

Folk theatre improves psychosocial work in Kashmir

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This article shows how a psychosocial project initiated by a Western, medical humanitarian organisation can connect with non-Western local traditions. In this case, the traditional folk theatre of the rural areas in Kashmir is used as a medium for psycho-education.

Keywords: folk theatre, psycho-education, local tradition

Folk Theatre in Kashmir

Folk theatre is an old tradition in the Kashmir Valley. It has always been a means of communicating a message that is through the performance. Folk theatre groups are known as 'Pather' and the actors that are part of a particular Pather are often members of the same family, or live in the same locality. Members are exclusively male, due to the prohibition of women performers in Kashmir. The performance normally involves singing and dancing. Some actors play traditional musical instruments like the Kashmiri sitar, drums, flutes and *santor*. A clown is usually involved as well, and is mainly responsible for making jokes and interacting with the audience. The actors dress in colourful costumes and it is normal for men to play the role of women enduring the performance.

The various Pather specialise in themes that

are central to their performance. Some groups are well known for criticising the government for abo corruption or the destruction of the natural environment. Other groups use their performance to raise awareness in the Valley about health-related topics such as vaccination campaigns or family planning

Objectives of the Activity

In 2000, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Government Medical College (GMC) began implementing a psychosocial project in Ganderbal block, a subdivision of Srinagar in the Kashmir Valley.

This pilot project (which ended in July 2003) was an innovative psychosocial programme; its main objective was to contribute to the reduction of the psychosocial problems of the population living in the Kashmir Valley, caused by traumatic stress induced by the chronic conflict in this region.

One component of the programme was the re-introduction of traditional music and cultural activities which had declined in the past 15 years. MSF, therefore, decided to use traditional folk theatre as a medium for psycho-education and approached the folk theatre group called 'Band Pather' in Wathura village (Budgam District). Several

other groups also joined in our efforts.

Our intentions were as follows:

1. to explain to the audience the causes of psychosocial stress in individuals and their communities;
2. to reintroduce traditional forms of theatrical communication (according to the Kashmiri people these traditions had almost completely disappeared in the last 14 years of conflict);
3. to offer the people an enjoyable atmosphere which has been missing in recent times.

Design and implementation of the Activity

MSF fieldworkers had several meetings with the *Band Pather* actors. A script was written by the leader of the theatre group, based on the information provided by MSF. It focused on the causes of stress and tension in Kashmir, the symptoms, the way people present their suffering, and the ways of coping that may help to reduce the level of stress. The MSF fieldworkers also asked the actors to make it clear in their performance that symptoms of stress are a natural consequence of conflict in Kashmir. In this way the audience would receive the message that they are not abnormal, but that the *situation* they face is abnormal. At the end of each performance an MSF expatriate would inform the audience about the activities of our organisation. The 30- to 40-minute performance was usually attended by about 300 men, women, and children in each location¹. Fortunately, there were never any security problems that affected our work.

Synopsis of the play

The whole play was developed by the *Pather* actors. MSF only introduced them to the concepts of stress and coping. The actors

informed MSF that they are well aware of these types of problems and that they also suffer from them.

The presentation begins with the *Band Pather* actors arriving in a central place in each village and loudly playing their flutes and drums. All folk theatres begin their performance in this manner so the villagers immediately recognize that there will be a *Pather* performing in their locality.

While the villagers are gathering the *Pather* start playing traditional Kashmiri songs and often the audience join in.

The first actor to be highlighted is the clown. He is the person responsible for communication between the actors and the spectators. He explains to the audience the purpose of the *Pather*, and also makes jokes to make the audience laugh and relax.

The play starts with a common situation that happens in the village. Actors representing village elders gather together and comment on the behaviour of a specific villager. According to the elders, this man must be crazy because he has been quarrelling with neighbours, having physical fights with his wife, and lately he is always dressed very badly and is unshaven. While the elders are discussing what they consider the crazy behaviour of this person, two men suddenly jump into the scene. Two men, who appear to be the 'mad' man and a neighbour, start fighting in the middle of the crowd.

New actors enter the scene and separate the persons fighting. The wife of the man also enters and explains how she has been suffering from her husband.

The man is allowed to express what is happening to him. He explains the problems he has had at work, his feelings of insecurity for both himself and his family - that he has not been able to fulfil his commitment as head of the family because he feels unwell most of the time.

At this time, the teacher of the village enters the scene. In Kashmir, teachers are usually considered to be very knowledgeable and are highly respected. The teacher listens to the man's problems. The man is now allowed to express his worries and also to express the reasons why he believes he is behaving in a different way.

The teacher then makes a summary of the problems the man is facing and he explains to the actors and to the audience that his behaviour is not mad but that it is a manifestation of what is called stress. The teacher gives some advice to the man. The teacher suggests that the mad man should not keep the problems to himself and that he should share and discuss his problems with the ones he trusts. The teacher also suggests that he should spend some time doing activities he enjoys like gardening and playing with his children. These simple activities would, for sure, reduce his stress. After this scene is over all the actors join in a circle and dance and sing traditional Kashmiri songs.

When they stop singing, the actors that represent the village elders come back to the scene and the teacher is again talking with them as in a normal day in the village. They talk about trivial things and mention the problems of the man that was judged as crazy. While they are talking, the man comes to the centre of the stage. He is now very well dressed, clean and shaved and he has come to thank the teacher because he now feels much better and he believes that all his problems have been solved with the help and advice provided by the teacher.

With this happy ending, the flutes and the drums are played again and the actors all sing and dance together.

Dealing with psychosocial concepts

This was the way some simple clinical concepts were introduced into a dramatic performance. Factors contributing to stress, stress symptoms, presentation, and coping mechanisms, were part of the dramatic presentation but were generally not labelled as clinical concepts. Only the word 'stress' had to be mentioned because this concept is very well known in the community and this also translates easily into the Kashmiri language. It is also important to note that the clinical presentation of the man in the play, his behaviour, and the advice given by the teacher, were all developed by the actors of the *Pather*.

MSF has also been running complementary psycho-education sessions in several villages in Ganderbal block. As the results of the evaluation of the *Band Pather* theatre show, we believe that the addition of a visually dynamic component to the psycho-educational session greatly enhances the impact of a standard psycho-educational session, where someone speaks and the others listen. The traditional format of the theatre added more believability to MSF activities and made a valuable contribution to Kashmiri cultural maintenance.

Evaluation

The objective of the evaluation of the Folk Theatre was to get the opinion of the villagers about this type of activity and to listen to their advice for possible future presentations. The villagers were very attentive during the performance of the *Band Pather* and laughter was common after specific parts of the performance. The immediate feedback from the villagers after the presentation was very good. They told us that the problems mentioned in the theatre are the real problems being faced by the

Kashmiri people. One old woman said that she was very happy that we had brought the theatre to her home. The last time she had the opportunity to see a performance was 15 years ago.

For the evaluation, MSF was planning to interview six people (two married men, two married women and two adolescents) in the localities where *Band Pather* performed—Shohama, Tullmulla and Ganderbal. In Ganderbal, only two people could be found who had attended the theatre presentation (Ganderbal is an urban area and people that attended the activities were mainly passers-by and not locals like in the other two localities). A total of 14 people gave their opinion about the performances.

They were asked the following questions:

- What did you think about the Folk Theatre presentation?
- What was the message behind the presentation?
- Does it reflect the current problems of yourself or of people that you know?
- How can people reduce their stress and tension? Do you use this method? Will you use this method?
- What are your suggestions for future presentations?

All the people interviewed appreciated the performance, saying that it was very good or even excellent. Some people said it should be repeated in the future. Some people remarked that the message was very well delivered. One person commented:

'It was very nice, it was as if happier former times had come back. It seems as if things are peaceful and normality is returning.'

Most of the people interviewed understood that the central message was about stress and tension. People also expressed what they understood to be the causes and symptoms of stress. Coping mechanisms were also mentioned, such as talking to friends,

working, and praying. One person said that the message was very clear on how to remain free of tensions.

The majority of the people interviewed mentioned that the presentation reflected the current problems the Kashmiri people face. They said that people are very much stressed due to existing conflict and unemployment. Five of the 14 people interviewed said that they knew someone, either in their village or in their family, who was suffering from the problems mentioned. Almost all of the people interviewed could mention some ways for reducing stress or tension, such as trying to keep yourself busy, praying to God, talking to people, expressing your problems to the ones you trust, sharing problems with friends, not being alone, laughing, doing breathing exercises. One person said that watching folk theatre in itself is a way of reducing stress. All interviewees said they were already trying to use these methods.

Future performances

The respondents gave some valuable suggestions for future performances. Some suggested addressing topics such as unemployment, violence, and torture. Others proposed to add *chakri* (traditional classic music) and *lady shah* (folk music with a lyrical message in a humorous format) to the performance.

In conclusion, the Folk Theatre activity was successful. The local people enjoyed it very much. The activity in itself seems to be a good way of reducing levels of stress and tension, and the actors managed to deliver their messages in a way that was easily understood.

In our assessment, folk theatre is a very effective way of communicating information to Kashmiri villagers: information that both the villagers and MSF believe is nec-

essary to improve quality of life and to reduce stress-related problems.

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¹ There is a video (on VCD) available about this presentation at the MSF Delhi and MSF Srinagar offices.

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