Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh), in which they secured first position. The scene that was enacted by them was “Lord Ram Van Gaman Leela”. This event was organized by the Department of Arts & Culture (Govt. of Madhya Pradesh). Moreover, the play ‘Maharaja Bharthari’ was staged for 3 days at the invitation of the Department of Arts & Culture, Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh). Such involvements demonstrate that RRAS takes up challenges and gives immense opportunity to their artists to have good exposure and hence develops their competitive skills.

The incomparable efforts made by the institution to maintain the integrity of rural art, culture & heritage are applaudable. For instance, RRAS organized a healthy competition among the Ram Leela Mandals of the Alwar district on 05/01/2016. The purpose was to give opportunities to the budding artists of the rural circle of Alwar. All the teams were instructed to recreate the scene of ‘Sitaharan’. Out of 14 teams, ‘Kala Mandir (Rajgarsh)’ secured the first position. Cash prizes were given to the winner and the runner-up teams. In addition to this, the entire arrangement of the 3-day stays of all the teams, food, and all facilities was organized by RRAS at their own expense. If the efforts to be made by the members of RRAS continue, the future of the emerging rural artists will be bright and their proficiency in art and culture will also be flourished.

The devotion and passion of the artists can be seen through the fact that from the day of rehearsal till the final shows, they work tirelessly without charging any amount. A maximum of them are employed in different sectors, despite this they serve their duty in the day and reach for rehearsal at night that continues till late hours. During the main shows, the play starts at 9 or 10 pm and continues till early morning. Even though after performing till late they join their work and get back to show in the evening. This kind of dedication is very rare to be seen in today’s time.

It’s only because of their selfless attitude that RRAS has reached the apex in its performances and maintains Alwar’s socio-cultural integrity. The community service by RRAS is noteworthy during the Corona pandemic. It is worth noticing how the members of RRAS could gather funds for the affected people and distribute medicines and kits to the public for free at cost. It was the period when the entire country was struggling for its basic livelihood, but here, organizations like RRAS stepped up to serve humanity.

Furthermore, in 2021, RRAS donated an amount of Rs. 31,000 for the construction of Ram Mandir. Such cases indicate that RRAS never falls behind in providing donations. Apart from this, RRAS often provides its stage to other organizations to conduct their events at a very nominal rate. It is the only theatre in Alwar which has a stage and auditorium.

Children are society’s future; therefore, strengthening their potential will help refine their skills. They will start facing the audience at a younger age which would benefit them in gaining confidence and overcoming stage phobia. Thus, keeping that in mind, on the occasion of ‘Ram Navami’ on 10th April 2022, RRAS organized a ‘Fancy Dress Competition’ on a grand scale. Around 150 students participated. Each child performed exemplary well on the given theme i.e. ‘Mythology’. Prizes were given to the position holders, whereas consolation prizes were distributed.

The above instances are true examples to showcase how theatres strive to facilitate social reforms in the traditional structure through its effective power of expression. Similarly, RRAS is constantly striving to nurture,

promote and protect cultural values and do commendable service/work for society. Overall, the theatre is using its resources and platforms to make a positive impact on their communities through social work activities that promote diversity, inclusivity, and community building.

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