ENACTING EMPOWERMENT IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPACES: THE ROLE
OF TARU IN FACILITATING SOCIAL CHANGE AMONG YOUNG VILLAGE
WOMEN IN INDIA

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Saumya Pant

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by

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ABSTRACT

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ENACTING EMPOWERMENT IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPACES: THE ROLE OF TARU IN FACILITATING SOCIAL CHANGE AMONG YOUNG VILLAGE WOMEN IN INDIA (224 pp.)

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The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the impact of an entertainment-education radio soap opera, Taru, on young women in village Abirpur of India’s Bihar State, who organize for social change in the public spaces dominated by men and the private spaces within their households. To understand the enactment of empowerment, I argue that these spaces are discursively created, maintained, and propagated by the young women of Abirpur. I use qualitative methods of inquiry and privilege feminist ethnography to record the stories of the young women of Abirpur.

The young women use public spaces to share their stories and reshape their realities through discursive practices. They organize into groups like the Taru Drama Club to share their experiences with other men and women. While organizing in these groups, they create discursive spaces where they have an opportunity to exchange their views on important social topics. It also opens up space for boys and girls to dialogue with one another. This unique discursive space created by Taru leads to certain transformative practices by promoting interaction between different groups with differing ideologies.

This study also investigates the role of a participatory theater workshop in empowering the young women in Abirpur to improve their status in the community. It
explores the workshop as a critical site for change where the public and the private sphere collide. In a society where girls do not leave their village until they get married, the theater workshop encouraged the girls to travel to a near-by village to interact with boys and girls of other villages. This was transformatory for the young girls of Abirpur. These girls performed in front of the village community and thereby shared their private stories in a public forum.

The entertainment-education strategy allows listeners to participate in the construction and consumption of educational messages over a period of time. This ensures the engagement and interaction of the listener with the media message furthering the process of social change.

Approved: ____________________________________________________________

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Raymie E. McKerrow
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To my parents, Geeta Pant (Amma) and Harish Pant (Babu).
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

More than 60 years ago, at a time when women were raised to stay at home and take care of the family, my maternal grandmother began her doctoral studies. After a year of course work, she got married and could not complete her Ph.D. It is said that one’s life journey is shaped by the journeys of people from eons ago. My grandmother is one such person who motivated, encouraged and challenged me to complete my Ph.D. I offer this dissertation to the women of the world who, because of life circumstances, could not fulfill their dreams. I hope the stories of Usha and others in this dissertation inspire the women of the world to create new paths.

I have been blessed in my life with people who have offered me new paths of discovery and learning. In 1997, a chance meeting with my co-advisor, Arvind Singhal, opened the doors of research and graduate education. Through these ten years, he has patiently suffered my doubts, quietly and appropriately nudged me to keep going, and given me many opportunities to travel, conduct research and to share my findings. On a personal level, Arvind and his wife Anuja have showered me with affection, support and many hot meals. Their presence and their love made this dissertation possible.

While Arvind provided me with the perfect context for my research, my co-advisor Raymie McKerrow shared with me his passion of Habermas, Foucault, and many other outstanding theoreticians. There have been a million times I have gone to Raymie for intellectual and personal support. Raymie trusted my abilities when I did not. He believed in me and with words of encouragement, with lunches and coffee, and with many socials at his place, he was confident that I would complete my dissertation. I am deeply indebted to him.
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This study would have been impossible without Usha, Manoj Maharaj, Mukesh Maharaj, and Seema in Abirpur, India. Thank you for opening the doors of your homes and your heart for me. My stay in Abirpur was special because of your love and affection. I would also like to thank Akhilesh of Janani, Rajiv and Dheeraj, Devendra, Mumtaaz Bhai, and Chetna for helping me with my fieldwork. My stay in Patna was comfortable because of Bandana’s parents who fed me with food and with ideas about development in Bihar.

I dedicate my dissertation to my amazing parents, Geeta and Harish Pant. You always encouraged and supported my dreams, loved me through my trials and tribulations, and stood steadfastly by me when I thought I could not write any more. You are the reason I am here today and feel truly blessed to be your child. My brothers Ashish and Avneesh, with their respective spouses, Anjali and Meenal, watched, waited and jumped with joy when I completed my dissertation. I cannot thank you enough for the many ways you have supported me – emotionally, intellectually and financially! I would like to thank all my family members who have contributed in many special ways. My grandfather (Barbaju) who was an advocate of education, Ama who loves me unconditionally, Nana and Nani for loving me and being proud of me, Amma and Daddy for their unconditional acceptance of who I am, Vivek Mama and Mami for parenting me and giving me hope, Varad and Manasi for being more than cousins, Subodh Mama and
Mami for always looking out for me, Shreshta for humoring me, and Nanka Mausi for taking good care of me. Thank you to all those who make me believe in the institution of family. This dissertation is dedicated to all of you.

The journey of discovery continues with our two delightful daughters Paavni and Suhaani. Their endless questions and funny comments teach me to laugh, keep life in perspective and be always open to outcome. This journey has been so enriching due to the love, support and constant assurance of my dear husband, Nagesh. He has taught me the virtues of humility, compassion, and kindness as he mentored me through this process. I owe the Almighty lots of gratitude for bringing him into my life and blessing me with his love.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment and gender equality are at the heart of all development efforts. Obstacles to women’s empowerment spring from cultural stereotypes and resilient gender roles that become major stumbling blocks to women’s participation in decision-making on a basis equal with men. While these gender roles compel women to stay within the confines of the private sphere, the public sphere, on the other hand, has also built-in barriers to women’s equal participation in decision-making and politics. Especially in India the public sphere is dominated by men who govern the activities that take place within it. Men’s control is more amplified in rural communities where women are illiterate and do not know how to demand their rights and voice their opinions on matters of public interest. Even within the private sphere, the women are at the receiving end as they negotiate control about role expectations with their in-laws and other members of the household.

In order to address the issues of women in the public and the private spheres and understand how they negotiate and enact empowerment within rural India, my dissertation project centers around an investigation of an entertainment-education radio soap opera called *Taru*, broadcast in the Indian State of Bihar in 2002-03. The roots of my interest in entertainment-education go back to the summer of 1997 when I had an opportunity to visit the village of Lutsaan, a village in northern India, to study the impact of an entertainment-education radio soap opera, *Tinka Tinka Sukh* (Happiness Lies in Small Things). I had just completed my master’s degree in communication studies from the University of Pune, India, and was eager to put my education to use. I was invited by a research organization in New Delhi, India, Centre for Media Studies (CMS) to
in Lutsaan were inspired by *Tinka Tinka Sukh* (TTS) to make significant social changes in their lives. *Tinka Tinka Sukh*, a 104 episode entertainment-education radio soap opera, was broadcast in India 1996-1997, and promoted gender equality, small family size, family harmony, environmental conservation, and HIV prevention (Papa, Singhal, Law, Sood, Rogers, Shefner-Rogers, & Pant, 2000).

Some 150,000 audience letters were received by All India Radio (AIR) in response to "*Tinka Tinka Sukh*" during its one year of broadcast (Sood et al, 1998). One letter from Birendra Singh Kushwaha, a tailor in village Lutsaan, was especially intriguing. In January, 1997, Kushwaha sent a 21-inch by 27-inch poster-size letter, signed by 184 members of the village, including men, women, youth, and children, who pledged to reject the practice of dowry, inspired by their listening of *Tinka Tinka Sukh* (TTS).

The executive producer of *Tinka Tinka Sukh*, Usha Bhasin, shared Kushwaha’s letter with Dr. Arvind Singhal, an Ohio University based professor who, in partnership with Center for Media Studies, India, was studying the effects of *Tinka Tinka Sukh* in India.

The following section provides a timeline of the main events leading to my dissertation. It begins with the broadcast of *Tinka Tinka Sukh* in 1996-1997 and highlights my field visit to village Abirpur in July 2003 to gauge effects associated with *Taru*. This section concludes with the recent visit to village Abirpur by a research associate, Ami Sengupta, to investigate the role of men in the process of social change.
Events Leading to the Dissertation

In 1996, an entertainment-education radio soap opera, *Tinka Tinka Sukh* (Happiness Lies in Small Things) was broadcast in northern India. It promoted gender equality, small-family size, HIV prevention, among others. In January, 1997, an intriguing poster-size letter arrived at All India radio signed by 184 members of village Lutsaan in U. P. State. The signators pledged to reject the practice of dowry, inspired by their listening of "*Tinka Tinka Sukh*." This poster letter led to the initiation of a village-level case study in Lutsaan on the community effects of radio. Under a research sub-contract from Ohio University, Mumtaaz Ahmed of the Center of Media Studies, India and I (under the guidance of Professor Singhal) led a research team to Lutsaan to understand the community effects of listening to *Tinka Tinka Sukh*. Our field visits suggested that community-listening to TTS resulted in increases in girls’ school enrollments, increases in cases of vasectomy among men as a family planning method, and increased acceptance of new ideas. During this Lutsaan visit, Dr. Singhal encouraged me to enroll in Ohio University’s MA program in Interpersonal Communication in Winter, 1998.

In the summer of 1998, I returned to Lutsaan village to collect further insights on the community effects of listening to *Tinka Tinka Sukh*, especially since our previous visit one year ago. I lived in the village for 15 days, becoming a member of the village community. I became a sister to some, a daughter to many. I learned first-hand the implications of doing ethnographic work within a community.

In March 2000, I defended my master’s research paper, “Media-Sparked Social Changes in a North Indian Village: An Ethnography,” which centered on my experiences in Lutsaan. It
described the organizing activities occurring in Lutsaan, sparked by TTS and how the community was reflecting on these social change activities.

The lessons from our community case study in Lutsaan on the effects of *Tinka Tinka Sukh* (TTS) suggested that the integration of on-air entertainment-education broadcasts with ground-based community listening helped listeners to engage in reflection, discussions, and dialogue on pertinent local issues, such as the practice of dowry, reproductive health, etc. These lessons learned from TTS were put to action in a meeting in New York between David Andrews and Kate Randolph of Population Communications International; Gopi Gopalakrishan, Arisingh Dutt, and Shejo Bose of Janani; and Arvind Singhal of Ohio University. In this meeting it was decided to launch another entertainment education intervention to promote reproductive health. The idea of *Taru* was conceived. In the next 17 months, the Taru Project progressed rapidly, as roles and responsibilities of the partners were defined.

In February 2002, prior to the broadcast of the serial, ground-based publicity for *Taru* was undertaken by Janani through the ground-based infrastructure of 20,000 rural health practitioners of Janani in 20,000 of Bihar’s villages. Posters, leaflets, stickers promoting *Taru* were distributed. In addition, in four villages in Bihar, India -- Kamtaul, Madhopur, Chandrahatti, and Abipur – folk performances publicizing *Taru* were held, each drawing an audience of 600 to 800 people. The social themes of *Taru* were woven in these performances by Devendra Sharma of Ohio University, and members of Rangkram (a local theater group in Patna, Bihar). The folk performances were promoted by Janani’s local rural health practitioners. The audiences responded favorably to these performances and were eager to listen to *Taru*. After the performances, listener groups were formed in each of the four villages to promote collective
listening. Each group was given diaries to document its impressions of the radio soap opera, which were collected post-broadcast.

*Taru* began broadcasting in Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattisgarh States in India. *Taru* was a 52-episode entertainment-education radio soap opera promoting social themes of gender equality, small family size, reproductive health, and community development. Ohio University, under the leadership of Dr. Arvind Singhal was awarded a research grant to investigate the effects of *Taru*.

After eight rounds of field visits in 2002 to village Abirpur and one in March 2003 (after the broadcast of last episode of *Taru*), it was evident that *Taru* was effective in influencing positive behavior changes among listeners. In April, Arvind Singhal convened a retreat at Ohio University to share the findings with the research team (Devendra Sharma, Ami Sengupta, Ketan Chitnis, Yogita Sharma, Saumya Pant, Nagesh Rao, and Arvind Singhal). From the data collected in India, I was deeply moved by the efforts of young female and male *Taru* listeners who opened a school for *dalit* (backward caste) children in their village, Abirpur. I had been looking for a dissertation study and after discussions with Arvind Singhal and Raymie Mckerrow (co-chairs of my PhD Committee), I decided to study the ways in which young female listeners in village Abirpur were negotiating their roles in public and private spaces. My previous experience in village Lutsaan encouraged me to stay in village Abirpur as an ethnographer.

Since the pre-publicity folk performances were highly popular in Bihar, Devendra Sharma and Arvind Singhal planned a participatory theater workshop with young listeners of *Taru* from these four villages to be held in July 2003. I orchestrated my stay in village Abirpur around the workshop so that I could help Devendra Sharma facilitate the workshop in village
Kamtaul, the site of the workshop. The workshop had significant implications for my dissertation research as it provided a unique space to the young female participants to enact their private lives in public space.

Before my visit to village Abirpur, Devendra Sharma had visited Manoj Maharaj, Rural Health Practitioner (RHP) of Abirpur, to inform him about my plans to stay in Abirpur. Devendra also informed the RHP about the theater workshop and realized that it would be difficult to ensure female participation in the workshop. I arrived in Abirpur on July 9, 2003 with the purpose to engage with the community and experience their way of life. In doing so, I would perhaps be able to understand how the young women influenced by Taru enact their changing identities in public and private spaces.

In July 2004, Ami Sengupta, a research associate, traveled to Bihar to investigate the role of men in the process of development. Her research agenda included an exploration of competing notions of masculinities, spousal communication on reproductive health, and lower caste perspectives on the Taru project (Ami Sengupta’s fieldnotes, 2004).

My journey from Lutsaan to Abirpur was reflective and deliberative. When I visited Lutsaan in 1997, I thought of myself as an ‘outsider’ to the community whose job was to objectively observe. During my stay in Lutsaan, I realized that I was becoming part of the community and I was enjoying it. In my visit to Abirpur (July 2003), equipped with theory and classes in methods, I knew that I had to be an ‘insider’ to do justice to my research. From a feminist perspective, by virtue of being in the community, I share the responsibility of enacting everyday life as a member of the community. That was my ethical responsibility to the community.

This journey from an ‘outsider’ to an ‘insider’ was illuminating and instructive. While in Abirpur, I did not fight my need to belong to the community. I was interacting with and neither did I struggle to identify with every aspect of the community life. I valued spontaneity in my relationships with the community and relied on an authentic
space where I could be myself. This was my personal lesson learned from *Tinka Tinka Sukh*.

During the broadcast of *Tinka Tinka Sukh*, informal and fragmented listener groups were formed that collectively heard the program and discussed its message post-broadcast. While collecting data from Lutsaan, the research teams realized how collective listening of *Tinka Tinka Sukh* had spurred conversations that were socially charged and led to radical reforms. For example, the postmaster of Lutsaan, who was an active listener of *Tinka Tinka Sukh*, refused to accept dowry in his son’s wedding as a result of conversations that were sparked after broadcast of a specific episode of *Tinka Tinka Sukh* that dealt with the issue of dowry. This account was quickly noted by All India Radio and implemented in their next production, *Yeh Kahan Aa Gaye Hum* (Where Have We Arrived?).

*Yeh Kahan Aa Gaye Hum* was a 52-episode soap opera that addressed environmental concerns like deforestation affecting the rural communities in India. Male and female radio listening clubs were formed in Lutsaan prior to its broadcast in 1998. When I visited Lutsaan in summer of 1998, broadcast of *Yeh Kahan Aa Gaye Hum* was in its second month. The members of the listening club were actively involved in implementing the messages of the radio soap opera. Singhal, Pant, and Rogers (2000) talk about the members’ courage and initiative in this outstanding illustration from Lutsaan:

The listeners’ club launched several social campaigns to save the environment. Inspired by the radio serial, members went on a bicycle tour to educate the public to conserve fuel, thus saving the environment from pollution. They rode to the nearest railway junction where several auto-rickshaws waited, with their ignitions
on, for the train to pass. The Lutsaan ‘activists’ explained to the drivers the hazards of air pollution, encouraging them to switch off their ignitions. The drivers initially thought that the club members were crazy. But the Lutsaan team persuaded them to switch off their idling engines (p. 177).

This intervention clearly indicated the success of listener groups in advocating for social change. *Taru* can be seen as a product of lessons learned from earlier entertainment-education interventions. It is a multi-layered approach, as it uses multiple resources to reach the intended audience. The research design of the *Taru* included both qualitative as well as quantitative methods of data collection. It was a strategic and systematic approach to gathering data over a period of one year and three months.

*Taru* began its broadcast in February, 2002 and promoted gender equality, small family size, reproductive health, caste and communal harmony, and community development (Singhal, Sharma, Papa, and Witte, 2004). One episode was broadcast each week on Friday at 8:00 p.m., with a repeat broadcast each Sunday at 3:40 p.m. Each episode of *Taru* began with a theme song, and a brief summary of the previous episode. Each episode ended with an epilogue that posed a question to the listeners, inviting them to write-in their responses to AIR.

As documented by Singhal et al (2004), a research team at Ohio University (1) designed the Project’s theoretical framework for integrating *Taru’s* on-the-air and on-the-ground activities; (2) carried out a pre-test of *Taru’s* pilot episodes in collaboration with the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), New Delhi; and (3) implemented the summative research evaluation plan (detailed later) for the present project in collaboration with CMS. Janani sponsored the broadcasts of *Taru* in the four states, worked with Ogilvy Outreach, a Bombay-based advertising and PR agency, to develop *Taru’s* logo and the
pre-program publicity materials (posters, stickers, flyers, and wall paintings), distributed these materials to RHPs, and provided logistical support to (a) Brij Lok Madhuri, India to conduct the Taru folk performances, and (b) Ohio University and the Centre for Media Studies, India to conduct the field-based research in Bihar State. All India Radio was responsible for producing the radio serial, broadcasting it, and for inviting and collecting listeners’ feedback.

Based on rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis compiled by Singhal et al (2004), the authors argue that “synergistic possibilities for social action can emerge when entertainment-education radio broadcasts are strategically integrated with community-based group listening and locally-available health care services” (p. i). The findings from the quantitative data analysis suggested that the higher the intensity of the on-air/on-ground intervention, the higher the percent of respondents who knew about Taru’s messages, and higher the numbers of those who actually listened to Taru.

The folk performances to publicize Taru were carried out a week prior to the broadcast of the soap opera. These performances were enacted in four villages of Bihar—Kamtaul, Madhopur, Chandrahatti, and Abirpur—and attracted huge audiences. In a consolidated report, Singhal et al. (2004) note:

These four villages provided a unique opportunity to qualitatively assess the process through which community members enact system-level changes as a result of exposure to Taru. Initially, we focused our efforts to assess community-level changes mostly in Village Abirpur—designating it as the ‘community case study village’ (p. 157).

---

1 The consolidated report, “Effects of Taru, a radio soap opera, on audiences in India: A quantitative and qualitative analysis” (January, 2004), was compiled through the coordinated efforts of 18 project principals representing seven organizations.
The large number of spectators that were assembled in the villages to watch the folk performances prior to the broadcast of *Taru* indicated the success of this initiative. After such a success, the research team in Ohio University, led by Arvind Singhal and Devendra Sharma, decided to organize a participatory theater workshop in July 2003 for the four villages in Bihar.

The young radio listeners of the four villages were restless as the broadcast of *Taru* had come to an end and they felt empty without it. We thought that this was a good opportunity to visit them and ask them to reflect how *Taru* had influenced their lives. The workshop was to be held at village Kamtaul under the patronage of RHP Shailendra Kumar and officers of Janani, but participation was requested from all four villages. It was not easy for parents to send their daughters to a strange village to simply act! Abirpur was 20 miles away from Kamtaul, and the parents of female listeners had reservations about their daughters traveling to a far-off village to participate in drama. In Bihar, the tradition was that young and unmarried girl does not step out of the boundary of the village until she gets married.

I organized my visit to Abirpur around the theater workshop so that I could help in its facilitation and in convincing the parents of female listeners to send their daughters to the workshop. It was challenging but gratifying to see equal female participation in the theater workshop that became a historical event for these villages in Bihar. The workshops gave the female participants a space to dialogue and enact their empowerment as experienced through the listening of *Taru*. 
Purpose of the Dissertation

While much work has been done to assess the impact of E-E programs on audiences, there is virtually no literature on how young female listeners of E-E programs enact empowerment in the public and private spaces that they occupy. The research carried out during the broadcast of *Tinka Tinka Sukh* indicated to us the critical role of women in the process of social change. It suggested how different women, young and old, were interacting with media for their personal growth. Although it shed some light on the empowering activities of the women in village Lutsaan, the purpose of the Lutsaan project was not to study the emerging roles of women in public and private spaces. To do so, one would have to systematically study the empowering activities of the young women as a result of listening to an entertainment-education soap opera. *Taru* provided me with such an opportunity to observe how the young women of village Abirpur were enacting empowerment in the public and private spaces that they occupied.

I visited India in the summer of 2003 to observe how young girls in Abirpur were using ‘public spaces’ to assert their identities and negotiate the power dynamics implicit within this public space. I wanted to understand the ideologies that dominate the public sphere in these villages and what strategies were being employed by these young girls to address them.

Since my mission was to understand the impact of E-E in organizing for social change, I wanted to observe how these women enacted their idea of empowerment in the private and public spaces. I tried to listen to their stories and understand how these women consolidate their identities by engaging in empowering activities. By doing so, I
attempted to juxtapose the liberating modernist manifesto of Habermas with an understanding of the processes of social change taking place in these villages.

At one level, I would like to discuss the complex nature of the public sphere and offer multiple perspectives and debates that privilege different epistemologies (Asen, 2000; Benhabib, 1986; Fraser, 1989; Habermas, 1989; Mumby, 2000; Squires, 2002). On the other level, I would like to re-invent the emancipatory mission of the public sphere as imagined by Habermas by proposing the inclusion of women and the peasant/working class people in its realm of influence.

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand how the young women are enacting the messages of empowerment and self-efficacy in their private spaces within their households. Further, this dissertation explores how the young women enact empowerment in public spaces predominantly occupied by men of the village society.

Another area that I want to looked at was the inherent tension and resistance experienced by young women as they (re)negotiate their newly acquired identities and observe the discursive strategies used by them to address some of these issues. By doing so, I want to suggest that this negotiated public sphere creates possibilities for resistance and change. To illustrate this, I foreground the role of a participatory theater workshop that was organized in July 2003 in Bihar, India and was attended by several female members. The workshop is critical to my dissertation, as it demonstrates the interface between private and public spheres. I believe that the theater workshop provides the young women the platform to resist dominant ideologies and offer their counter narratives of change.
I now turn to explaining why I chose Abirpur as the research site. I will do so by providing an account of my stay in Abirpur and introducing key community members who were important to my research. I will highlight a few significant events that guide the current study. To raise pertinent research questions, I will briefly discuss the theory of the public and private sphere and conclude by previewing the dissertation.

**Visit to Village Abirpur, India**

Village Abirpur in India’s Bihar State is five miles from the main road and has a population of about 500 people. When I arrived in Abirpur, the young radio listeners were involved in imbibing the messages of *Taru* in their everyday lives. They were trying to become better community members by collectively engaging in social change initiatives: The young radio listeners opened a school for under-privileged children; they abandoned tobacco chewing; started active dialogue about social evils like dowry and casteism, and encouraged the community to abandon these practices. Although the other three villages have also shown progressive signs of change, it is Abirpur that is striving to achieve sustainable development and equality for men and women. Since Abirpur had shown such promising signs of social change, I selected Abirpur as my site of dissertation data collection. In addition, Abirpur had been frequented several times by the research team and was open to outsiders visiting them. However, this was the first time that a researcher was about to stay with them for a month.

**Education and Employment**

Abirpur has a high number of educated unemployed young men who have finished college and in search of suitable employment. Most of these men had to make a
choice between education and traditional farming. Once they decide to study, it is difficult for them to become farmers. They are detached from their fields and can not go back to them.

Thus, unemployment is an ugly situation for most of the young men in the village. They are frustrated and sitting at home the whole day. Mukesh Maharaj, the Rural Health Practitioner’s (RHP) younger brother is one such person who has been looking for employment to no avail. He claims that he cannot farm anymore as he is out of touch and farming was not his ambition. This has resulted in a large outflow of young men to urban centers for employment.

Despite the alarming level of unemployment in village Abirpur, it was intriguing to discover the burning desire of the youth to change and transform the social landscape of the village. This encouraged me to visit village Abirpur and investigate the role of women in the process of social change.

While men try to seek employment in neighboring towns, several men have had to leave their families to go to far-off places in search of suitable employment. Almost ten such families are present in Abirpur where the man of the house has left in search of jobs, leaving behind his wife, children, parents, and siblings in the village. These families in particular seemed to be eager to actively participate in social-change activities.

Firstly, the wives of these men seem to be happier as they receive more affection from their husband on their occasional visits home. The husbands send home letters, gifts, and money which creates a healthy communicative space for the couple. In the absence of her husband, the woman continues to be the caregiver to her in-laws and
children, but in a paradoxical way, enjoys the increasing control she has on matters of public and private sphere. In her private domain, she can decide to send her children (especially her daughter) to school and ensure their education; in her public space, she has to step-out of the house to help with groceries, farming, or simply bringing the children back from the school. All these outdoor activities would have been the prerogative of the man of the house but in his absence, the woman has to assist her father-in-law and take the initiative to re-define gender roles. In the case of these women, this acquired mobility and independence creates the potential for a dialogic space for change. Hence, these women become critical to the process of social change.

Enactment of Empowerment: Usha and her Family

Several people in Abirpur are catalysts for change. They encourage people to think about their lives in a different way from the norm. Some of these people occupy critical spaces in the village to foster change, but most of them are confined within their homes. Although they do not have access to many resources, they engage in conversations and dialogues that create an environment for change.

As mentioned earlier, Taru influenced several men and women positively. Many listeners were immensely impacted by the messages in Taru and decided to adopt them in their everyday lives. They consciously practiced these pro-social messages and hoped that by doing so, other members of their immediate society would be positively influenced to do the same. For example, Tinkoo, a young female listener of Taru, decided to resume studies after listening to the radio program. While she internalized the message, she did not feel motivated to proliferate it to the other young female listeners in
her social group. She lacked the guidance and the confidence to mobilize a group of girls but had the determination to proactively change her way of life. Hence, she started attending school!

Although, these listeners hoped that others around them would emulate their positive behaviors, they did not set out to strategically impact social change in the society. While there were individuals who focused on changing themselves, there were few listeners who took responsibility for changing their community. These individuals dared to consciously attempt changes in their community by internalizing the messages of Taru and voicing them to the members of the community. Their motive was to positively influence the community by sometimes becoming the opinion leaders and other times role models. These individuals practiced pro-social messages in their day-to-day lives by advocating gender-equality and education for boys and girls. They fought against demeaning practices such as dowry, childmarriage, and domestic violence.

This enactment of empowerment by young radio listeners is significant to this research as it exhibits the tension between the young social activists (the young Taru listeners) and their immediate social environment. On top of that, if these young change agents are girls, it adds yet another intriguing dimension to the complex situation. As discussed in the earlier section, girls do not occupy important space in the rural society of Abirpur. They are marginalized and discriminated in comparison to the way boys are treated. They do not have any voice and cannot challenge the status quo. However, with the broadcast of Taru and efforts of the local health unit, Titli center, young girls in Abirpur were experiencing a social transformation of its own kind. They found a space
to talk about their conditions and discover avenues to address their concerns. This research is particularly interested in looking at the experiences of the young female *Taru* listeners who are struggling to create a space for communal dialogue and collective change to enhance their position in their society. Their enactment of their newly-discovered empowerment in their private and public spaces is of particular relevance to this body of research.

In the following section, I introduce two individuals who have taken the responsibility of transforming their community by becoming positive role-models for others. Both of them question the status quo and challenge the dominant ideology prevalent in the society. I discuss the role of Usha Kumari and Manoj Maharaj in the process of social change. Both these individuals work very hard to serve the interest of the community and inspire other women and men to join in their efforts of social change.

Manoj Maharaj is the Rural Health Practitioner in the *Titli* center at Abirpur. He is aided by his sister Usha Kumari in the clinic activities. At the time of my visit to Abirpur, Usha was 23 years old\(^2\) and single. She constantly resisted the dominant way of living and found her own space to express her mind. She is supported by a progressive family who continues to grow with her. She is an inspiring person who has become the role model for many girls in the village. Usha also played a critical role in influencing the folks of Abirpur to participate in the theater workshop.

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\(^2\) In the year 2004, Usha got married and lives in the neighboring town of Abirpur. With her husband’s support, she runs a pharmacy from her home and continues to effect positive change in her new environment (Personal Conversation with Usha Kumari, July 2004).
Usha: The Female Opinion Leader

Usha, who is 23 years old, resisted marriage because she wants to be financially independent before she gets married. She finished school but realized that formal education would be of no use to her as she would be married soon and would not be able to finish college. Therefore, she never went to college. According to her, girls are sent to school and then college by parents as an act of silencing them. They don’t send them there to educate them and make good citizens, but to keep them entertained and occupied. While the girls are in school, parents are always looking for a suitable match for their daughters. She knows that most of the girls are headed that way in her village.

According to Usha:

I advocate education for girls and boys. I know the boys benefit from it as they can get good jobs and be on their feet. But girls have to eventually become brides and then mothers. For the girls, education is only an amusement…a way to kill time as she is waiting for her suitor…I went to school and got the strength to resist marriage but I know most of the girls do not gather the courage to go against their families. Education taught me to be strong and to be firm about my virtues. I was lucky to be supported by an understanding family.

Usha has a loving and progressive family. They encourage Usha to find a vocation that she could engage in after marriage. According to the Janani, the spouse of the RHP has to be trained alongside to run the Titli centers. This fact helps the women to talk freely about their ailments to the female RHP and facilitates medical care. In this case, Manoj Maharaj’s wife has been trained to work with him but she has been so busy with her children that she has not been able to help her husband. Therefore, Usha, who is Manoj Maharaj’s sister, has been that person who unofficially works with her brother. She knows how to administer first aid, give injections, prescribe medication, and counsel
whenever needed. She is one of her kind as a young girl like her has never occupied such a space of power and control. She roams around door-to-door talking about different aspects of health care to women and to men. She is allowed to talk about such sensitive issues (family planning, dowry, etc.) as she is a ‘daughter’ of the village who is allowed to interact freely within the boundaries of her village – a privilege that does not extend to the *bahus* (daughters-in-law) of the village.

![Figure 1. Usha Kumari lighting the lamp for the evening (source: author).](image)

An illustration of Usha’s role in advocating the message of *Titli* center is her interaction with the young brides who marry into her village. Whenever a new bride arrives, Usha visits her and discusses different ways of practicing birth control. Usha is aware that simply educating her about birth control would not ensure its practice, as the man has to be educated as well. Since she knows that the young bride will be
uncomfortable to address this with her stranger-husband, she offers that her brother (RHP) will talk about this to him. This is very critical for the reproductive health of the young bride, as most of the brides are underage (less than 18 years) and are seldom aware of facts about sex and reproductive health.

Usha expressed her frustration several times when she talked about the limited resources available for women who want to be self-employed. Usha has learned tailoring and tailors blouses and petticoats for the local women. Although she makes very little money by doing so, this positions her as an earning member of the family and shifts the locus of power within her family context. Her sister-in-law and unemployed brother do not take her for granted and often ask her for money when they run out. She happily provides them with what she can. However, being the right hand of the RHP, and a seamstress, is not enough for Usha. She wants to be recognized for her talent and wants to be given every resource made available to men in her community.

In my dialogues with Usha, I was able to see a woman fueled with energy and dreams. She was frustrated with the current status of women and the lack of government initiatives to provide employment for women like her. Usha would like to be formally trained to be a medical practitioner so that she can be self-employed once she gets married. In her conversation, she highlighted the challenges:

There are no opportunities for women in our village. If I want to work in the Titli center, I need to be married to a man who is willing to become the Rural Health Practitioner for the village. This implies that my employment is dependent on my husband! This should not be the case. It is not fair. Often we do not realize that we can have opportunities as well. Nobody talks about our ambitions and our dreams. I feel so alone and so lost. Maybe I am not capable of changing the way things are…but I want to! I look at you and feel so inadequate…
A long conversation followed thereafter as I shared my life with her and she heard intently:

It is not easy for any woman to work in this world. Each one of us has to struggle and create our own opportunities. It is not easy for me to be here in Abirpur and live with strangers. My husband is very supportive and accepts my choices but I have to be responsible for my actions. I had to explain him about my dreams and ambitions and negotiate my choices with him. It is never easy as we live in a social world where we are answerable to several people. But we cannot be scared and give-up. We have to be brave and accept responsibility to change ourselves for the better. Once we do that, we can influence change on others.

I validated her choices and told her that she was a role model for so many girls in her village. Next time if a girl does not want to get married before she is independent, she can cite the example of Usha Didi (older sister) and maybe succeed in persuading her parents to listen to her. I told her that not many girls or boys are as brave as Usha and have the courage to work for social change.

By the end of our four-hour discussion, Usha was charged with ambition and promised that by the end of my stay in Abirpur, she would prove her worth to her society. She also pledged that she will attend the participatory theater workshop and ensure participation of other girls from the village. There was a spark of new-born enthusiasm in her and I knew that this would be critical to her life. As she had promised, Usha had accomplished what no other girl had ever before.

Often I visited the nearby town for supplies and to make phone calls. On one such day, after I returned from Patna (nearest city as well as the capital of the state of Bihar), Usha approached me with tears in her eyes. She handed me a pamphlet and told me that she wanted me to be the first one to know about it. I was bursting with curiosity and hugged her before I even read the pamphlet. Usha had become a member of an
organization that resembled AMWAY that encouraged women in the rural India to engage in self-employment by selling dress material to other women of the village. Each sale is based on a commission and is cumulative in nature. The pamphlet addressed the policies and stated that Usha Kumari from Village Abirpur is a member of this organization. I was surprised and asked her how she got enrolled in this organization. Apparently, Manoj Maharaj had introduced this to her few months back and encouraged Usha to join Amway. After our conversation, she wanted to do something that ensured her consistent income and was possible within the village limits. I was happy and bought her first dress material. That is my most valuable purchase ever!

**Heat, Home and Mosquitoes**

Usha’s family built their home only a year back. It is a new house with deep red brick, making it stand out in Abirpur. Given the standard of living in Abirpur, Usha’s house is very modern and colorful. It has three bedrooms, one terrace, one kitchen, one verandah, and one open space for the toilet/bathroom yet to be built. It has a hand pump within the house courtyard to bathe, wash clothes, and wash utensils.

Although the house is big with several beds to sleep on, everybody likes to sleep together on the terrace or in the verandah. The collectivistic culture can be seen in the sleeping behaviors of the family members. The first night that I was there, Usha and her mom showed me the room I was to sleep in. I was happy to learn that Usha would be sleeping in the same room and I felt that I was being welcomed by her family.
July and August are the hottest months in Bihar. The temperature ranges between 110-120 degrees Fahrenheit with no electricity\(^3\). It was hot and sultry. Other than heat, the other biggest problem in Abirpur was the mosquitoes. Usha’s mother put a mosquito net around my bed to protect me from them. I was initially happy but soon realized that I felt like a hot potato in an oven. It was hot and humid and the net suffocated me further. Almost instantaneously I woke up Usha, who was also fighting the heat, and asked her if she slept in that room everyday. She shyly told me that everyone slept on the terrace without the mosquito net. I opted for the mosquitoes and accompanied Usha to the terrace where the entire family was sleeping. I happily slept with them and over the next few weeks, I had 120 mosquito bites\(^4\) all over my back! This practice continued for the rest of my stay. I enjoyed the cool breeze and the mosquitoes enjoyed fresh blood!

**Manoj Maharaj: The Rural Health Practitioner**

Manoj Maharaj is the village Rural Medical Practitioner (RHP) of Abirpur. He runs the *Titli* center that is sponsored by *Janani*. He has been trained to serve the primary medical needs of the village. He is a very dedicated man who takes his job extremely seriously. He does not wait for people to show up on his door for treatment, but starts his day by making rounds to all his patients’ homes. He visits them and makes sure that they are following his treatment. He is popular among the neighboring villages and some even call on him when they need a consult. He integrates local indigenous traditions of medicine with modern medicine. This fosters faith between him and his patients.

\(^3\) Abirpur received 10 minutes of electricity every 48 hours.

\(^4\) After two weeks of stay in Bihar, I visited my family in Uttar Pradesh. To my mother’s amazement, she counted the mosquito bites and broke into tears.
During my stay in Abirpur, there was an incident that shook me. One night when we were almost in bed, there was lot of screaming and crying outside the RHP’s house. We all woke up and ran out to see who it was. Apparently a young boy had been bitten by a snake and his parents had carried him to Manoj Maharaj’s house for treatment. The boy had turned blue and was unconscious. It was late at night and the boy needed immediate attention. There was not enough time to take him to the nearest town for treatment. Manoj Maharaj quickly administered first-aid and took the boy to an old man who practices traditional medicine and was known for curing such cases of snake bite. I was confused and unsure if this was the right thing to do. However, Usha assured me that he knew what he was doing. The man spent several hours trying to drain the poison
from the boy with the help of suction from a small straw-like tube. Manoj Maharaj continued to watch and assist while he administered intravenous fluids to the boy. The boy slowly recovered and gained consciousness and we all were relieved.

Manoj Maharaj does not only practice medicine, but also is like an advisor to the village. He is only 28 years old and is wise and compassionate. Before he became the RHP, he had completed his undergraduate studies and wanted to be a teacher. He taught several boys and girls and charged them a nominal fee for the tuitions. He was married at a young age and is now a father of five children.

Devendra Sharma was an important part of the research team. He visited Abirpur prior to my visit and discussed the possibility of the theater workshop with Manoj Maharaj and his friends. He positioned this event as a ‘cultural’ event where the young girls and boys can participate and share their talents. Although Manoj Maharaj was aware of the implication of this event on the village community, he was extremely excited and decided that he would help us in encouraging the parents to allow their daughters to participate in it. He had several long discussions with the parents and tried to convince them that this was a good opportunity for the girls to express their minds and learn from one another. He systematically approached the village elders to discuss the workshops and helped in creating an environment in the village that was conducive for an intervention of this nature. Through conversations over a period of time, he helped the parents to feel comfortable in sending their girls and boys to another village for the workshop.
**Contradiction and Paradoxes**

Manoj Maharaj can safely be called a catalyst for change in Abirpur. He is a good man with noble intentions. Although he aspires for goodness of his village, his choices and behaviors reflect certain paradoxes and contradictions. He is an educated man who advocates family planning through *Titli* center. He earns a living by selling condoms to men and contraceptive pills to women in search of a healthy life for the community of Abirpur. He promotes family planning measures, like vasectomy for men and tubectomy for women, by referring them to *Surya* clinic (Reproductive Health Centers) in the cities. However, his personal choices contradict what he advocates professionally.

A father of five children who were born over a period of 10 years, Manoj Maharaj is well aware of its ramifications on the quality of his life and on the health of his wife. In June 2003 (a month before my arrival in Abirpur), he had a son who was born after four daughters. His implicit need for a male child to carry his family name ahead becomes an interesting aberration in his otherwise righteous character. This need to bear a son is typical of rural societies like Abirpur where the onus is on the son to continue the lineage of the family

Manoj Maharaj’s wife is trained to help him in the clinic but is busy being a mother or a wife. She is overburdened with household chores. Though Manoj Maharaj’s family is among the most progressive in Abirpur, his wife reaffirms the gender norms set in place by the village society.
Summary of Key Points

From the previous description of Usha Kumari, we can see the angst of a young woman who wants to decide her own fate and live by her own rules. She is pragmatic and knows she will get married, but she wants to be independent so that she need not rely on anyone for her existence. The family advocates her rights and encourages her to be an individual in a world where it is unacceptable for a woman to be assertive and vocal. As much as Usha tries to push her individual identity before her cultural and social one, she is constantly surrounded by contradictions. While she is advocating change door-to-door, she is affecting influence only in a gendered arena where women dominate. She has no control over decisions at village (society) level and cannot express her mind to the village elders, all of whom are men. When she is inside her home, she is a daughter who serves water and food to her family and eats after all the men have finished eating. However, after listening to Taru, she has been able to speak her mind and resist certain dominant ideologies. This tension between her public and private life makes an interesting area of study.

Manoj Maharaj attends to his patients’ needs with utmost care. He is also a committed brother, son, and husband who constantly moves between these roles. As much as he loves to support his sister’s commitment to gender-equality, he constantly dominates his wife and orders her around. He does not encourage her to speak her mind in the public and private sectors of their lives, but he provides for her. It is interesting to see how Manoj Maharaj is negotiating the public and private spaces that he occupies post-Taru. His conversations with Usha and other female members of the listener group
provide a fertile site to study the discursive strategies used by young women to create possibilities for resistance and subsequent change.

It is interesting to note what is considered ‘private’ and ‘public’ in the village context. A daughter-in-law is meant to veil if she is in front of an adult male and cannot leave her home as a rule. However, she can sleep in the same room as her brother-in-law, since it is a collectivistic society and due to lack of physical space. This raises some interesting questions about the influence of culture and society in conceptualizing the public sphere.

Lastly, my presence in the village as the urban outsider conflicts with their notions of how a married woman ‘ought’ to behave and dress but their acceptance of me challenges those notions. I will elaborate on this tension in chapter three when I explore the role of an ethnographer in the field. My notions of public and private were constantly challenged by the community members during my field research.

The theory of the public sphere provides a constructive framework to situate the main points that I have raised. In the next section, I will talk about the theory of the public sphere and various perspectives from which it can be studied.

**Public Sphere**

I started my examination by looking at the properties of the public sphere, a concept that is especially associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas. For Habermas, a public sphere is a collection of private individuals who get together to discuss matters of common concern (Habermas, 1989). The public sphere began to expand in the 18th century with the rise of the middle class and the creation of associations, clubs, coffee
houses, and salons. People used these spaces to discuss poetry, philosophy, aesthetics, and social issues. Distinct from home life, distinct from the church, and distinct from government, there arose a place for people to gather and talk about life. In the public sphere, ideas were examined, talked about, reasoned over. Gradually they began to discuss matters of governance.

For Habermas, the public sphere is a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action. By allowing every person the same opportunity to participate in discourse, Habermas hopes to eradicate the prejudices which limit marginalized groups from fully attaining their rights in a democracy. The public sphere, therefore, manages to generate a political space which respects the rights of the individual and strengthens a community.

The bourgeois public sphere, which began appearing around 1700 in Habermas's interpretation, was to mediate between the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic, and social life contrasted to the demands and concerns of social and public life. The public sphere consisted of organs of information and political debate such as newspapers and journals, as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, meeting halls, and other public spaces where socio-political discussion took place. For the first time in history, individuals and groups could shape public opinion, giving direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice. The bourgeois public sphere made it possible to form a realm of public opinion that opposed state power and the powerful interests that were coming to shape bourgeois society.
While in the bourgeois public sphere, public opinion, on Habermas's analysis, was formed by political debate and consensus, in the debased public sphere of welfare state capitalism, public opinion is administered by political, economic, and media elites which manage public opinion as part of social control. Thus, while in an earlier stage of bourgeois development, public opinion was formed in open political debate concerning interests of common concern that attempted to forge a consensus in regard to general interests, in the contemporary stage of capitalism, public opinion is formed by dominant elites and thus represents, for the most part, their particular private interests. No longer is rational consensus among individuals and groups in the interests of articulation of common goods the norm. Instead, struggle among groups to advance their own private interests characterizes the scene of contemporary politics. Hence, Habermas describes a transition from the liberal public sphere which originated in the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolution to a media-dominated public sphere in the current era.

In my analysis of locating public and private spaces in Abirpur, I focus on gender issues. I consciously chose to talk about women as they have been traditionally excluded from discussions within the public sphere. They have always existed in the public sphere but their stories have not been privileged, which has made them invisible.

**Blurring of Line: Private and Public**

Before I left for India, my understanding of private and public was based on purely appreciating the Habermasian way of looking at these spaces. While doing fieldwork in Bihar and experiencing the discursive spaces occupied by the young female listeners of Abirpur, I decided to expand the theoretical framework I was working with. I
tried to contextualize the experiences of the young girls in Abirpur and embedded it in
the feminist discourse of the public and private sphere.

In my view, public and private spaces are determined by the geography as well as
the relationship between those who occupy these spaces. By geography I mean the
physical space within which we go about our daily lives. This space can be as private as
home or as public as the village well where all men and women socialize. These spaces
are co-created by the interaction between those who occupy it. It is this interaction that
makes it public and/or private.

This interaction is complex due to the relational dynamic that exists between the
players who are simultaneously carving the public and the private. Relationships embody
elements of power and control making them unequal and unique. Although these people
are simultaneously occupying a common geographical space (public or private), their
interaction will determine their private and public status within this pre-determined
geographical space. Therefore, each person may be experiencing a different level of
private-ness or public-ness when bound by a mutually defined private and/or public
space. Therefore, while public and private is a definite in space and time, it is also a
floating signifier that is negotiated by people and predicated on power differentials.

Let me explain this with some imagery from Abirpur. Usha is an active member
of the community who expresses her mind about gender roles, education for girls, gender
discrimination whenever an opportunity presents itself. She is not scared of village elders
and talks to them with honesty and humility. When she is expressing her mind in the Titli
center, which is a common place for people to meet, she is sharing the public space with
others and co-creating a public discourse. However, when Usha walks into her home, she is engulfed by the private sanctity of this space as well as her role in it. She is a daughter and a sister. She may be speaking her mind outside in the public space and shaping public ideology, but within the confines of her home, she is constantly negotiating power and control with other members of the family.

It was interesting to observe Usha’s role in the family. As the sister, she is expected to serve her brothers food and bring them water. She eats with her mother once her brothers have been fed. She engages in household chores such as cooking, cleaning the floors, washing the utensils, washing the clothes, and helping with the children, none of which men are expected to perform. In this way, Usha resembles any other girl of the village. She is not exactly disempowered, but definitely her role is compartmentalized between public and private. Sometimes, within the private safety of the home, the public sphere creeps in. When the family sits together and talks about village issues, the private nature of the conversation changes into a more formal public dialogue. Usha’s brothers regard such conversations with detachment but Usha approaches these conversations with activism and fervor. At times these conversations remain at an extremely public level of distance and an inherent coldness but at times, these conversations become personal and very private. Hence, these sites of public and private are negotiated and cross the boundary of physical space and time.

**Sister-in-law, Brother-in-law, and Space**

I was surprised by the sight of men and women of different generations sleeping in close proximity with one another. Although it fits in with the tradition of collectivistic
society, it challenges the conventions of gendered behaviors. A man and woman sleeping in close proximity from one another was alarming for me, but for Usha and her family it was another way of sharing the private space.

Manoj Maharaj’s wife is the bhabhi/bahu (sister-in-law/daughter-in-law) of the house and has to follow norms that every bahu has to follow in the village society: she cannot approach any male member of the village without her veil; she cannot talk back to any woman older than her or her nanad (sister-in-law). She cannot leave the threshold of the house except on special occasions. While this is a tradition she follows as a bahu, she is relieved of these restrictions when she becomes a saas (mother-in-law) herself. When she is the oldest surviving woman in the family, she can afford to exercise control and power.

In such a social set-up, bhabhi sleeps in the same space as her husband, devar (brother-in-law), sasur (father-in-law), and others. When I asked bhabhi to comment on the status of bahu in the village, she shrugged and sighed that this is how it is. When she becomes the saas, then she can go anywhere in the village and meet people. She missed companionship the most and waits to grow old so that she can have the freedom. She resented the difference between herself and the daughter (Usha) of the house. She expressed how much she would like to roam around the village with me but cannot because the samaaj (society) will not approve of it.

Thus, bhabhi cannot roam all over the village and her desire to be by my side while I visit families remains unfulfilled. However, what connects one woman to another

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5 This is another reason why women want to bear a male child: so that one day they can rule their daughters-in-law the same way they were ruled by their own mothers-in-law. The tradition gets carried forward without much modification.
in Abirpur is the tangible radio. It unites all men with women and adults with children as it is consumed by all.

**Radio as the Bridge between Public and the Private**

Since men and women live such divided worlds (especially after they are married), for some the radio that plays a critical role in blurring these spaces of socialization for these groups. In a focus group discussion with the male listeners of *Taru* Listener Club in Abirpur, I found out that young boys had several spots in the village to socialize. The popular spots were the *Titli* center, the orchards, and the village well. They gathered in these areas and discussed political issues. According to them, these discussions resulted in collective action, like banning the use of tobacco by youngsters. However, they agreed that women did not have any forum for conversations. The married women stayed at home all the time and had little exposure to the outside world, except listening to the radio. The point of intersection between the private and public worlds is the radio. *Taru* became one such site of intervention that connected the men with the women and created a healthy environment for dialogue that could trigger change.

Another meeting site for the young adolescents in Abirpur was the *Taru* listener club, which provided an opportunity to the young girls and boys to socialize and talk about relevant issues confronting them and their society. They would hear the radio collectively in these clubs and talk about their status in the society and think of ways to change it. Therefore, radio blurred the private lives of the women with their new public engagement in these clubs. It became a bridge to connect the young female listeners with
other female listeners as well as male. Together, they became catalyst for social change in Village Abirpur, opening a village school for *dalit* (low-caste) children.

![Figure 3. Titli Center is a popular site for get-togethers and discussions (source: author)](image)

**Rationale for the Study**

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand how the young female radio listeners are enacting the messages of an entertainment-education radio soap opera, *Taru*, in their everyday lives. These women are enacting empowerment and self-efficacy in the private and public spaces which are predominantly occupied by men of the village society.

While the women are negotiating messages of social change in their private and public lives, this study also looks at the inherent tension and resistance experienced by
these women. This study observes the discursive strategies used by the young female listeners in addressing their new identities thus creating possibilities for resistance and change.

**Plan for the Dissertation**

This chapter identified and described the subject of this study, described my experience in the field by introducing key personalities, and introduced the theoretical framework informing the questions guiding this study.

Chapter Two identifies and explains the theory of the public sphere, the feminist reconsideration of the public sphere, the discursive model of the public sphere, and the organizing for social change research informing this study.

Chapter Three provides a rationale for feminist ethnographic enquiry, and describes the methods used to gather the data used in this study.

Chapter Four provides a detailed illustration of the research data that addresses the three research questions around which this study is organized. The data is drawn from different sources and provides a justification for analyzing the results in the following chapter.

Chapter five provides a rich analysis of the research study by weaving the data and the experience of the researcher in a cohesive dialogue that provides constructive justification for the employment of the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and a brief section on areas for future research.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter identifies and explains the theoretical concepts and previous scholarship that inform the present study. In this dissertation, I am raising questions about how young women negotiate their roles in the public and private spaces they occupy and what discursive strategies do they use to address these roles. To address this question, I begin this chapter by exploring discourse as a strategy for transformation. Next, I discuss the private-public split and will define the spheres. After offering an informing critique of Habermas and proposing counterpublics as an alternate way of looking at subaltern publics, I conclude this chapter by offering a descriptive dialogue on how communities organize for social change. This dialogue will situate the experience of young women in Abirpur while organizing for social change.

Discourse and Possibility of Social Activism

...to alter the terms of public discourse one must change the experiences people have, and to restructure experiences one must change the language available for making sense of those experiences.

- Kathy E. Ferguson, 1984, p. 154

We express ourselves by using the language that is available to us, which most of the time is the dominant language. By dominant language I mean not a unified one that controls all aspects of social life, but rather certain patterns that are hegemonic within different sectors and areas of social life. The discursive power works in a way that renders some people powerless, devoid of any control over their lives. Usually people do
not have an alternate mode of expression to articulate their experiences and resist patterns that are oppressive for them.

Bowles and Gintis (1987) argue that discourse is ‘a set of tools’ and as such provides the elements to organize and structure collective action:

People use tools to forge the unities that provide the basis for their collective social practices… Lacking an intrinsic connection to a set of ideas, words, like tools, may be borrowed (p. 153).

Language, as dialogue among concrete people, consists of social phenomena always in the process of becoming. Individuals do not receive a “ready-made language at all; they enter into social communication and in this process their consciousness is constructed, being active in the communication process” (p.154). Richard Quantz and Terrance O’Connor (1988) express this idea when they argue, “This dynamic conceptualization of the individual’s relation to the social world… presumes that every individual has an active role in affecting the communication process and, hence, in continuing the ongoing reshaping of the culture” (p. 95). This aspect seems of special importance since it gives a sense of agency; it stresses the role of the individual in the transformation-emancipation process as well as the role of the community.

Bowles and Gintis (1987) summarize by demonstrating the emancipatory nature of discourse:

In sum, discourse has the ability to bond people and organize action creating the conditions to achieve personal and collective projects. This approach provides the elements to theorize both the formation and action of individuals as social actors and the process of transformation of social structures through their activity (p.157-8).
It seems that conceptualizing discourse as emancipatory is the basis for an empowering theory of action: individuals both get constituted and constitute themselves through discourse and this, at the same time, works as a bonding element for action. Furthermore, individuals can participate in the process of constituting themselves and through it they can get together building a dynamic unity for social change and transformation.

Mumby (2000) defines the public sphere as a “discursively constructed space for argument in which different interest groups compete to articulate conflicting worldviews. The boundaries of the public sphere are both conventional (i.e., humanly constructed) and permeable, so the relationship between public and private spheres is continuously open to contestation” (p. 6). Furthermore, following Fraser (1990-91), Mumby rejects the notion of a single public sphere in favor of a “multiplicity of spheres that impinge in different ways on society. These spheres are interrelated, drawing on a complex system of overlapping discursive communities that have varying degrees of cultural, economic, and political capital” (p. 11).

Any attempt to characterize the public sphere in monolithic terms and to posit a straightforward and fixed relationship between the public and private spheres fails to do justice to the complexity of the spheres and their relationship to each other.

A sufficiently nuanced conception of the relationship between the public and private spheres requires an understanding of the complex relations among discourse, power, gender, and identity. By viewing public sphere as a contested discursive space that is subject constantly to refinement and change, we are less likely to reify it in a way
that limits possibilities for participatory forms of democracy. The constitution of the category of public sphere needs to be understood as a discursive platform where resistance, participation, collective deliberation and decision-making take place as both a moment of critique and as an alternative to existing system.

**The Private-Public Split**

The importance of critical feminist theory lies in its ability to deconstruct the discursive articulation of the public-private relationship and to demonstrate the ways in which different conceptions of this relationship serve different interests. Feminist theory has consistently addressed the binary assumptions associated with traditional Western, patriarchal epistemology. Feminist researchers have shown how knowledge claims are coproduced by the researcher and informants and are very much tied up with the political choices made by the former. As such, feminists eschew the notion of objective, political-neutral knowledge, arguing that all knowledge arises out of the standpoint one assumes (Collins, 1991).

The feminist critique of both patriarchal ways of knowing and gendered systems of oppression provides a framework for the analysis of the relationship between the public and private spheres. The gendered split between the public and private realms becomes the foundation for social order. In her analysis of the mutual development of capitalism and individuals, Fox-Genovese (1991) notes:

Individualism, rationalism, and universalism were all interpreted in strictly male terms. Worse, in some measure, they all rested upon a more or less explicit repudiation of women as the opposite of the desired male norm and the celebration of them as the emotional anchor necessary to the functioning of that norm under conditions of intense competition. Having rejected dependency in favor of autonomy, the dominant male culture nonetheless itself depended, in the
lives of individual men, upon a repressed domestic sphere that was represented as
custodian of all the qualities the public sphere could not tolerate (p. 16-17).

One of the cornerstones of feminism is to point out the private/personal as
political. This means that aspects of everyday life – such as child care, parenting
practices – should be open for discussion and criticism since all of them can be spaces for
either oppressive or liberatory practices. Jean Bethke Elshtain (1993) resists this
conceptualization because she fears that defining the private as political will open it to the
intervention of the state. In this way she falls into the traditional liberal conflation of
state and politics. David Held (1989), although recognizing the need of a broader notion
of politics addressing all systems of power, also seems to fall into the same trap by
making politics potentially co-extensive with all realms of social, cultural, and economic
life, it opens these domains to public regulation and control.

On Held’s view, would a narrower conception of politics make spaces like the
family or the school much more free? Held seems to get caught in the liberal fear of the
despotic state, a fear that does not address other sources of domination and oppression.
Or, perhaps, he does not worry particularly about control itself but about who exerts it.
Although his concern for the protection of privacy in the context of its current invasion
by bureaucracies is acceptable, it seems that he is still caught in defining the private as
that which the public excludes, rather than what people want or have the right to keep
from public scrutiny.

In order to find alternative ways to talk about the private-public split, there is a
need to go beyond the binary oppositions in order to recognize links and overlapping
interests and concerns, and to keep a realm of the personal, of that we do not want to
share with others; of that which, at the same time, would not be determined a priori to be
determined a priori to be private.

**Private Sphere**

In Western political thought, the distinction between the public and the private
spheres has served to confine women, and typically female spheres of activity like
housework, reproduction, nurturance, and care of the young, the sick, and the elderly to
the ‘private’ domain, and to keep them off the public agenda in the liberal state. These
issues have often been considered matters of the good life, of values, of non-
generalizable interests. Along with their relegation to the ‘shadowy interior of the
household’, they have been treated, until recently, as ‘natural’ and immutable’ aspects of
human relations.

sphere’, as invoked by the modern tradition of political thought, have included at least
three distinct dimensions: first and foremost, privacy has been understood as the sphere
of moral and religious conscience:

As a result of the historical separation of church and state in Western European
and North American countries, and as a consequence of developments in modern
philosophy and science, matters of ultimate faith concerning the meaning of life,
of the highest good, of the most binding principles in accordance with which we
should conduct our lives, come to be viewed as rationally ‘irresolvable’, and as
issues about which individuals themselves should decide according to the dictate
of their own conscience and world views (p. 85).

In the emergence of Western modernity, a second set of privacy rights accompany
the eventual establishment of the liberal separation of church and state. In this context,
Benhabib (1998) suggests that ‘privacy’ means first and foremost “non-interference by
the political state in the free flow of commodity relations, and in the particular no-
intervention in the free market of labor power” (p. 86).

The final meaning of ‘privacy’ and ‘privacy rights’ is that of the ‘intimate sphere’. This is the domain of the household, of meeting the daily needs of life, of sexuality, and reproduction, of care for the young, the sick, and the elderly. As Lawrence Stone’s (1979) path breaking study on the origins and transformations of the early bourgeois family in “The crisis of aristocracy, 1558-1641” shows, from the beginning there were tensions between the continuing patriarchal authority of the father in the bourgeois family and developing conceptions of equality and consent in the political world. As the male bourgeois citizen was battling for his rights to autonomy in the religious and economic spheres against the absolutist state, his relations in the household were defined by non-consensual, non-egalitarian assumptions. Questions of justice were from the beginning restricted to the ‘public sphere’, whereas the private sphere was considered outside the realm of justice.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the emergence of autonomous women’s movement, women’s massive entry into the labor force in this century, and their gain of the right to vote. These trends have changed the way we talk about women’s lives. However, contemporary moral and political theory continues to neglect these changes and continue to classify women in the private sphere while limiting their participation in the public sphere.

According to Fraser (1990) firstly, these theories have been “gender-blind and have ignored issues of ‘difference’, the difference in experiences of male versus female
subjects in all domains of life” (p. 66). The women have unique experiences that separate them from not only men but also from other women. Secondly, the intimate ‘sphere’ is a complex space with power relations that have been ignored. The women in the ‘intimate sphere’ live within hierarchies of control. In the typical Indian social context, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is generally unequal wherein the mother-in-law tends to exploit her daughter-in-law. This is not a rule but an emerging practice in a typical Indian family. The idealizing lens of concepts like ‘intimacy’ does not allow one to see that women’s work in the private sphere, like care for the young and the running of the household, has been unremunerated.

**The Public Sphere and Critique of Habermas**

After a quarter-century delay, Jürgen Habermas's, “Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit” appeared finally in English translation in the MIT Press series 'Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought', edited by Thomas McCarthy. Habermas philosophical-historical critique of the concept and function of the public sphere in England, France, and Germany (with some parting glances at the United States) from the Renaissance to the twentieth century served as a direct inspiration for the German New Left and opened up new lines of scholarship and political debate in Germany and Western Europe.

By isolating the public sphere as a structure within civil society, Habermas established a new field of research on the political, distinguishable both from a narrower definition of the state and from a more broadly conceived 'political system'. By focusing on the 'structural transformations' of the public sphere, Habermas invited concrete
investigations of specific forms of political and cultural life, the benefits of which continue to be realized.

The bourgeois public sphere is conceived to be a sphere of private people coming together as a public through the 'historically unprecedented' public use of their reason. This informal association of private persons mediated between, on the one hand, civil society (the economy or sphere of commodity exchange and social labor) and the family, and, on the other hand, the state (the realm of the police or state administration and the court).

Habermas (1989) argues that, originally, the bourgeoisie conceived the public sphere as the realm that mediated between society and the state. In other words, it embodies “the principle of information which once had to be fought for against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities” (p. 50). On this, Mumby (2000) notes:

Habermas also argues that, although this liberal model is still in principle an instructive one (in terms of its ability to critique state power), it can no longer be applied to the conditions that currently operate in late capitalist, welfare-state mass democracy. The public sphere has by and large lost its importance as an instrument of political discussion, not because the role of the citizen is less important but because of the overlapping of state and society (p. 9).

Habermas’s critique of the liberal model of the public sphere is important because it allows us to see how a still largely accepted dichotomy between public and private has been transformed in late capitalism. To argue for an unproblematic distinction between the public and private spheres is essentially to overlook not only the extent to which the two realms intertwine but also the extent to which the citizen as the sovereign subject of rationality has been undermined and disempowered. Mumby (2000) points out to the
problematics of the Habermasian public sphere when considering the discursive public sphere. He notes:

The opportunity for the “private” citizen to make his or her case in a discursive public space is largely negated because (a) the institution of the public sphere is not equally available to everyone; (b) those with the resources to make use of the public sphere also have the resources to control the ways in which different and competing interests, needs, and beliefs are interpreted; and (c) the public-private dichotomy structurally and ideologically disempowers certain social groups because it regulates admission of issues into the public sphere, thus determining the extent to which issues are open to contestation (p. 10).

Habermas maintains that something like the public sphere is indispensable to the rational contestation of issues of public welfare, but at the same time he offers an important critique of why the public sphere, as currently constituted, is unable to function in its appropriate critical, mediatory role (Fraser, 1990).

According to Habermas, the idea of a public sphere is that of a body of private persons assembled to discuss matters of ‘public concern’ or ‘common interest’. Fraser (1990) explains:

… these publics in early modern Europe aimed to mediate between ‘society’ and the state by holding the state accountable to ‘society’ via ‘publicity’… At one level, the idea of the public sphere designated an institutional mechanism for rationalizing political domination by rendering states accountable to (some of) citizenry. At another level, it designated a specific kind of discursive interaction. Here the public sphere connoted an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters (p. 58-9).

For Joan Landes (1998), the key axis of exclusion from the public sphere is gender. She argues that the ethos of the new republican public sphere in France was constructed in deliberate opposition to that of a more woman-friendly salon culture that the republicans stigmatized as ‘artificial, ‘effeminate’, and ‘aristocratic’. Consequently, a new, austere style of public speech and behavior was promoted, a style deemed ‘rational’,
‘virtuous’, and ‘manly’. Extending Landes’s argument, Eley (1992) contends that exclusionary operations were essential to liberal public spheres not only in France but also in England and Germany, and that in all these countries gender exclusions were linked to other exclusions rooted in the process of class formation. The network of clubs and associations - philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural - was anything but accessible to everyone. On the contrary, it was the arena, the training ground, and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeoisie men, who were coming to see themselves as a ‘universal class’ and preparing their fitness to govern.

While the men in the nineteenth century were organizing spaces of their own, there were women who were actively participating in the ‘public sphere’. Habermas overlooks the other competing public sphere that was operating in the same time. Mary Ryan (1998) documents the variety of ways in which nineteenth century North American women of various classes and ethnicities created ways to have access to the public political life. She proposes that for the elite bourgeois women, this involved building a counter-civil society of alternative woman including philanthropic and moral reform societies. These associations aped the all-male societies built by these women’s fathers and grandfathers. However, the women were innovating, since they creatively used the ‘private’ idioms of domesticity and motherhood precisely as springboards for public activity. At the same time, for some less privileged women, access to public life came through participation in supporting roles in male-dominated working class protest activities and these women found public outlets in street protests and parades. Finally, women’s rights advocates publicly contested both women’s exclusion from the official
public sphere and the privatization of gender politics. Habermas’s account of the public sphere emphasizes the openness of the sphere. It was meant to be accessible to everyone. The norm of ‘publicity’ rests on the virtue of openness.

Fraser (1990) responds to Ryan’s understanding of the public sphere with evidence and states:

Of course, we know, both from the revisionist history and from Habermas’s account, that the bourgeois public’s claim to full accessibility was not in fact realized. Women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded from official political participation precisely on the basis of ascribed gender status, while plebian men were formally excluded by property qualifications. Moreover, in many cases, women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds (p. 63).

**Subaltern Counterpublics**

History records that members of subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians – have found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. Fraser (1990) calls these “subaltern counterpublics” in order to signal that they are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67).

The counterpublics are powerful as they are contestatory in character and can fall into the danger of reproducing the power dynamics that they condone themselves. The members of the counterpublics have to remember that this is a discursive space like any other public in which the purpose is to disseminate one’s discourse into an ever widening arena. Fraser (1990) claims that the subaltern counterpublics have a dual character: “On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand,
they also function as bases for training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (p. 68).

Felski defines counterpublics as “critical oppositional social forces that assert distinctiveness against the homogenizing, critically denuding tendencies of the global megaculture of modern mass communication as a debased pseudopublic sphere” (1989, p. 166). Felski situates counterpublic spheres as “multiple and heterogeneous social forces that do not converge to form single, coordinated revolutionary movement” (Asen, 2000, p. 428). Both Felski and Fraser recognize struggle and contest among publics.

The purpose of these final considerations is not to criticize the critical theory of Habermas simply by confronting it with the demands of the women's movement. Rather, my goal is to point to an area of conceptual unclarity as well as political contestation in contemporary debates. Any theory of the public, the public sphere, and publicity presupposes a distinction between the public and the private. These are the terms of a binary opposition. What the women's movement and feminist theorists in the last two decades have shown is that traditional modes of drawing this distinction have been part of a discourse of domination which legitimizes women's oppression and exploitation in the private realm. But the discourse model, precisely because it proceeds from a fundamental norm of egalitarian reciprocity and precisely because it projects the democratization of all social norms, cannot preclude the democratization of familial norms and of norms governing the gender division of labor in the family as well. If in discourses the agenda of the conversation is radically open, if participants can bring any and all matters under critical scrutiny and questioning, then there is no way to predefine
the nature of the issues discussed as being public ones of justice versus private ones of the good life. Distinctions such as those between justice and the good life, norms and values, interests and needs are 'subsequent' and not prior to the process of discursive will formation. As long as these distinctions are renegotiated, reinterpreted, and rearticulated as a result of a radically open and procedurally fair discourse, they can be drawn in any of a number of ways. Thus there is both an 'elective affinity' and a certain tension between the demands of social movements like the women's movement and the discourse ethic.

Faced with this claim, Habermas as well as the liberal political theorist might respond that this position invites the corrosion of rights of privacy and the total intrusion of the state into the domain of the individual. The issue is not that these distinctions must be reconceptualized but of where the line between the private and the public will be situated as a result of this discursive reconceptualization. Put in more familiar terms, does discourse theory allow for a theory of individual rights guaranteeing privacy, or is it simply a theory of democratic participation which does not respect the legal boundaries of individual liberty?

While the young women in Village Abirpur are enacting their empowerment in public and private spaces, they are also organizing as a group to advocate social change in their community. The radio listener club is one such organization that has become an icon for radical change in the village society. It becomes important to understand the process of organizing for change. The next section will explore the multiple perspectives of community organizing while privileging the work of Alinsky (1971), Freire (1972), and Chambers (1997).
Communities Organizing for Social Change

Community organization is the process of people coming together to address issues that matter to them. Community organizing occurs in a variety of contexts that define “community.” Community organizing may arise among those who share a common geographic space such as a neighborhood, city, town, or village or who share a common experience or concern.

Communities can be created when a group of people share a common interest or are being exposed to similar conditions. Radio plays an important role in the lives of many rural Indians. For some, it is their source of entertainment and recreation. People interact around radio programs and share experiences as listeners. While they do that, they form small groups and communities of listeners. In village Abirpur, India, young men and women formed listeners’ groups to listen together to their favorite radio soap opera. These communities are like floating communities that are drawn together for the sole purpose of listening collectively. However, when these groups of people are organizing to listen, they are coming together and sharing ideas and conversations. Once the radio soap opera ends, some of these small communities of people fracture and move on to create similar communities based on other interests.

For a very long time, community organization referred largely to the coordination and collaboration of social agencies and/or to a cooperative planning process conducted by professionals with an educated, largely middle-class citizenry (Cloward and Piven, 1999). The participation of the ‘grassroots’ and the organizing that took place at that level went either unrecognized or was at best a peripheral element in the field.
I would like to highlight the work of Saul Alinsky, who was the preeminent leader and teacher of community organizers in the post-World War II period. He believed that the grassroots movements in the U.S. could be strategically organized in communities that could uproot the dominant forms of governance (dominant organizations). In his mind “Power and organization are one and the same.” (1971, p.113) Organization yields influence; the larger the membership, the more the influence. Once formed, the poor people’s mass membership organization makes sustained political action possible. According to Saul D. Alinsky (1971), “self governing is important for participation and is the essence of democracy. Lack of doing so ensures dependency on public authority and a state of civic-sclerosis sets in” (p. XXVI).

In his book *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky (1971) discusses the importance of community involvement and participation of the people in the process of empowerment. He believes that the community organizers, a.k.a. ‘radicals,’ should begin from where the community is and not where the radicals want it to be. It is important that the community organizer begins with the existing system. Alinsky (1971) argues that a revolutionary organizer must be able to “bridge the old experiences to the new ones…he must shake up the prevailing patterns of their lives- agitate, create disenchantment and discontent with the current values, to produce, if not a passion for change, at least a passive, affirmative, non-challenging climate” (p. xxii).

Alinsky believed that power can rise from below and be sustained over time. He believed that change agents and opinion leaders played an important role in communities
organizing for change. According to him, the vast fragmented community can be organized if the right climate for change is attained.

Sanford D. Horwitt (1989), one of Alinsky’s biographers, believes that Alinsky’s influence, relevance, and legacy live on in no small part because he effectively advanced the great American radical ideal that democracy is for ordinary people. Horwitt also quoted Ernie Cortes, one of the nation’s best-known Alinsky-style organizers, who defines the essence of the poor people’s organization as “teaching people about what politics is really about – public discourse, negotiations, how to argue, when to compromise, and not just accepting what comes your way” (p. 548). While doing so, he advocates that new illuminated communities are organized that can become the basis for further change.

All of these radicals believed in the spirit of change and progression. They believed that communities of interests and influence could be generated from the grassroots that can then lead to the enlightenment of the masses. However, this may not always be possible due to its idealistic underpinnings and serve as a utopian manifesto for change.

Social activists have highly regarded Alinsky’s work but have tried to move beyond it by studying it and re-conceptualizing ways for organizing communities. According to Cloward and Piven (1999), the capacity to create mass formal organizations that can exert conventional political influence in a regular way varies with location in the social structure, “both in the sense that social cohesion varies from one setting to another, and in the sense that resources for conventional political influence vary by social class.”
(p. 167). What is applicable and acceptable in one community may not be entertained in another. They arrived at the conclusion that the “lower-strata people have to be drawn together by sheer organizer grit, and that any resulting formal organization could be sustained only by enormous investments of organizing effort” (p. 170).

In this proposition, the onus to advocate any change lies on the external organizer or organization. They propose that poor people’s organizations have always lacked the scale and stability to influence national politics. This is quite clear and is no mystery as to be poor means to command none of the resources ordinarily considered requisite for organization and influence: money, skills, and professional expertise, access to media, and personal relationship with political agencies. This is the reason why radicals such as Alinsky and his contemporary were discouraged in part because they had succeeded in organizing only a few tens of thousands of people. Alinsky himself was never able to form a national umbrella organization. This is why Cloward and Piven (1999) are convinced that a theory of power from below (as suggested by Alinsky, 1971) does not work in practice.

**Participation and Development**

Recent years have witnessed a phenomenal upsurge in commitment to participatory processes in development. A widely shared view in the development community is that without the commitment, creativity, energy, and involvement of the people, the pace of development will not accelerate (Servaes, 2002). This is the constant tension between the two positions that communities can be built or communities build themselves. More and more participation among the community members helps them to
organize by themselves and recognize the strength of their unity. They realize that they do not need external intervention and are able to recognize their needs and chalk out a process for organizing for action. While that is true, several media interventions have been carried out in India, Tanzania, Mexico, and other countries, and we have learned how media plays an important role in building a climate for social change and community building.

Community participation and organizing is being encouraged all over the world. It is the top agenda of every developed and developing nation. This, however, does not protect it from ridicule and speculation. As I mentioned earlier, true participation is a threat to powerful vested interests. It is more usual for community participation to be considered as a tool for carrying out a task, whether political or physical; its most obvious use as a political tool is to bring people together to lobby the state to provide services. Or, expressed more radically, ‘unity among the oppressed’ is considered as a necessary prerequisite to liberation (Freire 1970: p. 172-3). Since it is hard to challenge the inherent goodness of community participation, it has become a double-edged tool sometimes used to justify the state’s evasion of its own responsibilities. This is one of the hypocrisies of community participation that masks itself behind the noble and the good.

The language of community participation has tended to obscure the fact that there is always an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. The borderline between the two groups is not fixed. In some circumstances ‘us’ means the governments of the handful of wealthy industrial nations and ‘them’ is everybody else. But, in other circumstances, ‘us’ may include local
field workers who are drawn from, and live in, the villages which are the target of aid. Similarly, ‘them’ sometimes refers solely to government ministries, at other times householders, and sometimes more specific groups such as the lower castes in a particular village.

Often the intervening institutions are always trying to achieve the same thing, and the assumption is that they know how to work in a multidisciplinary manner. What makes development both an interesting and an immensely difficult field is that all facets of life are involved – economy, politics, technology, and culture. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are usually portrayed as latter-day missionaries doing good among the poor. In reality, NGOs are established either to promote political or religious view or out of frustration of the government to meet the demands of the oppressed people. Most NGOs are not multi-disciplinary and cannot cohesively analyze a situation as the team is fragmented and has little training to sustain group understanding of an issue.

There are, however, several obstacles to participation that could lead to community building from within the community. In Indian villages, where poor live in large numbers, where poverty is rampant, the poor have long been dominated by and dependent upon local elite groups. As a result, a mentality of dependence has overtaken them, rendering them sometimes incapable of making their own decisions. Centuries of poverty and injustice have bred an overwhelming fatalism among the poor. Social structures account for this condition of the poor. The poor in India live in highly stratified societies, with castes and classes clearly demarcated in a rigid hierarchical order. In these circumstances, mere survival is the greatest challenge. If the struggle for
existence consumes all the time and energy of the poor, then participation with goal for community building is a luxury that they cannot afford.

However, this does not discourage the development professionals to go into these local communities and find innovative ways to organize the disempowered poor into sustainable groups and help them to be self-reliant. Robert Chambers (1997) is a follower of Paulo Freire and is inspired by the Freirian theme that poor and exploited people can and should be enabled to analyze their own reality. In the quest to empower the oppressed, Chambers’ Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is widely used to encompass approaches and methods which have in various ways combined action, reflection, participation, and research. According to Chambers (1997):

The essence of PRA is changes and reversals – of role, behavior, relationship, and learning. Outsiders do not dominate and lecture; they facilitate, sit down, listen, and learn. Outsiders do not transfer technology; they share methods which local people can use for their own appraisal, analysis, planning, action, monitoring, and evaluation. Outsiders do not impose their reality; they encourage and enable local people to express their own. (p. 103)

In this approach, the outsiders and the insiders carry equal responsibility to work together and make this interaction successful. The local people realize their potential and the outsiders simply facilitate their discovery of themselves. The organizing takes place in an empowering way and also in a sustainable way so that when the outsider exits from the community, the community can continue on its own as it has triumphed the variable of self-reliance above all other attributes.

What happens to women, particularly feminist researchers, as they attempt to enter a culture and society? Some believe that women researchers, regardless of race, are pressured more than men to conform to local gender norms, which may create difficulties
and dilemmas for feminist researchers working in highly patriarchal settings. On the subject of empathy between researcher and the subjects, Wolf (1996) states:

Despite partial or complete immersion that can render the researcher feeling unempowered and dependent, inequality may still persist between researcher and her subjects. This is particularly evident because the fieldworker has the ability and privilege to leave the field location once the research is over. Thus, immersion may be a useful strategy to attempt to view a culture from within, and it may position the researcher in a way that differs from a more distant-participant-observer, but it does not basically alter the researcher’s positionality, which remains part of her in the field and to which she returns in full when she is finished. (p. 10)

This gives us a pragmatic and assuring perspective that the power dimension between the outsider and the insider is always apparent and should not be taken for granted. However, the positionality of the researcher is accounted for and is not a surprise. It is an intentional tool used by her to understand the world she is visiting.

According to feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 1987) one’s positionality as a woman is crucial in gaining knowledge and understanding of other women. This would essentially mean that in order to understand a person’s oppression, the researcher needs to be oppressed the very same way! This raised a lot of dialogue among feminist scholars and finally Uma Narayan (1989:263-264) views this problematic thoughtfully and in terms of probabilities rather than absolutes, without excluding multiple views. She argues against any metaphysical presumption that experiencing oppression will enable an individual to understand others but believes that those who have experienced the oppression of the group they do research on are more likely to have critical insights than will outsiders.
Participatory research and action research offer possibilities that resonate with feminist goals much more than conventional research methods. Ideally, these methods could unsettle the typical power relations between researcher and subjects, empower the subjects who participate to change their own lives, and instigate meaningful and needed change that is defined endogenously.

Feminist methods of doing research complement Freirian and Chambers ideals of participatory research. It seems that feminist framework will support community organizing as the feminist agenda is to lend voices to those who remain unheard. The process of community organizing could enable the oppressed women of the society to organize in groups of interest by participating in an empowering process of social transformation. Participatory research presumes a separation between the “researcher” and the “activist” that may not exist.

Feminist scholarship is optimistic as it acknowledges the role of an ‘outsider’ and the need to be sensitive to ethical issues. It does not turn a deaf ear to the needs of the people of a community but offers insights into how can the outsiders continue to be part of the process of community organizing.

Feminists show how experience is not merely a personal, individualistic concept: it is social. People’s experiences reflect where they fit into the social hierarchy. Feminist standpoint methodologies inquire into how different groups construct truth or knowledge out of their experiences, influenced by their social location and the conditions of their lives. The notion that subjective experience and knowledge are central to our understanding of women and other oppressed groups rests on the assumption that
oppressed groups have subjugated knowledge and perspectives, which are not reflected in the conceptual schemes of dominant groups (Hartsock, 1987).

Susan Parkinson Stern (1994) proposes that ‘conversation-based participatory’ research is meaningful and effective as it builds on ordinary friendship conversations in which exploration of the personal realm grows to include “investigation of shared social values” (p. 110). Conversation-based activist research begins with locating existing conversations among local community participants, and then aims to gradually widen the base of participants sharing the same social concerns, so that private conversations about shared problems take on a more public character, thereby increasing not only knowledge but also solidarity and the capacity for creating social change.

**Research Questions**

In the literature reviewed above, I have discussed the politics of the public and private sphere and the need for including women and the working class in this realm. I also explored how an emancipatory vision of an ‘ideal’ public sphere may be achieved with the inclusion of men and women from all economic classes. In the case of Abirpur, I would like to propose a public sphere in which women can have an active role to play. Membership to the public sphere should not be contingent on caste or gender. People from all realms of society should have a democratic right to participate in the public sphere.

My research focuses on the young female listeners in Abirpur who say that they have been positively influenced by the entertainment-education radio soap opera, *Taru*. *Taru* has taught the young girls to be sensitive to the traditional values of their
community but also be mindful of the inherent exploitation that exists within this cultural system. The radio program encouraged them to question the conditions in which the young women live and rationalize their right to equality and dignity. The young female listeners have internalized the message of *Taru* and have started asking questions and enacting their empowerment in public and private spaces.

The public space in Abirpur, until the broadcast of *Taru*, was gendered in the favor of male experience over the female. The public constituted of the privileged male who controlled the decision-making that affected all men and women. The private space had been controlled by older men (patriarchs) of the household or the mother-in-laws who enacted the role of the patriarch. The young women of the household were feeble and helpless.

The public and the private space began to change once *Taru* gained communal recognition. It was heard by men and women of all age and enjoyed by them. For some, it was purely entertainment and for most, educational. It shifted the power dynamics in Abirpur as young girls, influenced by the protagonist, *Taru*, took the responsibility to change their plight. My study revolves around these issues of transformation and consolidation of roles when engaged in a process of social change. I am particularly intrigued by ways in which young girls in Abirpur, who are influenced by *Taru*, negotiate their roles in the public and private spaces they occupy. I would like to explore further the discursive strategies that the young girls are using to address the changes around them. Lastly, I would like to explore the potential of participatory theater workshop to function as a public site to enact empowerment and private lives by young women.
The need to investigate the possibility of a transformative public sphere in an Indian rural context encourages me to ask the following research questions.

The present study is organized around three research questions.

Research Question # 1: How are the young women of Village Abirpur enacting empowerment in the public and private spaces that they occupy?

Research Question # 2: How do young women in Village Abirpur, Bihar use the public sphere as a discursively constructed space for argument in which different interest groups compete to articulate conflicting worldviews?

Research Question # 3: How does participatory theater intervention provide a site for interface between public and private sphere?
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

As an organizer I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be. That we accept the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be.

-Saul Alinsky, 1971, p. xix-

In this chapter, I will outline the rationale for using qualitative research methods for collecting data in the field. To do so, I will argue why feminist ethnography and field observations were appropriate for the field conditions and discuss the role of reflexivity in doing ethnography. Oral culture is the strongest in Indian rural societies where literacy is negligent. Hence, most of my data is embedded in rich stories and conversations that I had with the members of Abirpur community. Thus, I will discuss the strength of oral narratives and life histories to explore the lives of women who are invisible in the pages of history. I will conclude this chapter with a description of data that was gathered during the course of the study and an explanation of how it will be used in this study.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Methods

Some type of epistemology underlies every research project. An epistemology is a theory of knowledge with specific reference to the limits and validity of knowledge. According to Berger and Luckman (1966), we first need to recognize that knowledge is humanly constructed or produced and that we are active participants in producing it. There are multiple perspectives, interpretations, and uses of knowledge. My understanding of the world is deeply influenced by certain feminist ways of looking at
production of knowledge, wherein ‘gender’ plays an important role. My orientation towards collecting data is based on these feminist theories that guide me through my fieldwork.

Over time, though, feminist theorists and researchers have increasingly distinguished between qualitative methods and a feminist approach to social science research, thus deemphasizing the critical focus on quantification. For example, Stanley and Wise (1983) have argued that “methods in themselves aren't innately anything” (p. 159). They point out that although “positivist methods and world views are objectionable, sexist even, ... what should be objected to about them isn't quantification or their use of statistical techniques” (p. 159). Instead, the ways in which research participants are treated and the care with which researchers attempt to represent the lived experience of research participants are of more concern. In fact, in reviewing recent discussions of feminist methods, Harding (1987) argues that “feminist researchers use just about any and all of the methods, in this concrete sense of the term that traditional androcentric researchers have used. Of course, precisely how they carry out these methods of evidence gathering is often strikingly different” (p. 2). She concludes, “it is not by looking at research methods that one will be able to identify the distinctive features of the best of feminist research” (p. 3).

An inclusive viewpoint on methods, which appears to be increasingly accepted in feminist research circles, takes the form of promoting the value and appropriate use of both qualitative and quantitative methods as feminist research tools. The emphasis here
is on using methods which can best answer particular research questions, but always using them in ways which are consistent with broad feminist goals and ideology.

Thus, Jayaratne (1983) and Wittig (1985) have argued that both types of methods can be effectively utilized by feminists and can be implemented in ways to be consistent with feminist values. Procedures commonly used in quantitative research which are inconsistent with feminist values can be altered without abandoning the quantitative strategies which can be beneficial to feminists. Moreover, combining methods, sometimes termed “triangulation” (Denzin, 1978; Jick, 1979) permits researchers to “capture a more complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal . . .” (Jick, p. 603). As Jick points out, “the effectiveness of triangulation rests on the premise that the weaknesses in each single method will be compensated by the counter-balancing strengths of another” (p. 604).

Jayaratne and Stewart (1991) inform ‘three problematic areas’ within feminist methodology that need attention:

Although there seems to be increasing consensus in the feminist community that quantitative methods are legitimate research tools and that methods should be chosen based on an appropriate fit with the research question, there remain at least three conceptual areas in discussions of feminist methodology where the dialogue remains problematic. First are definitional difficulties with the terms "quantitative," "qualitative," "method" and "methodology." Second is the tendency of many authors to take an essentialist position, which assumes that female researchers feel comfortable, and are competent using only certain "female" methods. The third problem concerns the epistemological issue of objectivity/subjectivity, a continuing central focus for debate. (p.92)

Harding (1987) has recently suggested distinctions among terms. She identifies “methods” as particular procedures used in the course of research (e.g., interviews), “methodology” as a theory of how research is carried out or the broad principles about
how to conduct research and how theory is applied (e.g., survey research methodology or experimental methodology), and “epistemology” as a theory of knowledge (e.g., the “scientific method” which aims to establish the truth-value of various propositions). It follows from these definitions that first, quantitative and qualitative “methods” are simply specific research procedures; second, “feminist methodology” or a “feminist perspective on methodology” must be taken to refer to a much broader theory of how to do feminist research. There may, then, be a “feminist methodology” without any particular feminist “methods” (p.10).

An essentialist belief expressed in some feminist literature is that women researchers are more likely to study issues important to feminists. Interestingly, in an analysis of articles published in personality and social psychology between 1963 and 1983, Lykes and Stewart (1986) found that “female authorship was uncorrelated with the sex-typing of research topics, age of subjects, analysis of sexes separately, inclusion of gender as an aspect of the research question, discussion of sex roles, or interpretation of gender differences” (p. 400). Thus, there is no automatic association between gender of researcher and research methods used.

Feminism and Ethnography

Research that aims to be liberating should not in the process become only another mode of oppression. Feminist scholars have consistently raised questions about power imbalance between researcher and researched in the field, suggesting that if researchers fail to explore how their personal, professional, and structural positions frame social
scientific investigations, researchers may inevitably reproduce dominant gender, race, and class biases.

How one defines the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched also depends on one’s epistemological stance. A researcher never has complete autonomy in shaping relations with subjects of his or her research. In fact the research subjects have the power to influence the direction of the research, resist researchers’ efforts and interpretation, and add their own interpretations and insights. As Leslie Bloom (1998, p. 35) astutely observes, “the idea that the researcher has the power over the participant (in a research study) is an authoritative, binary discourse that may function to disguise the ways that the flow of power in multiple systems of domination is not always unidirectional. She concludes with the observation that “power is situated and contextualized within particular intersubjective relationships”. Ethnographers negotiate and renegotiate relationships with the members of the communities they study through particular and ongoing everyday interactions. These interactions are themselves influenced by shifting relationships among community residents.

My approach to fieldwork has been influenced by feminist standpoint and postcolonial researchers who have developed innovative methodological strategies designed to “seriously and self-reflexively ‘deconstruct’ our practices so that we can ‘reconstruct’ them with fewer negative consequences” (Richardson 1990, 118). From the postcolonial perspective of conducting fieldwork, I agree that ethnography is about active participation from the members of communities we research. These members play
powerful roles in shaping what we come to know about their lives and the communities in which they live and work.

**Postcolonial Ethnography**

While postcolonial and third world feminist scholars point to myriad of ways relations of domination infuse ethnography, they also offer some guidance for negotiating power inherent in the practice of fieldwork (Rajan 1993; Spivak 1999). Postcolonial feminist scholars argue that the practice of ethnography among marginalized groups is historically tainted by ethnocentric biases in traditional ethnographic practice as well as feminist research (Collins 1990; Mohanty 1991a, 1991b). Further, as philosopher Sandra Harding (1998, 12) emphasizes, ethnocentricism is more than a set of “false beliefs and bad attitudes” held by individual scholars; it is structured into the institutional and academic practices so as to produce relationships oppressive to indigenous cultures in the so-called first world as well as third world countries. Harding (1998) asserts:

What is most startling, and disturbing, from such a perspective of institutional, societal, and civilizational eurocentricism is to realize that even individuals with the highest moral intentions, and with the most up-to-date, state-of-the-art, well-informed, rational standards according to the prevailing institutions and their larger cultures, can still be actively advancing institutional, societal, and philosophic eurocentricism. (p. 12)

Mohanty (1991) calls for “careful, politically focused, local analyses” to counter the trend in feminist scholarship to distance from or misrepresent third world women’s concerns. Feminists are not exempt from “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one hand, and the inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the ‘third world’ in the context of a world system dominated by the West, on the other” (p. 53). Unfortunately, as Mohanty emphasizes, these factors
“characterize a sizeable extent of western feminist work on women in the third world” (p. 53).

Mohanty is critical of Western feminist construction of third world women as victims rather than agents. By emphasizing these women’s experiences, Western feminists construct a totalizing image of “the” third world woman that masks the great diversity in such women’s lives and their resistance to oppression. In addition, Mohanty argues, first world feminists gain power by distancing themselves from third world women’s concerns and constructing themselves as liberated.

Mohanty (1991b) and Ong (1988) confront and contest the ways in which Third World women have been conceptualized and represented by First World (usually Anglo) feminist scholars. Both authors point to the false binary oppositions that have been utilized to conceptualize and represent Third World women (e.g., uneducated, illiterate, poor, powerless), which implicitly use the First World feminist researcher as the reference point (e.g., educated, literate, better-off, in control).

Feminist scholars continue to experiment with different strategies of representation. A few contemporary feminist ethnographers have followed on the life or oral history of one individual woman (Behar, 1993), attempting to represent her through her own voice and story, which are edited as little as possible and may not be guided by the researcher’s questions. Experimenting with strategies of representation has produced some alternatives, it is doubtful that these forms of representation are distinctly different from others, since the end product does not necessarily appropriate less and does not shift the balance of power or the benefits.
I think it is important to acknowledge that when one is working with poor and marginalized people, power differentials between feminist researchers and their subjects remain as such. Although feminist researchers may attempt to equalize relationships while in the field through empathic and friendly methods, these methods do not transform the researchers’ positionality or locationality. The “equality” is short lived and illusory because the researcher goes home when she is finished, reflecting her privileged ability to leave. This does not mean that attempts at more egalitarian field relationships should be abandoned but rather that they should be seen more realistically.

Despite the valuable efforts of feminist ethnographers to produce more balanced accounts of third world women, some postcolonial critics fear that “a ‘non-colonialist’ space remains a wish-fulfillment within postcolonial knowledge production” (Rajan 1993, p. 8). While I continue to hold deep reservations that any of the major dilemmas inherent in ethnographic practice can be consistently overcome, I remain optimistic that with a commitment to strong reflective strategies, especially ones that include, whenever possible, dialogue and respectful engagement with the subjects of our research, the context and the form of dilemmas can be brought to the surface and become part of the ethnographic story.

The Role of Reflexivity

A sociology-of-knowledge approach to feminist scholarship reveals the role of reflexivity as a source of insight (Cook & Fonow, 1984). Reflexivity means the tendency of feminists to reflect upon, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research process. To some extent, this tendency toward reflection is part of a tradition of
attention to what Kaplan (1964) refers to as "logic-in-use" or the actual occurrences that arise in the inquiry, idealized and unreconstructed. Emphasis on reflection also belongs to a tradition of reminiscence about fieldwork experiences by sociologists and anthropologists (Daniels 1983, Gurney 1985, Warren & Rasmussen 1977).

Yet feminist epistemology carries this tradition of reflection one step further by using it to gain insight into the assumptions about gender relations underlying the conduct of inquiry. This is often accomplished by a thorough-going review of the research setting and its participants, including an exploration of the investigator's reactions to doing the research.

**Consciousness Raising**

One of the ways in which reflexivity is employed involves the concept of consciousness raising, a process of self-awareness familiar to those involved with the women's movement. Underlying much of the reflexivity found in feminist scholarship is the notion found in the earlier work of scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois (1969) and Paulo Friere (1970) that consciousness of oppression can lead to a creative insight that is generated by experiencing contradictions. Under ideal circumstances, transformation occurs, during which something hidden is revealed about the formerly taken-for-granted aspects of sexual asymmetry.

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) argues that it is the awareness of her marginal status as the "outsider within" that provides the black female intellectual with a unique black feminist standpoint from which to analyze self, family, and society. It is the “outsider within” who is more likely to challenge the knowledge claims of insiders, to
acknowledge the discrepancy between insiders' accounts of human behavior and her own experiences and to identify anomalies. The most common anomalies involve the omission and distortion of facts and observations about the lives and experiences of black women. Collins suggests that there are a number of benefits of “outsider within” status that actually enhance the production of knowledge; these benefits include greater objectivity, ability to see patterns insiders are too immersed to see, and latent advantages of invisibility.

Consciousness-raising is employed in at least three ways by the feminist scholars. The first way is through attention to the consciousness-raising effects of research on the researcher. Consciousness raising is also involved in discussions of ways in which the research process influences subjects of the inquiry. Some authors view the research act as an explicit attempt to reduce the distance between the woman researcher and female subjects. Consciousness raising also plays a part in feminist methods as a central feature of research technique. This is found in a wide variety of instances. For example, Collins (1991) suggests that consciousness raising is employed as a process that is studied by feminists when women's lives are examined at “structural rupture points” (p. 51) in their biographies such as divorce, unemployment, occurrence of rape and physical abuse, coming out, and many other times when social actors commonly forge new aspects of their identities. Maria Mies's (1983) discusses how studying women at these rupture points reveals aspects about them that might otherwise remain hidden. “Click moments” for both researcher and subject are often used as sources of creative insight that are transferred into the research process.
These approaches have provided feminist researchers with a way to tap women's collective consciousness as a source of data and have provided participants in the research process with a way to confirm the experiences of women which have often been denied as real in the past (Reinharz, 1983).

**Limits and Possibilities of Reflective Practice**

Feminist researchers use self-reflection about power as a tool to deepen ethnographic analysis and to highlight the dilemmas at fieldwork. The call for reflective practice has also been informed by critiques of third world and postcolonial feminist theorists who argue for self-reflexive understanding of the epistemological investments that shape the politics of method and the “intellectual frameworks in politics” (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997, xviii). Cultural studies scholars have also questioned the call to reflective practice arguing that taken to the extreme, “constant reflexivity” can make “social interaction extremely cumbersome” (Hurtado 1996, p. 29). In contrast, the call to “accountability” is said to offer a more collective approach than “individual self-assessment of one’s perspective” that the term “reflexivity implies” (p. 29). However, from point of ethnographic practice, it is seldom clear to whom one should be “accountable,” and therefore the term reflective practice seems to be appropriate.

Reflective practice indicates both individual self-assessment and collective assessment of research strategies. Hurtado (1996) emphasizes that a “reflexive mechanism for understanding how we are all involved in the dirty process of racializing and gendering others, limiting who they are and who they can become” is a necessary strategy to help dismantle domination (p. 124). Such reflective strategies can also help
ethnographers bring to the surface “their own privilege and possible bias” as well as “addressing the difference between different constituencies” (p. 160) within the communities they study.

**Reflective Practice and the Use of Oral Narratives**

Ethnographers usually draw on biographical narrative or life history approaches to gain further understanding of the historical and cultural experiences that shape personal and interpersonal relationships in diverse communities. I draw on the life history method in my scholarship on women’s lives in their community and value this methodology for exploring the development of and shifts in their consciousness and practices over time without artificially foregrounding any one dimension or influence. I used the life histories generated through my research to explore the experiences of those young women who were influenced by *Taru* and heard their stories to understand how they were impacted by the program.

Three areas of investigation guided the conversations/interviews I conducted: their experience of *Taru*; an exploration of how they enacted this experience in the public spaces as well as in the private spaces; and how they negotiated their changing status in the public and the private spaces they occupied. Consequently, the in-depth interviews, towards the end of my stay in Abirpur, generated a focused life history of key incidents, key relationships, and their willingness to continue to improve their lives. This approach offered a context in which to examine the development of their identity as well as an opportunity to explore conflicts and tensions in the community as the young women asserted their individuality.
Anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran (1994) demonstrates the power of feminist ethnographic narratives that view “identities” as “multiple, contradictory, partial, and strategic” (p. 50). She sees oral narratives are forms of both empowerment and subjection to alternative forms of authority. In her view:

The underlying assumption is, of course, that the subject herself represents a constellation of conflicting social, linguistic, and political forces. Individual narratives can be seen as both expressive and ideological in nature. However, the category ‘experience’ is utilized not to pin down the truth of any individual subject, but as a means of reading ideological contradictions. (p. 50)

For example, feminist sociologist Susan Chase’s (1995) approach to oral narratives includes attention to “how women tell their stories” (p. 5). Rather than treat the narratives as “evidence,” Chase is interested in “understanding relations among cultural context” (p. x).

During my stay in Abirpur, I had long conversations with young women and members of their social group. Often while talking, these young women would suddenly realize something that she had not known about herself. She would be excited and I felt privileged to share the moment with her. These conversations were very self-revealing. Mostly the content of the conversations would be indicative of the young women’s state of mind, but there would be instances when I would have to rely on the ‘way’ the woman talked to me and not on ‘what’ she talked to me about.

In one such conversation with Usha Kumari about dowry, Usha was antagonized by the role of men in the practice of dowry. While she was sharing her angst with me, she suddenly got up and was ready to leave. I asked her what she was feeling. She said that she would like to go and talk to her uncle right now. Her uncle had been planning
his daughter’s wedding: she is only 17 years old. She felt motivated to give him her piece of mind and counsel him not to get her married this early and not to give dowry on his daughter’s wedding. She took a deep breath and sat down. She was charged with enthusiasm and felt good about talking to me. At that point I realized that these girls have never had the opportunity to have a dialogue about their lives and had never talked about their beliefs and motivations. This was a content-rich conversation where I could engage in ‘what’ the person had to say. These conversations were richer than any structured interview I will ever document!

As much as these conversations were refreshing, there were some conversations in which I had to observe ‘how’ the woman was talking rather than ‘what’ she had to say to me. One such example is my conversation with Usha’s young aunt who had been married for a few months.

Usha’s aunt belongs to a literate family and wanted to talk to me about her experience in Abirpur after her wedding. I met her one morning at 6:30 am in her kitchen. She was preparing food and asked me to sit by her and the fire. I was eager to hear her story. For the next hour, she talked to me about how happy she is in Abirpur, how nice her in-laws are, how loving her husband is, and how she could not have asked for a better life. I heard her intently but noticed how frail she was, how weak she was, and how ‘scared’ she was. We talked a bit more and exchanged life stories. The way she told me her ‘happy’ story left me very uncomfortable and intrigued. It was only after a few days I learned from Usha’s mother that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer soon after her marriage. Her in-laws were unkind to her and her husband had almost
abandoned her. She was dependent on Usha’s family for support and confidence. Contrary to the reality, I was convinced that Usha’s aunt was happy in her social world. However, sharing the discursive space with Usha’s aunt, offered yet another layer of understanding that helped in analyzing her status at home.

As I begin my account of what I did in Abirpur in July 2003, I would like to reflect upon my positionality as a female researcher and a feminist female researcher. I think that it was important that I carry feminist sensibilities. My feminist analysis of women's oppression, which constituted much of the theory informing my work, also increased my sensitivity and awareness in the research process, and contributed to the emergence of an empathetic atmosphere in the interaction process with the community members. A faithful account is best pursued in ethnographic research where changing consciousness is the central question - through the close and sympathetic involvement with the informant rather than through distancing and objectifying. At the same time such closeness may create certain kinds of blindness in the researcher.

I got reassurance of the research process from those women I was interacting with on a daily basis. I received extensive feedback from many of them at both individual and group level. Some listened to their interview tapes and eagerly discussed their opinions. Sometimes, I would share my written field notes with many and in those discussions my findings and interpretations would be confirmed.

The background of the visit to Village Abirpur has been discussed in Chapter One. I have also provided an exhaustive philosophical and epistemological framework of my research approach. Next, I will discuss my methods of data collection which I will
intersperse with anecdotes from the field that will deepen the understanding of my experience.

**Visiting Village Abirpur**

My visit to India was critical for me as a researcher – a woman – to discover herself amidst the young women in Village Abirpur. When I decided to visit the State of Bihar, India in the summer of 2003, as an outsider, I felt unsafe. I was warned against it by my parents (but supported by my husband) but I was reassured by my colleagues who had already visited the villages under study and had enjoyed the hospitality of the local communities.

The message of my arrival had reached the village members and they were expecting me at Village Abirpur in July. Time is elastic so nobody was expecting me on a ‘given’ day but definitely sooner than later. I arrived at Patna City, India (capital city of Bihar) with two colleagues in the heat of 110 degree Fahrenheit. Although I had stayed in a village during my Masters’ research project, I was anxious and worried while entering Abirpur.

Before leaving for the village, we visited our ground-based collaborators, Janani, who had been instrumental in the field-based implementation of the Taru project in India. The role of facilitators is crucial to the success of my research project in Bihar, India. I was lucky to have good colleagues in Janani who took good care of me during my stay in Abirpur and helped me to settle in Abirpur. Another person who was critical to my stay in Abirpur was the taxi-driver, Amar Kumar, whom I could trust.

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6 Mumtaaz Ahmed works for Center of Media Studies, New Delhi and is a collaborator on Taru project. Yogita Sharma is a graduate student at Texas, A&M who had accompanied me to Bihar to help with the Participatory Theater Workshop held from 24th-28th July in Bihar, India.
When I arrived at Abirpur, I was scrutinized and evaluated by the community members. They wanted to know if I could speak their dialect of Hindi. Fortunately, I could speak Hindi and understand their dialect very well (by the end of my stay, I was speaking their dialect). This was important to them as sharing the same language meant sharing the same cultural values. They were happy to notice that I looked and dressed very Indian as they knew I was coming from the United States of America and could be a misfit in their world.

After I met with the chief of the community and paid my respects to his family, I was ushered to Usha Kumari’s home (RHP’s sister) where I was going to stay. At that time, I was not aware of my typical day in the village. In the next few hours, I understood that Abirpur received a few hours of electricity every other day, Usha’s home did not have a toilet, the women bathed under the hand-pump in the early morning hours before the men woke up, and that there were lots of mosquitoes! With much enthusiasm, coupled with some trepidation, I began my stay in Abirpur.

**A Typical Day in my Life in Abirpur**

4:00 A. M. - I would wake up at 4:00 in the morning to leave for the field with bunch of women to engage in ritualistic bodily functions. Initially it was difficult to wake up so early and ‘perform’ but eventually I got use to the rhythm. The reason why women wake up this early is to not overlap this time with men.

4:30 A. M.- I would bathe in the hand pump in Usha’s home verandah. Sometimes Usha would stand and guard for my benefit as I took time to adjust to bathing with a bucket by the hand-pump. I was not accustomed to bathe under the open blue sky. After a few
days I became familiar with the ritual and learned how to bathe without exposing my body.

Figure 4. An open-air bathing area with the hand pump at Usha’s house (source: author)

5:00 A. M.- Usha, her mom, and her sister-in-law would make a paste of cow dung and clay which acts as a disinfectant and plaster it all over the floors of the house. This paste would dry in a few minutes and would become like hard floor. It had no stench and would be re-plastered every morning. Usha would start the breakfast while her mother would get busy in constructing the mud-stove. This stove was also made every morning with clay and would be fuelled by dung-cakes. Usha’s sister-in-law would cook the entire breakfast which was a regular meal. I often helped in plastering the clay mixture to the floor and surprised them one day by cooking with them.
5:30 A. M.- The men would be served tea after their morning rituals. They would then shower under the same hand pump and get ready. I would get my equipment ready (audio tapes cued, etc.) and write my field notes from the previous day. This would be my quiet time since I was dependent on natural light for writing.

7:00 A. M.- By now the family was ready to eat a whole meal. The men eat first and are served by the women. They get ready to leave for the field to work. The women would eat after the men left. Usha’s mom ate first, followed by Usha, and lastly Usha’s sister-
in-law would eat with her children. I was requested several times to eat with the men of the house but I made it a rule to eat with the sister-in-law. This shocked the men, women and also the neighbors. A few days later, Usha’s mom, Usha, sister-in-law, and I ate together.

8:30 A.M.- By now everyone has eaten and the kitchen has been cleaned out once again. Now the socializing begins. Women visit one another and spend time talking about their families. By 9:00am it would be very hot and people would not walk on the village road. Some men could be found lazing under trees.

![Figure 6. Women working in the field to collect food for next meal (source: author)](image)

9:00 A.M.- I would begin my rounds in the village as this would be the best time to catch the women in their homes. By now most of their pressing chores are done and they are relatively free to talk. I would visit any house and would be welcomed with a cup of tea. Tea was a safe bet for me as it kept me away from drinking local water. Not always
would I know the source of water so I would often avoid it. Usha was a big help who
saved me from situations where I would be served water. She would immediately
indicate to the host to make a cup of tea for me. By the end of the day, I would have
consumed 8 to 10 cups of tea. Although I tried to consume bottled water, I often ran into
situations where I would drink the local tap water. Sometimes, I would not have bottled
water on me to drink, and other times I would be in situations when it would be
impossible to take the bottle out of my bag. For example, if I was conducting an
interview and the interviewee offered me water from her home, I did not want to run the
risk of losing credibility by being picky about bottled water. In such situations, I would
happily share their water and quench my thirst.

12:00 P. M.- I would be back home by noon and spend time with Usha’s family who
would be getting ready for lunch (2nd meal). I would be stuffed and would decline lunch
but had to eat invariably as Usha’s mom would get worried about my health (even though
I felt pretty healthy). By now, I was an adopted daughter of the village and had to be
taken care of so that my husband would not be disappointed to see me. After lunch, we
all would nap some. We would be lucky if there would be any breeze as there was no
electricity at all.

3:00 P. M.- I would make my second round in the village and strike more conversations
with men and women about their views on schooling girls, caste differentiation,
employment issues, marriage, dowry, etc.; mostly these conversations would not be
recorded on audio-tapes but often documented as my field notes. Usha would often
accompany me and we would have fun meeting her friends and visiting her relatives. I would once again be fed!

5:30 P.M.- We would start preparing for dinner and fresh vegetables from the field would be gathered. I would help everyone with their respective chores. Sometimes I helped Usha’s grandmother to walk to the village temple. At times I would help Usha’s mom with a rug she was knitting. Several times I milked the neighbor’s cow. I would often play 7 Tiles and Hop-Scotch with the kids. I would accompany Manoj Maharaj to his evening rounds to see his patients.

8:00 P.M. - Dinner was once again served in several phases. Usha’s sister-in-law was completely in-charge of the dinner. She cooked it, served it, and then cleaned-up while taking care of her five children. During my stay in their home, we helped her with the dinner. Usha promised me that she would continue to help her after I left.

10:30 P.M. - Invariably we would retire to the terrace where everybody slept. I had a floor mat, a pillow, and a sheet to cover myself. I loved the cool breeze in the night and my conversation with family members. We would talk into the night and Usha and I would be the last one to sleep. There is one incident that brings a smile to my face. I had decided to sleep in Salwaar Kameez (Indian outfit) so that I would not offend their culture. The first night that I prepared to sleep, I saw Usha and her mom approach their floor mats in modern ‘nighties’ (sleeping gowns). I was so surprised to see them in gowns and they were surprised to see me in my Indian clothes. We laughed and they offered me a gown too but I continued to sleep every night in my Indian clothes.
The days went by quickly and I got into the swing of things. By the second week, I resembled a woman from Abirpur. I was tanned due to the blazing sun and had picked up on the local dialect. I felt at home and became comfortable with my surroundings.

My research agenda was to conduct several interviews over the course of my stay. However, I planned to spend the first part of my stay in Abirpur without formally conducting interviews or focus groups. The purpose of this casual interaction was to facilitate conversations and dialogue where the community got a chance to talk to me freely and ask me as many questions as they wished to. Frequently asked questions were about my age, marital status, family background, caste, and purpose of my stay in Abirpur. Most of the young men were curious to know about my experiences in America and if they had any job opportunities over there. However, most of the young women were keen to know about my lifehistory so that they could do similar work within and outside their community. The girls were keen to seek advice and guidance to improve the quality of their lives.

Most of the first week was spent in getting to know one another. I furiously scribbled notes at the beginning of every day (I could not scribble field notes at the end of the day due to no electricity at night in Abirpur) and tried to recall our conversations. From the second week onwards, I started walking around with my tape-recorder in my bag and grabbed the opportunity I got to record an interview. I made sure that the interviewees were comfortable and sought their permission on tape before conducting and recording an interview. By the end of my stay, I had gained the confidence of the respondents and had recorded interviews and group discussions.
The participatory theater workshop and the performances that resulted from it are critical to my dissertation research as the workshop provided the girls with a platform (in the public) to talk about their experiences of their private lives. It blurred the lines between public and private which had significant implications for my research. In the following section, I will discuss how the participatory theater workshop was organized and orchestrated.

**Participatory Theater Workshop**

After the broadcast of *Taru* concluded, the young men and women of the four villages -- Kamtaul, Madhopur, Chandrahatti, and Abirpur—felt empty and bored. They had learned so much from *Taru* and wanted to give it a voice. The girls were eager to discuss their ideas in the open but could not find an organized way of doing so. They did not have a platform to enact their empowerment. Thus, the theater workshop came at a perfect time for the *Taru* listeners who were impatient to give voice to their experience.

The purpose of *Taru* was to raise consciousness about gender equality, small family size, reproductive health, caste and communal harmony, and community development (Singhal, Sharma, Papa, & Witte, 2004). In July, 2003, a team consisting of Devendra Sharma, Yogita Sharma, and myself returned to Bihar to organize participatory theater workshops for members of *Taru* listening clubs from each of the four villages. As described in the chapter written by Harter et. al (2004):

> The interventions were carried out in collaboration with Brij Lok Madhuri, an organization dedicated to using Indian folk forms for social change. The week-long workshop was designed to empower each group to develop participatory theatrical performances to capture (a) their personal and group listening experiences in relation to *Taru* and (b) their concomitant attempts to secure political and social reform in their respective villages. These folk performances
were then staged for village members in an attempt to bring the personal narratives of the participants into the realm of public discourse. (p. 274)

We knew from the very beginning that it would not be easy to organize the workshop sitting so far away in the United States of America. However, under Arvind Singhal’s guidance, Devendra Sharma was able to solicit the support of Janani, Rangkram, a local theater troupe, his personal contacts, and the Rural Health Practitioners to organize a four day workshop in village Kamtaul, Bihar, India to be held in July 2003. He spent several days in Bihar to orchestrate the workshop and visit the RHPs of the four villages identified to participate in the workshop.

Kamtaul, Madhopur, Chandrahatti, and Abirpur continued to be the chosen four villages for the workshop. These villages had been visited several times by different research teams and were fairly accepting of new ideas. As part of the ground-based pre-publicity for *Taru*, folk plays inspired by the storyline of *Taru* were performed in these four villages of Bihar. These performances popularized the messages of *Taru* and led to formation of radio listening clubs that encouraged systematically dialogue among the listeners. Due to the success of the past initiatives, the theater workshop was organized in Kamtaul and attracted participants from Madhopur, Abirpur, Chandrahatti, and Kamtaul.

Devendra decided to host the workshop at Kamtaul, since it was in the cluster of Madhopur and Chandrahatti, and this way we could ensure participation from the three villages. If we had organized the workshop in Abirpur, we would be deliberately risking participation of the other three villages due to the distance-factor. This did not mean quitting on Abirpur as we were eager to have their participation in the workshop.
On visiting the villages, Devendra projected the workshop as a ‘cultural’ show so that the community would not look at it as an alien proposition. Besides, drama in the open public is looked upon as low culture in which children of good families do not participate, and definitely not girls. Girls leave the village only once in their lives- when they get married. Soon we realized that convincing parents to send their daughters to the workshop was going to be challenging.

Devendra had visited Abirpur before my arrival in early-July and requested the Taru listeners to participate in the workshop to be held later that month in an adjoining village. His proposition met with lot of resistance as parents were not keen to send their daughters to another village. After Devendra’s visit, the news of a possible theater workshop in the village spread quickly. Some would openly talk about it and perceive the good and bad in it but most of the people would remain quiet as if not talking about it would make it disappear. In Abirpur, for instance, the idea of the girls leaving the village to attend a workshop in another village was unthinkable.

I knew that I had to work hard to convince the villagers to agree to send the girls to another village. However, I had no intention to bombard them with persuasive messages. First, I wanted to build a relationship with them based trust and faith. Sometimes, while interacting with the members of the community, I had to forget about the theater workshop and relate to the parents’ fear and anxiety of sending their daughters far and away to participate in a ‘show’. I had to listen to their stories and understand their point of view. Once I had their trust and attention, I planned to talk about the reasons for the workshop as well as the emancipatory nature of it.
Over the course of my stay in Abirpur, I had several conversations with the key community members and especially the parents of the Taru listeners club members. I made sure that I visited them often and talked to them about anything and everything. Initially the people were curious about my intention to stay in Abirpur. They had been introduced to interventions that were goal-oriented and quick. Here I was with my bags, pen, and notebook scribbling away without any purpose (in their eyes). Once they got to know me better and understood my reasons to be in their village, they stopped questioning me at every point and became more comfortable with my presence in their community. Eventually, we started enjoying one another and I became more and more a part of their every day lives.
Negotiations and Consolidations

I knew that the time for the workshops was nearing and I had not heard much about the workshop from the villagers. Usha and I decided to pursue this further. I made daily trips to the parents of the girls, who were avid listeners of Taru, and started conversations with them about the workshop. By now they knew me well and engaged in a heart-to-heart discussion. They would often ask me “if I were their parent, what would have I done?” My solemn answer to them was that I would trust my daughter and would let her go. Maybe I would accompany them to make sure they are taken care of during the workshop. When I talked about trust, they would immediately turn around and tell me how much they trusted me and would be comfortable to send their daughter with me.

Over the first few weeks, I was able to establish connections with the key members of the female listeners’ families. I strategically interacted with them and opened myself to questions and inquiries. In the process of doing so, I won their trust and confidence. Sometimes, I resembled their own daughter who was requesting her parents to allow her to go to Kamtaul to participate in the workshop. This interaction with the parents helped in creating an identifiable relationship which helped me to persuade them to allow their daughters to go on this excursion.
Table 1

*Chronology of Events in July 2003*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 9, 2003</td>
<td>Arrival in Abirpur, Bihar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 10, 2003 to July 20, 2003</td>
<td>Start negotiation and consolidations with the local families to encourage female participation in the workshop. Meeting with the families of the participants at Titli Center to address their concerns. Meeting the concerned community members at Titli Center to brainstorm the agenda of the theater workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 23, 2003 (morning)</td>
<td>Visit the RHP of Kamtaul (workshop site) with Usha and Manoj Maharaj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 23, 2003 (evening)</td>
<td>Usha addresses concerns of the community at Abirpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 24 -26, 2003</td>
<td>Participatory Theater Workshop held in Kamtaul, Bihar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 27, 2003 (morning)</td>
<td>Performance at Kamtaul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 27, 2003 (evening)</td>
<td>Performance at Madhopur Arrival of Arvind Singhal (Principal Researcher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 28, 2003(morning)</td>
<td>Performance at Chandrahatti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 28, 2003(evening)</td>
<td>Performance at Abirpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 31, 2003</td>
<td><em>Taru</em> Drama Club founded Departure from Abirpur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: author)

I understood their problem when I heard each parent worrying about the reaction of the invisible ‘other’ in the village. *Log kya kahengey?* (what will people say?) was the
greatest worry. They were not concerned about the workshop or its outcome. Their biggest concern was the conversations that would transpire in the village about their daughters leaving the village boundary and going to another village to act with boys! They were more concerned with the opinions and prejudicial remarks of the community than with their own understanding of the situation. The implications of such behind-the-back conversations and gossips are severe for the future of the girl in question. She would have difficulty finding a groom as she would be black-listed as a decent girl of the community.

After long discussion with Usha and her family, I arrived at the decision that it is important that the parents of all the girls who were asked to participate in the workshop should collect in one place for a discussion. So the next day (a week before the workshop), we collected all the parents at Titli center for a discussion. Most of the fathers of the wards came for the meeting. Usha’s and Soni’s mothers joined the discussion. Kum Kum’s father was eager to discuss the outcome of the workshop. After a few minutes of skirting the real issue, I addressed the concerns of all the parents and told them that each parent had the same worry of what others in the village community would think if their daughters went to a different village.

Usha’s and Manoj Maharaj (RMP) played an important role in brainstorming the issues with the parents and clarifying the agenda of this workshop. Manoj Maharaj kept saying if Saumya didi can come all this way to help us, why can’t we help ourselves? The parents talked for a long time but took solace in the fact that they were not alone. I kept assuring the parents that their children would be well cared for and Manoj Maharaj
kept emphasizing that we have to show those who are complaining that we are capable of changing our society.

With those words of enthusiasm, the crowd was seemingly okay to send their daughters to Village Kamtaul. Their only condition was that the children will be chaperoned by Manoj Maharaj and Saumya didi. I assured them my cooperation and thanked them for participating indirectly in this activism for change.

**Usha’s and Vandana’s Friendship: A Visit to Kamtaul**

The parent group decided that Usha would visit village Kamtaul where the workshop was to take place. A day before the actual workshop, we took Usha to Kamtaul and introduced her to Vandana, a member of Kamtaul’s *Taru* radio listening group. Vandana, an avid *Taru* listener, was a catalyst for change in Kamtaul and is the daughter of the RHP of Kamtaul. Therefore, Usha and Vandana enjoyed meeting one another and found a common desire to change the status quo. Vandana took Usha’s hand and took her around her home. She introduced Usha to her family. Vandana’s mother assured Usha that she will make sure that everything will go well. The women sat and talked for a long time. Vandana asked Usha to bring as many girls from Abirpur as possible for the workshop.

On our return, Usha visited the homes of each participant and optimistically described her short visit. In Abirpur, the parents of female participants waited for Usha’s return as they were curious to know about village Kamtaul. Once Usha narrated to them her successful visit to Kamtaul, the parents were happy and relieved to know that Usha had a good visit but were still restless and impatient about the following day.
Bus Ride to Kamtau: Conversations and De-Brief

A bus had been arranged to take the participants from Abirpur to Kamtau where *Taru* listening club members from four villages were meeting for theater workshop. By 7 A. M., children from different homes started trickling in front of Soni’s house to ride the bus that was parked in front of her house. They were accompanied by several villagers. Some had come to gaze, others to bid farewell, and some to scoff and mock the girls for breaking the traditional expectation by shamelessly coming to such an event. However, the participants were very cheerful but controlled their happiness until they were safely in the bus and out of the village. They gave a scream of excitement and triumph. It must have felt liberating for the travelers, especially the girls, to be able to leave the village. Traditionally the girls leave the village only after marriage. Here she was leaving the village at 7 A.M. in the morning which meant someone else was going to fill in for her household tasks. This was a true holiday for the participants.

The 20 mile ride from Abirpur to Kamtau was a fun trip. There were lots of conversation about the nature of the workshop. There was lot of positive anticipation in their voices. Manoj Maharaj had woken up an hour before his usual time and tended to all his patients so that he could accompany the participants to Kamtau and spend the day with us. He gave a small lecture to everyone to behave themselves and remember that they are guests in Kamtau and respect their host. I thanked Manoj Maharaj and told him how much we treasured his involvement in this intervention.
Putting it Together in Kamtaul

This intervention was made possible by the participants who engaged in the workshop and the facilitators who committed their time and expertise to orchestrate it. I was fortunate to work under the guidance of Arvind Singhal and Lynn Harter, who conceptualized the theater workshop; and my colleagues Devendra Sharma and Yogita Sharma who accompanied me in the field.

Devendra Sharma was well acquainted with the field environment as he had visited the villages of Kamtaul and Abirpur several times and was known to the key members of the community. He is also a qualified theater artist who is a founding member of Brij Lok Madhuri, an organization dedicated to using Indian folk forms for social change.

This intervention was Yogita Sharma’s maiden exploration in the field and she was excited to study the impact of the theater workshop especially on the condition of women. Her involvement in the workshop was critical as she had spent several hours in the villages of Madhopur and Chandrahatti engaging in long discussions with families to encourage them to send their daughters to the workshop.

My dissertation research centered in Abirpur and I spent several days getting to know the families in the community. Hence, as a team, we were in contact with all the four villages and had created a lucrative network of contacts to ensure healthy participation in the workshop.

While Yogita and Devendra were busy collecting youngsters from Kamtaul, Chandrahatti, and Madhopur, the participants from Abirpur were the first ones to arrive
in the village school of Kamtaul. Everybody was anxious to meet each other. In the meantime I introduced them to the rest of our team. They were very excited to see that there were cameras and two folk-artists who were going to help them. They immediately sat and started playing the harmonium (piano-like instrument) and the dholak (drums) and singing songs that were scripted by them. These songs talked about dowry, drugs, and illiteracy. They sang till others started arriving.

Devendra and the rest of us were busy taking care of the last-moment logistical issues such as posters that were put up indicating that members of Taru Listener Club were presenting a cultural program. The participants felt proud to read it and gazed at it for several minutes. They were impressed to see the organization that went into arranging this workshop and kept telling me that they hoped they were good enough for this show. Some were so nervous that they wanted to step down and just watch. They were intimidated by the camera and thought about failure. They were sure that they will do something silly. However, between Manoj Maharaj and I, they were convinced that they could give it a shot today and decided to stay back to participate. We emphasized that they did not have to do anything that they felt uncomfortable about.

Slowly people started pouring in and the room started filling up. The participants were all unknown to one another and were unsure about the goal of the workshop. With some encouragement from our team, they began to interact with one another and realized that most of them were equally anxious and shy. Usha and Vandana took the lead in introducing people from their village to each other. Within minutes, a huge group of children poured in. They were from Chandrahatti and ranged from 6 to 15 years of age.
Initially participants generally clustered around their own friends. The girls clustered together and so did the boys. First impressions were being formed. Most participants dressed well for the occasion.

![Figure 8. Devendra Sharma (right), Manoj Maharaj (center), and Rajiv (left) addressing the eager participants on the first day of the theater workshop in Kamtaul (source: author)](image)

Devendra addressed the groups followed by a small speech by Manoj Maharaj. Everyone listened intently and wondered their fate for the next few days. Devendra used the American classroom style to make groups and counted off people into three groups. The people were little sad to be separated at this point as they did not know anyone from other village. This was an opportunity for them to interact with one another.
Rajiv and Dheeraj were the two folk artists who helped to co-facilitate the workshop. One group was assigned to Rajiv and Dheeraj, the other to Devendra, and I worked with the children’s group. We did not integrate the children with the rest of the groups as we were unsure about the learning curve of these children. We did not want them to hold back others but we were very wrong. The children’s group was a quick study. Once the groups were made, they were asked to sit in separate circles and introduce themselves to learn something about each other. The girls were initially hesitant to sit next to boys from other villages. Slowly they opened up and realized that they had to work with each other.

**Stories and Scripts**

The groups were made to sit in a circle facing inwards. Each participant had to introduce themselves by telling a story. The story could be an incident or an episode that
occurred in the village. Participants started narrating stories from their own village. These stories were true and were based on a social issue affecting their village. Soon there was a rich collage of stories based on the experience of the participants.

Once the stories were discussed, the group had to collectively select two or three best stories from the group and discuss them in detail. There was no competition as each person tried to reflect upon another person’s story and relate it to his own. This created a congenial atmosphere where participants tried to identify common issues that all of them found salient. Initially the girls were quiet and had to be prodded. With encouragement from Usha, Vandana, and others, over time, more girls opened up.

Subsequently, these stories would become the themes of the emerging scripts. Each group was given instructions to choose best stories and create a meta-story out of it. The plan was to spend the better half of the morning in creating these scripts. The participants were quite surprised with this process. They could not visualize the outcome and doubted their ability to do this. Basically, they could not believe that they could come up with a script so soon.

One group highlighted stories about drug abuse, illiteracy, and family planning in their village. This group had many members from Abirpur who talked about their efforts in eradicating illiteracy by opening a school for under-privileged children run by youngsters. They also discussed ways to stop the consumption of tobacco and suggested that role modeling is one of the many ways to do so. Participants who did not belong to Abirpur also found similar experiences in their own villages. For a long time, they discussed ways to connect these stories and started creating dialogues. They were helped
by some of us to script their ideas. They did not write each and every line but scribbled the general idea onto paper.

Soon after, they started counting girls and boys in the group to create roles and characters. They found that they had a good distribution of girls and boys. Jyotish, a participant from Abirpur, teased some young girls from Abirpur to play the part of mother or aunty. This resulted in a long dialogue between the girls and me, as they did not want to play a married role. Their respective village community members would criticize playing such a role. It was very difficult to convince them that this would be only for the stage, but their arguments were critical to their circumstances. I did not pursue this any further and left it on the group to decide. After, an hour or so, the group came to me and told me that the girls would do any role they had to do to make the play effective. I was delighted that they had reached this decision on their own.

At the end of that day, while leaving for Abirpur in the evening, I asked the participants what had made them change their mind. Jyotish and Dhurender explained that they told the girls that they would protect them from any unpleasant situation. Finally, Manoj Maharaj stepped in and encouraged the Abirpur girls to cooperate and not pay attention to unnecessary details. The girls agreed to do the roles because they felt that they had already broken enough traditions to participate in the workshop so one more would not hurt them. The group with least inhibition and maximum excitement was the children’s group.
Children’s Group: Brimming with Enthusiasm

The dozen children ranging from six to fifteen years were clubbed in one group which became the most exciting group of the workshop. I took the responsibility of the children on the first day and asked them to tell stories that were dear to them. These stories should have some lesson at the end that we could discuss. They had few inhibitions or demands. Chandni, a nine year old from village Chandrahatti and an avid Taru listener had motivated several of them to attend the theater workshop.

Figure 10. Chandni writing the script during the workshop (source: author)

Chandni has an extremely sharp mind and could articulate her thoughts well. When she heard about the workshop, she took it upon herself to motivate the children to attend it. She went all around the village convincing parents to send their children to Kamtaul. She asked my colleague, Yogita Sharma, to wait at her house and brought several children to the bus. On the second day of the workshop, she brought in more children
and teenage girls as well. She went back home after the first day and talked to village elders to let their daughters come to the workshop. She would say: “If I can go to Kamtaul, why can’t you?” Chandni was the resident activist.

Once the children had chosen the most engaging stories from their group, Chandni took over and organized the whole group to think about creating a script. I thought they will need facilitation from us so I hung around. Soon I realized that the group could write their own script and allocate roles and create dialogues. After an hour or so, they put on a spectacular show. Their themes focused on gender inequalities at home. They showed how parents invariably differentiate between boys and girls and provide limited resources to the female child. We were pleasantly surprised to see the children perform and admired them for their initiative.

After a while, Chandni came to me with a proposition. She asked me if she could sing a song in the play. I asked her to sing for me and she sang a beautiful song on dowry and status of women in the society. I was impressed and asked her where she had learned it. To my amazement, she told me that she had written the song and composed it. I wished for more Chandnis to make this world a better place.

**Performances**

Our original plan was to hold the workshops for five days and then perform in all four villages over the next two days. However, the groups were progressing well by the third day so we decided to have a final rehearsal to assess their progress. The groups performed their plays with passion and zest. Other than the plays, we had one dance, one song, and one poem interspersed between the three plays. During our final practice,
villagers stood by the boundary of the Panchaayat Ghar (local government quarters), which was the location of the workshop, and watched intently. Some of them climbed the gates and were eager to fall into the premises to watch the play. We decided that the performances could begin the next day so that the groups do not lose their passion. There was no end to improvising as the plays were works-in-progress. Every time the groups acted, they wanted to add or change something. They became more and more creative as time went by. They certainly enjoyed the production more and became more confident.

Figure 11. The practices were enjoyed by uninvited audience crowding by the boundary wall (source: author)

The performances were advertised by word of mouth. Rural Health Practitioners played an important role in promoting the performance to the village. People were
curious to see what we had been up to for the last few days. Some were waiting for the best opportunity to criticize, others were simply eager for entertainment.

Devendra earmarked with the help of RHP the best spot to do the show. We chose an open area where people could stop by while walking up and down the village. This helps in attracting those people who would not have conventionally come to watch. It would take approximately two hours for stage set up. Devendra had hired rugs for covering the stage, and a sound system. The villagers gave us their Takhatas (wooden cots) to make into a stage. They would give us tarpaulin sheets to spread on the floor so that audience members could sit on it.

![Takhat](source: author)

*Figure 12. Takhat (wooden cots) used to construct the stage in Kamtaul (source: author)*

The actors either came dressed in costumes from home or brought their clothes to wear before the show. They chose their own costumes. The girls were uncomfortable to
wear *sarees* as only married women wear *sarees*. They were not comfortable to wear *sarees* in their own village but did not mind wearing it during a performance outside their village. Since they could be recognized in their own village, they were hesitant to become the source of anxiety for their family. Because they were in another village, they clearly enjoyed dressing up.

The performances were held during the day under the hot sun. This did not stop people from attending. Women came from their homes to watch and we made them sit in the front. We subverted the dominance exerted by men in such scenarios and encouraged the women and children to be in the front. The men were clustered at the back. Those who were not allowed to leave home (like young married women) watched from terraces of neighboring houses. Some audience members were sitting on trees, some precariously perched on walls, and others had brought their chairs to watch the show. The show was a big success and was attended by hundreds of people. The participants improvised on stage if they forgot a dialogue.

It was noticed that the audience of all age and social groups had turned up to watch the program. Though the days were hot and humid, the audience watched the program with complete attention and little interruption or disturbance was noticed during the show. The audiences were keen to interact with the characters on the stage as they kept voicing their views during the dramatization on the stage. They clapped and conveyed their verbal appreciation many times during the show.
Most of the female audiences members were found to be seated in the front rows and the males were scattered at the back. Young male and female audience members were more enthusiastic to watch the program and sang and danced with the characters on the stage. To watch the program without any obstruction, some of the young boys sat on trees and many young women were found on the roof of houses nearing the stage.

**Methods of Data Collection**

Since I wanted to experience everyday lives of the young women in Abirpur, I decided not to use traditional methods of gathering information. As Abirpur had been visited by several clusters of research teams over the past 18 months, I decided to stay in Abirpur and tried to become part of the community. Therefore, I decided to rely on the power of observation at one level, and conversations on the other. I decided to keep lengthy fieldnotes (written and audiotaped) and would scribble whenever I got the opportunity. I knew that evenings were not a good time to write fieldnotes due to absence of electricity, so I adopted the habit of writing in the morning. Once I would
have taken my bath and helped Usha in the kitchen, I would sit on the terrace of Usha’s house and write for an hour or more.

I had decided that I do not use the tape recorder until the last few days of my stay as I did not want to distance myself from the community. So, I would visit five to seven homes every day and spend several hours talking to the women, their husbands, parents, and other relatives.

Often, I would be asked about the purpose of my visit. I would simply say that I was visiting them to find out about their lives and how they interact with one another. However, when the young women from listeners group asked me about my intention, I would explain the essence of my study and ask them for their help.

Often, I would organize informal group discussions. These discussions would emerge most of the times depending on the conversation between the group members. However, sometimes I would take the liberty to suggest a theme which would then result in long discussion.

One evening, several boys and girls were sitting outside Usha’s house singing and playing local instruments for entertainment. I joined them in their recreation and encouraged them to discuss the origin of these songs. This led to a long and interesting discussion on history and tradition of songs. I learned a lot about their heritage and we had a great informal chat about what it meant to be a person from Abirpur. Sometime during the discussion, the elders joined and talked about the changing value system and how it had affected the youth of their village. After a deep discussion, we all joined
together (young and old) in singing songs that had surpassed the barrier of time and age and rejoiced in that moment!

The more I stayed, the more my methodology became organized. Now that I became familiar to them, more structured conversations began to emerge. I would strategically join a group of men and women, and start a conversation relevant to their lives. The most frequent conversations were around the participatory theater workshop. People wanted to know more about it and started trusting me with information. They started sharing their reservations about sending their daughters to another village and began to invite my views regarding the situation. I would never offer an opinion but would start dialogue about their concerns. This would validate them as well as address the issue at hand.

Apart from observations, field notes, conversations, group discussions, I also used participatory photography to scope out public and private spaces of interaction. I handed out disposable cameras (24 exposures) to six young female Taru listeners and asked them to take 12 photographs of what they consider to be private spaces and 12 of public spaces. I did not offer much guidance and asked them to think carefully and not share their ideas with other photographers. They were excited and motivated to take photographs. Very quickly, I got to know how the male listeners were unhappy with this scenario. They wanted to photograph as well. I explained the purpose of this research technique and privileged them by holding a three hour long focus group discussion with them. This discussion concluded with singing and dancing as I shocked them with my singing and playing dholak (a folk drum).
After two weeks of my stay in Abirpur, I started interviewing some of the key young women listeners on tape. I felt comfortable recording these interviews on tape so I started a series of unstructured interviews.

Kum Kum volunteered to begin the first interview and had a predisposed attitude toward the research. She knew that the objective was to describe what inspires her and how she carries it out in her everyday life; she herself had a feminist orientation, and she was anxious to cooperate. During the interview, she did her best to be honest and open. The interview lasted for three hours, and both of us felt good about it even though we were exhausted. However, reflecting on what she had said during the next few days, I realized that she had omitted some very important aspects of her life and had unintentionally misrepresented others. She felt that the account she had given was chaotic, unclear, and disorganized. In a week between the first and second interview, she thought about her life and tried to clarify events, relationships, and feelings.

In the second interview she discussed herself within this altered point of view. Still, reviewing later, she was again dissatisfied with the accuracy of her presentation of her current and past life. Once more, she went through a process of self-examination and rethinking. The third interview was somewhat better, but she was not satisfied yet. Only after the fourth interview did she begin to feel she was portraying her life as she actually lived it. By the fifth interview she had arrived at a coherent explanation of her experiences. She said that this was the first time in her life that she was able to put together a reasonable account for herself. She believed that her first accounts were chaotic and disorganized because that was the way her life was, filled with multiple and
conflicting demands from her father, brother, sister, her role in community, and her friends. In the research process, between interviews, she spent long hours analyzing those relationships. The facts of the past were not altered, but they were elaborated and important omissions were filled in. Her own definition of what was important also changed in the process. The first interview might have reflected her conscious assessment of the reality of her life at that time, while the fifth interview reflected an equally valid picture at a later time. Are we thus getting a more and more valid account, or are we getting several accounts that reflect the process of change? Certainly for Kum Kum, the interviews were part of a change process in which she was trying to deal with fundamental contradictions in her life situation. Her understanding of her present dilemmas such as became clearer too, clearer in that she was more satisfied with them.

Unless a relationship of trust is developed, one has little confidence that our research on women's lives and consciousness accurately represents what is significant to them in their everyday lives. This is particularly true if we are trying to understand lives in their totality, as ongoing processes in which the person plays an active part.

In the relationship with those women who were actively changing both their life circumstances and their understandings of their lives, I was able to glimpse the research process as consciousness raising or emancipatory. As I evaluate my experiences in interviewing these women, I am led to another dilemma of feminist research—should we do research that is not consciousness raising for the participants? Is such research an oppressive process that of necessity exploits the subject? If our answer to these questions is yes, we are faced with the possibility of only doing research with people who are very
much like us, eliminating most women from our view and limiting the usefulness of our projects. Perhaps this is another necessary tension in the ongoing project of feminist investigation.

**Data for Analysis**

I conducted thirty in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions involving eight to fourteen women and (sometimes) men at a time. I wrote illustrious fieldnotes in my journal and recorded a few audio tapes with my observations. I also have access to video recording of the participatory theater workshop and the performances. I have 250 pictures taken by me of my stay in Abirpur as well as the participatory workshop. I have transcripts of all the data that has been collected so far by the research teams that have visited Abirpur.

For the purpose of addressing the research questions, I primarily transcribed those interviews that were especially relevant for the study. I used photographs of my field visit to illustrate my experience in Bihar, India.

In the next chapter, I dedicate a section to the research method of participatory photography which I used to understand female listeners’ experience of public and private sphere in their everyday lives. Due to certain equipment constraints as well as communication gap, I am unable to use this data to directly draw conclusions about the women’s use of both public and private spheres.

**Summary**

This chapter described the rationale for using qualitative research methods for collecting data in the field. It provided a description of feminist ethnography in particular
postcolonial ethnography and emphasized the role of reflexivity in doing ethnography. 

Next, this chapter outlined why oral narratives and life histories should be used when studying the lives of women as they have been muted forever and have no representation of their own. The women are trying to challenge these structures of oppression that silence them and are carving new spaces in the old system for their own survival.

Finally, this chapter concludes with a description of data that was gathered during the course of the study and a proposal of how it will be used to address the research questions.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In this chapter, I analyze the collected data to answer the three research questions as well as attempt to generate a deeper understanding and appreciation for the experiences of the young girls of Village Abirpur who continue to struggle with forces of change and transformation. To do so, I rely on (a) my field study (observation and in-depth interviews) conducted in the summer of 2003 in Village Abirpur, Bihar; (b) observations recorded during the theater workshop held in Village Kamtaul, Bihar; (c) detailed conversations with the village community members of Abirpur; and (d) transcriptions from various interviews conducted over the last several years. Although it is true that I am responsible for the interpretation and judicious analysis of the data, I attempt to share this burden with the women and men that I interacted with during the course of the study. To do so, I continually reflect their thoughts and ideas in my interpretation and lend them voice wherever appropriate. Hence, I consider this chapter to be a discursive product of my interaction with the village community of Abirpur.

I will begin this chapter with a brief description of the participants who were involved in the process of data collection. These participants are members of the Abirpur village community and help me to define and articulate their world within the framework of the research questions. After describing the participants, I will situate myself, the researcher, within the study and shed some light on the reflexive role of the researcher while gathering and interpreting the data under consideration. The remaining chapter will investigate the three research questions around which the study is situated. To do so,
I will honor the voices of the young women of Abirpur and offer their experiences of Taru as a testimony to their quest for emancipation and critical consciousness.

The Participants

The primary participants of this research are the young girls of Village Abirpur who are unmarried and live with their parents. I lived in Abirpur for 21 days and interacted with several men and women. However, I focused my time and effort on 15 girls who became my primary participants. These girls were active listeners of radio and had followed Taru closely. Since they were members of the listeners club, they were well-informed and knowledgeable. As a result of listening to Taru and engaging in a systematic dialogue in these clubs, these girls were enacting empowerment in their private as well as public lives. Hence, they became an appropriate group of people for me to study for my research.

These 15 girls help their mothers and sister-in-laws at home and assist their fathers and brothers in their profession. Most of the girls belong to agricultural families and help their fathers and brothers in activities related to the field. Unlike the married women, young girls have fewer restrictions and are allowed to move in and out of their homes and help the men in the fields.

The secondary participants of this study are the married women of Village Abirpur who cannot leave the four walls of their homes. Traditional society imposes this restriction on them and makes them “prisoners” in their own homes as their freedom of movement gets curtailed once one is married and moves to their in-laws’ homes. These women are engaged in household activities such as cooking, cleaning, raising the
children, and looking after their husbands and in-laws. Their lives revolve around their households and their existence is defined by their family. They are allowed to leave their house for religious festivals and weddings in the village. In which case they are expected to be in *purdah* and limit their conversations with only women. The women are accustomed to these rules as they have been in practice for several generations.

**The Researcher**

Reflexivity is particularly concerned with how we ‘write’ (re-present) our experience, that is, it raises important questions about the nature of ‘reality’ and how we constitute and theorize our knowledge of that reality. These questions have been debated across a variety of disciplines: the natural sciences; anthropology; history; sociology; and psychology (for example, Ashmore, 1989; Bourdieu, 1992). Reflexivity draws on the humanistic approach to assume that an individual is a self-conscious and self-questioning being who is capable of formulating and reflecting on his or her means and ends of action. Reflexivity also means questioning our ways of being in the world: i.e. turning inward. When an individual engages in a certain action, he or she is not only critically conscious of the act, but also questions the act in a reflexive manner. Bourdieu describes this as “reflexive critique” (1992).

Essentially, reflexivity challenges the assumption of philosophical and methodological certainty that is implicit in the goal of mainstream social scientists to provide an absolute view of the world. Reflexive authors like Pollner (1991) claim that all forms of inquiry are paradigmatically circumscribed and therefore we cannot claim there is one truth, one reality, one theory, or one ideal way of acting. Many
contemporary approaches to reflexivity focus on various intellectual critiques and raise philosophical issues about the nature of knowledge and language.

Reflexivity has major implications for both intellectual and social practice: it is not just a writing ‘tool’, but a writing ‘practice’ in which we question our own ways of being and acting as academics, scholars, researchers, and participants in the lived world. Reflexive practice questions and explores how we might contribute to the construction of realities, how we relate with others, and how we construct our ways of being in the world.

The idea of self-reflexivity is an internal process wherein we examine ourselves, including our values, in the process of exercising critical consciousness. It is a process that depends on the idea of a transforming self, continuously emerging and changing as we interact with others, the environment, and the public. It is a dialogue with the self about its fundamental assumptions and values. It is questioning our selves about our core beliefs, not just about our understanding of a particular event.

In this context, self-reflexivity becomes an act of reason turned inward in a radical way toward the foundation of consciousness. Through this radical process of critiquing our beliefs and ideologies we remain open to change. This openness to change in our selves creates new alternatives for change.

As a reflexive researcher, I have strived to understand the embedded meaning in the numerous dialogues with the women and men of Abirpur. I have tried to maintain dignity and sensitivity while interpreting their stories and lifehistories. While doing so, I have chosen to be conscientious of the multiple realities that exist when studying a
phenomenon and have tried to approach it from several angles. In doing so, I apologize to the participants for any unintentional prejudice or ignorance that may have crept in my analysis of the research questions.

**Organizing for Action**

Research Question # 1: *How are the young women of Village Abirpur enacting empowerment in the public and private spaces that they occupy?*

To address this question, it is important to note that I do not define public and private sphere as only geographical spaces which are inhabited by people. As much as it is geographical in its physical entity, it is also an abstract space consolidated by discursive interactions between those who inhabit them. Hence, it is a discursive space that is inhabited by people of Abirpur and the nature of interaction between them defines this space as public or private.

For example, when Soni sits with her friends in *Titli* center, she is definitely sharing a public forum defined by physical attributes of the space. *Titli* center is a place where men and women come together to seek medical advice from the rural medical practitioner and converse on diverse political and social issues affecting their lives as part of the village community. However, often Soni will be found in *Titli* center having an intense conversation with Usha about her parents’ plans to get her married in the coming year. This discursive space becomes private for the two while the locale is public in its definition. Although this seems like a very simplistic definition of public and private sphere, its use will be complex and rigorous in analyzing the results.
I will address this research question by providing an examination of the different organizations that the young girls have formed in Abirpur and highlight their initiatives at the community level. This will validate their experience of enactment of empowerment at a public level. Next, I will describe how these girls are enacting empowerment in the private spaces they occupy by describing their resistance within the family. I will end this section of the chapter by discussing the ideological and philosophical enactment of empowerment practiced by the girls in Abirpur. Wherever possible, I will juxtapose my analysis with their voices and validate their experience to shoulder my ethnographic responsibility as the story-teller.

_Taru Natya (Drama) Club_

Many girls in Abirpur have been immensely influenced by _Taru_ and have organized themselves in different groups to challenge the existing system and propose viable changes within their social world. The proposed changes have not only shaken the foundation of what is come to believe the ‘way of life’ in Abirpur, but have also impacted the way people perceive social issues like dowry, caste, and gender roles.

The young _Taru listeners_ have realized the potential of organizing as a way of enacting empowerment in their everyday lives. In the process of doing so, they have mobilized several men and women to join hands and share the responsibility of challenging and changing the status quo. They have been successful in forming organizations such as the _Taru Drama Club_ which provides a dialogic space for young girls and boys to come together and share their experiences that may lead to social change.
For ages, traditional communities have been using folk theater for entertainment and education. Hence, the tradition of folk theater was utilized to emphasize the personal narratives of the participants which were never heard before.

The participatory workshop was inspired by the writings of Augusto Boal (1979) who authored the revolutionary book, *Theatre of the Oppressed* that was based on the radical principles of Freire. Harter, Sharma, Pant, Singhal, & Sharma (2007) were involved in conceptualization and execution of the workshop in Bihar and noted:

Underscoring Boal’s work is an assumption that all theater is ideological – it reproduces and/or resists value-laden practices and patterns. As such, theatre, explicitly or implicitly, entertains, educates, informs, influences, and incites action. Boal’s techniques of TO, based on Freirean principles of dialogue, interaction, problem-posing, reflection, and conscientization, are designed to activate spectators to take control of situations rather than passively allowing things to happen to them. Passive spectators are transformed into actors in charge of dramatic action. The human body, the source of sound as well as movement, is the means of producing theatre. Thus, embodiment is the means of controlling
theatrical performance. Through body control, a passive observer becomes an active protagonist. (p. 276)

The workshop in Kamtaul concluded with four performances held in the four villages and was successful in creating a dialogic environment wherein the community members discussed the issues enacted in the plays and expressed their opinions to one another. The performances provided the actors a discursive space to demonstrate their ideas and the spectators to participate actively with the actors.

The performances were well received by the viewers and sparked several conversations within the village community. There were several people who were impressed by the collective effort of the young boys and girls and appreciated the hard work that went into organizing the show. At the same time, several members of the community objected to the frivolous and public display of issues (like dowry, female infanticide, child marriage, etc.) that are considered personal and private to the village community. However, the young participants realized how they had impacted the village society by working together as a team since boys and girls were not supposed to interact with one another. They had violated an age-old tradition by participating in these workshops and performing in front of the entire village and they fully enjoyed the experience!

The young participants were immensely intrigued by the reactions of the community. As they talked to the people about issues confronting their society, they realized the continuous need for such performances in their village. They were amazed at how the community resisted new ideas and was unwilling to change. Conventionally, people were unwilling to talk about the deficiencies present in their society but after the
inspiring theatrical performance in their village, people were happy to engage in extensive discussions.

Apart from the encouragement that the participants received from the spectators, the participants from Abirpur felt the need to create an organization in order to sustain their interaction. They were very nostalgic of the time they had spent together during the theater workshop and missed the engaging conversation they had with one another on issues that engulfed their society. Hence, the participants (from Abirpur) called a meeting at Titli center and invited all those boys and girls who were interested in social reform activities. In this meeting, the young boys and girls decided to systematically organize into a group that was ready to challenge the status quo.

The meeting began by sharing the mission of the theater workshop that was held earlier that month (July, 2003) in Village Kamtaul. This was done to reinforce the agenda for the meeting and especially those who had not attended the participatory theater workshop. A decisive discussion took place about the issues confronting their society. Several concerns were raised and brainstormed. According to Usha Kumari of Village Abirpur:

It is very important that we continue with the efforts that have been made by Saumya didi and her friends. By doing so, we can solve several issues facing our society. I am mainly concerned with the issue of dowry and education for girls. But I will also support issues that are facing the young men in our village like drug and alcohol addiction. I firmly believe that if we put our heads together, the young men and women of our village can fight any battle. So let us start by coming together and creating an organization.

I was fortunate to be part of this session and quietly observed the meeting. I noticed that the girls were always more vocal whenever the issue of dowry was raised.
Probably they felt more affected by the issue. At the risk of stereotyping, boys were more concerned about lack of employment opportunities in their village:

If the boys are expected not to take dowry, they need to be and economically independent. Before they marry, they should have a decent job or a reliable source of income. Then they can confront the elders of the family and refuse to take dowry. If they are dependent (like me), then they are forced to listen to their parents and may have to accept dowry at the time of wedding.

(Manoj Maharaj, Rural Health Practitioner, Village Abirpur.)

After a long engaging discussion, the boys and girls concluded that they needed to continue the workshop to produce more plays that address the social ills present in the society. They realized the effectiveness of collective action and the strategic employment of participatory theater to entertain and educate the community. Although they realized the potential of such interventions, they felt restricted by the dearth of resources available to them. They wanted to continue working as a team to eradicate social evils but missed the leadership that was provided by the research teams that visited Abirpur in the last several years. The lack of an organized plan and initiative became a source of worry to the gathered group in Titli center. They had become so dependent on the help of outsiders and felt lost. They approached me for guidance.

I was impressed with their undying determination and conviction to strive for social justice and gender equality and advised them to discuss the potential of a club that would work to serve the interest of the community. I emphasized the importance of collective efficacy in social change activism and highlighted the effectiveness of participation by illustrating the philosophy behind the theater workshop. I talked about the work of Augusto Boal and his innovative methods of using theater and other local artforms to address issues of development.
The discussion attracted boys and girls who were directly associated with *Taru* via listeners clubs and those who were recently affected by *Taru* as a result of the performances presented in Abirpur. They were excited to learn about the potential of participatory theater and were eager to practice it in Abirpur. After several hours of brainstorming the multiple ideas, the group decided to create a club that would work on the teachings of Augusto Boal.

I encouraged them to involve as many boys and girls as possible so that the work for social change could go on with maximum support of the community. The club was opened to all members of the community and listeners of *Taru* became the founding members of the club. The founding members discussed the underlying philosophy of the club and elaborated its mission. This discussion led to the co-creation of the constitution.
by which the club would function and serve the community. Some of the highlights of the constitution were:

1. Every member has to follow the constitution of the Drama Club.
2. Social issues will be incorporated in every play and dramatized in front of the village community.
3. The members of the club shall not do drugs or drink alcohol.

(The Constitution, July 31, 2003)

Once the constitution was approved by all the founding members of the club, it was shared with the larger village community. This group of youngsters were determined to popularize the mission of Taru and appealed to the village community for support and blessings. Several people showed interest and welcomed the ideas of the club. Hence, on July 31, 2003, Taru Natya (drama) Club was founded and 22 members signed the constitution that promised to use theater to eradicate social inequalities from the society.

The members announced their first performance to be held in the village local school on August 15, 2003 to celebrate the Indian Independence Day. They were eager to perform in front of the school children so inspire them to reflect on social issues affecting their village society. They also planned to host a competition in October 2003 and invite other villages to participate in it. It was decided that all the plays in the competition will focus on dramatizing the existing social inequalities present in the society and offering solutions to eliminate them. The members were excited to work together as a team to affect change in their society.
Organizing in such group leads to meaningful interaction among the members. These members are busy in their daily routines and are unlikely to have an opportunity to converse with one another outside the club. Hence, the club becomes a forum for exchange of ideas and social activism. Another group that functioned as a critical dialogic site is the *Taru* Listeners Club that was consciously organized to spark conversations about social issues discussed in *Taru*.

By founding this club, the girls are enacting empowerment and impacting change in their public and private lives. They are more visible in the community and have started occupying spaces that were traditionally dominated by the male members. As Tinkoo stated:

> Earlier we could not sit and talk with anybody outside our home. Even within the confines of our home we were restricted to talk to the women of the household. But now, not only has my interaction extended to men but also the nature of my conversations has changed to cover areas that I could not address earlier. Now I can raise questions about dowry, education for girls, marriage and expect to be heard. In the club, everybody is equal and has same opportunities. I feel confident about questioning issues. This confidence helps me to break the silence at home and I feel comfortable talking to my brother and my father about my future. Earlier, I could not look into their eyes but now I feel safe.

The workshop had provided the girls a safe platform to raise questions and address their concerns. Through the drama club, the girls have ensured that the channels of communication remain open for them and they can continue to assert themselves little-by-little. During the participatory photography exercise, Neha commented on the empowering dimension of the spaces that she occupies as a result of listening to *Taru* by showing me a picture of her room:

> Before *Taru*, I was afraid to ask my parents to send me to college. I thought my job was only to raise a family and learn household chores. But after seeing how
Taru didi struggled in life to be independent, I decided to follow her steps and gather the courage to face my world. Slowly I started talking to my mother and then my dad about educating me and they listened and agreed to send me to school. This changed my status at home…in my private space…my bedroom used to be a place where I did my household chores like sewing, laundry, chopping vegetables…but now the room is a place where I study and dream of a better life and future.

If we operationalize private space as a physical space, then Neha, Tinkoo, and many other girls like them rejuvenate and enact their freedom in this space. They have found this new spirit of change after being exposed to Taru and being engaged with groups such as drama club and listeners club.

This enactment of empowerment in the domestic space inadvertently changes the nature of interaction of these girls in the public space. Their newly found identity encourages them to re-visit the public space with a new sense of confidence. Seema of Abirpur photographed the Titli center as the public space she occupies in her village. According to her she can sit in Titli center and converse with boys and girls about issues that affect her life. She considers this space to be public as the nature of conversation in here is of issues that relate to the society and not just her personal life.

**Taru Radio Listeners Club**

Four listening groups were formed in Village Abirpur to build a sizeable and dedicated audience for Taru and to create a dialogic space for the listeners to discuss the issues addressed in the radio soap opera. According to Manoj Maharaj:

The club started with a small group of people who came together to listen to Taru. Gradually, there was a rise in the number of Taru listeners and more and more people
began to enjoy *Taru*. Through frequent conversations, the listeners actively mobilized other people of Abirpur to listen to the program. According to Mukesh Maharaj:

> Once I heard the program, I was so entertained by it that I encouraged my *Chachi* (Aunty) to listen to it as well. Gradually, I realized the educational value of the program and learnt a lot from its content. It is then that I asked my younger brother to sit with me and listen to the re-runs of the program. He enjoyed it as well and we had good discussions after the broadcast.

The members of the club collectively listened to *Taru*. The listeners discussed the episode after its broadcast and reflected on the educational message(s). The club has a very special meaning for the young women of Abirpur. It is for the first time that the women of Abirpur belonged to a group that was organized by them and for them. They felt important and eager to discuss their problems within this group. The female and male members of the listeners’ club consciously organized themselves into groups in order to meet their own needs. Such social processes created an environment conducive for social change.

**Enactment of Empowerment in Village Abirpur**

Organizations such as the *Taru* Drama Club and *Taru* radio Listener Club are empowering for the young women of Abirpur. These young girls have never systematically organized themselves in any group. Before now, they have been muted by the men of their society and have remained silenced for ages. Although some girls like Sunita and Neha continue the struggle to be heard, there are some girls who have found a new strength to speak their minds and challenge the status-quo. The strategic planning by the *Taru* research team by forming listener groups encouraged the young women to interact with one another on a weekly basis. This ensured consistent exchange of ideas
and dynamic conversations within the group members. Apart from interacting with one another, the girls got the opportunity to mingle with the boys who were also the members of the listeners club. These young men and women exchanged their views on the social issues dramatized in Taru and brainstormed its relevance in their lives.

After the broadcast of the episode, the boys and girls would systematically summarize the main issues addressed that day and offer their perspective on them. These discussions would be recorded in a diary by a designated member of the listener group who would share her/his observations with the entire group and seek their approval. This would be the common protocol in all the groups and would lead to a systematic documentation of listeners’ observations during the broadcast of Taru.

In one such post-broadcast discussion, Mukesh Maharaj, Kum Kum, Amit, Soni and Sunita share their opinion on the social epidemic of dowry:

Kum Kum: What if somebody says that there is no use in educating the girl as she has to eventually cook food in her future.

Mukesh: Ok, if parents are not able to send their daughter to school because of money problems, then they should educate them at home so that their daughters can be independent and earn some money and maybe go for higher studies.

Soni: Suppose the daughter does all of that - takes tuitions, studies on her own, etc. and then her family tells her that the more you study the more educated boy we will have to find for you… since we cannot marry you to a less educated fellow…Then?

Mukesh: But, when if the girl is employed, she will find a boy of her own choice. The parents will not have to search for her. Problem will be solved!

Sunita: It is so difficult to get a boy in the first place and you are talking about a well-qualified boy!

Mukesh: If the girl is a graduate, she would want a boy who is a post graduate. But if she does her graduation, she would get a job somewhere. There will not be any dearth of money and then there would be no problem in getting married either.

Amit: But the girl will always be less educated than a boy!

Soni: No, that was the case before but not now girls are flying airplanes.
Mukesh: She will be equal, but she is not totally free. She still has bonds on her.
Sunita: Given the amount of freedom you people (men) have, if we could have the same, even we could have done something and showed you.
Mukesh: This is a social problem and not a gender problem.
Soni: There is not so much freedom for us (women). Suppose we are earning our own money and paying for our expenses to study, the society would still not let us. If we go out to study everybody would say- see what this girl is doing, is she studying or what...
Kum Kum: Especially these problems are present in the villages. We live in such a society where women are constantly looked down upon.
Mukesh: Think about this - we never sat together and spoke like this before. Today because of Taru we are sitting together and speaking and there is no veil of any kind. There are no wrong feelings in our minds! This is a sure way of moving ahead. We will correct our lives first and then the others can follow.
Sunita: If one generation is alright, the following generation would automatically be good.

(Post-Broadcast Discussion, Episode # 33)

These conversations are critical to the process of social change as it provides rich insights about the opinions of a community on issues. The radio listeners' club in Abirpur mobilizes villagers to listen to radio in small groups and with family members. After listening, it encourages discussions among group members.

Similarly, the Taru Drama club that was founded subsequent to the theater workshop and performances encouraged conversations of emancipation and liberation among the women. The young listeners jointly decided to start this club and represent their perspectives through scripted plays. These plays were scripted, directed, and enacted by the members of this club. The girls in this club enact empowerment as they dramatize their realities and perform it in front of the village community.

The founding of the drama club in Abirpur is symbolic of women asserting themselves. The club has given them space and voice. Here, the women spend time to discuss their problems with one another, finding comfort in togetherness. Due to
organizations such as the Taru Drama Club, women have been consciously integrated in the process of social change.

Organizations such as Taru Drama Club and Taru Radio Listener Club provide a platform for exchange of ideas. In these discussions, people realize the problems and issues they are confronted with and begin to think about possible resolutions. Women in Abirpur said that prior to listening to Taru, not many conversations in Abirpur focused on burning social issues. After listening to Taru, young women and men began to get together in informal groups and started talking about the social issues. These discussions had an open-ended agenda. Some individuals like Usha Kumari and Kum Kum formalized these discussions and directed strategic conversations with their peers. However, most listeners of Taru were intrigued by the serial’s plot and talked what happened to the principal characters.

From all the recent organizing activities taking place in Abirpur, one senses that the village was at a crucial stage of embracing change. The climate for change was in tune with the broadcast of the radio serial Taru. Girls such as Usha Kumari, Seema, Tinkoo, Neha, Sunita and several others were eager to change their status quo but did not know how to transform their current condition. Taru gave them the platform to exploit the opportunity to change and listened to the program attentively and with open-mindedness. The program dealt with social issues that were central to the lives of the people of Abirpur. There is enough evidence to show that young women were enacting empowerment by organizing in these groups (clubs) and were displaying their involvement in social activism at a public level. They were openly engaging in activities
that challenged their status-quo and were emerging as main players in social change activism. Hence, *Taru* provided many of the young women radio listeners of Abirpur an opportunity to publicly question the prevailing social inequalities by organizing in strategic groups of interest. *Taru* provided the extra stimulus for exchange of ideas and helped in sparking the process of discussion, dialogue, and the search for identifying mechanisms to accelerate social change.

**Politics of Education**

Parents have several incentives for not educating their daughters. Foremost is the view that education of girls brings no returns to parents and that their future roles, being mainly reproductive and perhaps including agricultural labor, require no formal education. As more and more boys are engaged in education, there is a growing reliance on the labor of girls. Girls are increasingly replacing their brothers on the farm while carrying on their usual responsibilities in housework. The role of parents is to deliver a chaste daughter to her husband’s family, one who can work at home as well as help in outdoor chores.

*Taru* impacted the way many members of the village community started thinking about education. Earlier it was considered futile to educate the girl as she had to spend the rest of her life serving the in-laws. However, many women in Abirpur changed their opinion about education and realized that education can be useful to their daughter in her married wife and it also provides her an economic crutch in case something were to happen to her husband. In a conversation with Sunita’s mother, I realized how important it was for Rita Devi to educate Sunita:
Interviewer: Do you think your life would have been any different if you had continued studies?

Rita Devi: If I had studied, I would have been more aware of things around me. I would have understood my environment better. Now I only understand household things... I cannot understand things pertaining to education. That is why I would like Sunita to be educated... My father told me that I could not go to school. I was very keen to attend school. He refused. As soon as I became an adolescent, he stopped me from going to school. I feel bad about it as I am totally dependent on my husband for everything. If anything were to happen to him, I would be homeless! I don't want my children to feel helpless and that is why I send them to school. It makes them happy. The times have changed. World has changed. It is very nice from before.

While Rita Devi is eager to educate Sunita and make her independent, she is also caught in her own dilemma. She is aware of the needs of the new world but feels trapped within the customs of her community. Later in the interview when I asked her about purdah (veil), she helplessly conceded to its use and expects Sunita to give-in to the tradition as well:

Interviewer: Can the bahu (daughter-in-law) of your household come in front of the elders of the house?

Rita Devi: No. They cannot come beyond the door (pointing at the threshold of the kitchen). They are not allowed and have to see from here and also shout from here if they need anything.

Interviewer: Will Sunita have to do the same after she is married?

Rita Devi: It will depend on her family. She may be allowed to go outside the or maybe not. These are the rules and norms in the village. If she gets married in the city, then she will follow their criteria otherwise she will have to follow the village norms and values if she were to marry in a village.

Interviewer: After her marriage, it is not your responsibility?

Rita Devi: No, she will have to find out how it works in her new home. She is majboor (helpless) and cannot do anything. She cannot go against her in-law’s wish. She will have to respect the rules of her new home and live within them. She has no choice but to agree.

Hence, the daughter is expected to follow the rituals of her in-law’s home and silence herself. It is paradoxical how the mother ‘knows’ what is best for her daughter
but is helpless to take any action. She is wishful that her daughter will marry into a family where she is treated well but cannot protect her against any harm. Like Rita Devi, Kiran Devi agrees that Taru has enlightened the folks of Abirpur and prioritized education as a key component in the welfare of the girls:

- When the girls go to school that will change the society as well. They will move ahead in life. Education is everything. After listening to Taru, girls who were not educated have started considering education.

While there is hope and enthusiasm in Abirpur for young unmarried girls to carve a future for themselves, there is also a lot of remorse among young married women with children who feel suffocated in their current status. They are still very young and have not forgotten the dreams that they had dreamt once. They want to attain respect and affection in their in-law’s house but feel confined and limited. They would like to find some strength from listening to Taru, but often feel handicap and hopeless. These women constantly compare their lives with the unmarried girls in Abirpur and feel suffocated and helpless.

Neetu Sharma is 24 years old and a mother of two boys. She has already been married for nine years. She was educated by her parents and succeeded in finishing 10th grade. Neetu did not want to get married and lead a traditional life but her early marriage left her no choice and she is today the bahu (daughter-in-law) of a highly conservative family in Abirpur. After talking to her, I realized that Neetu still dreams of working someday and improving the quality of her life. She continues to advocate for change in her life even if presently within the four walls. When I asked her how education has changed her condition, she noted:
Education has helped me a lot...I teach my own children. I taught my sis-in-law’s children. They never studied before. Their eating habits have changed. Before I came into this house, they cooked simple food. They did not know how to cook delicacies like *kofta, sambar, and paneer* but now they do. I introduced it to them. They would wear clothes in the most disorderly fashion. I explained them how to match their blouse with the *saree*. I told them that a bed should have at least 2 sheets - one to put on the mattress and other to cover with. The pillow should have a cover. I do it so the other women in my household watch me and get influenced.

It became evident from such conversations that the older generation of women and the married women were resenting the lack of education in their lives and were also mourning the limitations set on them by their elders. They wished for better lives for their daughters but were aware of the constraints of the society.

As much as the married women were disillusioned about any change in status for their daughters, the young girls of Abirpur were excited about what lay ahead of them. They were talking to one another about improving the status of education in their village and decided to take matters into their own hands.

**Founding of Local School**

The young female radio listeners were immensely inspired by *Taru* and realized that if they wanted the village community to change, education had to be popularized and made accessible to all the people. In the listeners groups as well as in informal groups, the girls had been discussing the relevance of education in their lives and realized the absence of it in their village. On listening to *Taru*, the girls started to reflect on the role of education in improving their status in their society. They were aware that their mothers were not usually educated, and did not want that to be the case in their
During an interview with Sunita, she described the status of education in Abirpur before and after the broadcast of *Taru*:

**Interviewer:** Did *Taru* impact the status of education in your village? Are people eager to educate the girls at all?

**Sunita:** From the very beginning I wanted to study. But after listening to *Taru* I got more confidence and courage. I thought I could be independent... now I want to be independent, and do my work myself. I have seen it in my home and in the village that villagers started giving equal education to girls also. Differences in a caste and creed have reduced. Guardians who did not want to educate their children are doing so now.

**Interviewer:** How has listening to *Taru* changed your attitude towards education?

**Sunita:** I did not study so much before... I used to study only in the night. But now whenever I get the time - be it day, night or afternoon - I study!

**Interviewer:** Did people observe the change in you as a result of *Taru*?

**Sunita:** Nobody at home says anything in front of me but when I go out in the village people say that she is good in her studies. There is a change in her attitude. I like that very much!

Inspired by *Taru* and eager to change the world, the young female radio listeners decided to start a school in their village for those children who did not have access to the village school. These children belonged to the lower caste (*Dalit*) strata and were barred from attending school with the upper caste children. Hence, they did not receive any education and continued to live in poverty and ignorance. The female listeners discussed the potential of such a school with other male listeners of the club and did not receive much support:

**Soni:** You people (men) have the freedom to move ahead, why don’t you start a school and we will follow you. The problem is that you take a step towards something and then back out of it.

**Mukesh:** If you have any problem, tell us. You cannot blame us without giving us a chance.

**Sunita:** Okay, when we have a problem and cannot come to the school to teach, the male members of the listeners club should be there to teach. The children should not come to school and go back.
Soni: Or, is it that you people are so busy that you cannot find one minutes time for us (girls). We cannot rely on you at all.

(Post-Broadcast Discussion, Episode # 33)

Finally, left to their own devices, the girls decided to proceed with organizing a school by the village well. This well was situated in front of the Titli Center and was a popular spot for the villagers to hang out. However, the dalit children did not frequent this place much as they were not allowed to visit the village. They dwelled in the fringes of the village and were invisible by compulsion. They were never welcomed to any event in the village and were condemned by the village community.

Given the historical status of this marginalized community, the girls were aware of the risk they were about to take by inviting the dalit children to the village to study. They were excited to challenge the status quo and to disregard the norms established by the village community. They publicly denounced the discriminatory custom of ridiculing the dalit and opened their hearts to their children.

People were unhappy with the girls and scoffed at their ambition to be ‘teachers’. They were sure that the girls would be unable to teach and fail in their mission.

However, Sunita was determined to start the school with her friends Soni and Neha:

One day we decided that it would be very nice if we taught children from the dalit community… just the way Neha (radio character) does in Taru. Many people said that ‘she herself does not know how to read and write and she is trying to teach others!’ Then we thought that after some time things will cool down. We worked with courage and did not get scared. We had decided in the beginning itself that we will let people say whatever they want but we will operate the school without any help. We will cross all hurdles like Neha did.

The girls had a difficult task ahead of them. By openly challenging the status quo, they were reconfiguring the power structures inherent in the village community.
The naturalized space for these girls is within the four walls of their homes where they are trained to be responsible wives and mothers. By crossing the threshold of their houses, these girls had reinstated their identities in the public sphere.

In this public sphere, multiple discourses are at play. There is the dominant discourse of patriarchy in which the women have no representation. The men make the rules and lay the foundation of the society. They are in control of the fate of the women by disengaging them from any conversation about their status. This discourse runs deep and governs the politics of the public sphere. The public sphere is dominated by the male presence and any intervention by the women is loathed and disregarded.

Bina Devi is one such citizen of the village community who has little say in any social or personal matter. She has been taught that being mute is the way for a woman to be and she agreed to be like that until Taru was introduced in her life:

Nobody wants to know how we (the women) feel about issues as our opinions do not matter. We are invisible citizens who have no voice and no right to raise our voice. Slowly we became comfortable with this idea and taught our daughters the same. Although women do talk within close confines, their conversations has no bearing on any decision being taken inside or outside her home. However, with Taru radio program, I realized that my daughter need not believe that she is invisible and remain quiet...so I decided that I will let her find her voice.

The public discourse is performed daily in front of the Titli center where the influential men intermingle and discuss varied aspects of the village life. The well, around which they socialize, becomes a symbol of their fraternity in which only men are welcomed. This public space is exclusively occupied by the men for ages.

Seema’s father is a local politician and a very open-minded man who seldom differentiates between his sons and daughters. While he is an advocate of education for
girls, he is equally entrenched in the overarching patriarchal system that operates in the village society:

I agree that the girls should have equal opportunity and should be encouraged to compete with boys but there are several things that they cannot perform. They cannot sit with the village elders (who are men) and chat with them about relevant social issues…that would be rude and uncustumary. Some spaces are definitely for men – like the village Panchaayat (local government). The women have representation in this local body but only to feel equal. They are incapable of holding intelligent conversation and give constructive criticism about the local politics. I encourage them to be part of this organization but not to interfere with matters of the men!

Another discourse that draws our attention is that of the counterpublics. The counterpublics are those men and women who have survived on the periphery. These are mostly the women, children, and lower-caste dwellers of Abirpur. Although these people may not have an active representation in the village society and polity, but they have a strong underlying presence. Their discourse is prominent by virtue of being reactionary and emancipatory. Traditionally, this discourse has been muted and subdued by the dominant discourse.

One such person is Manoj Maharaj’s (RHP of village Abirpur) mother who has encouraged her son and daughter to engage in social activism through Titli center. She has inspired many women to take control of their lives by thinking about their condition and fighting it from within the walls of their homes:

In order to change something, one need not go on a war. As a mother, if I can encourage my daughter to change for the better, I am as successful as a leader changing the country. I have always wanted to give Usha a chance to make something of her life and not simply get married as the society demands it. Janani and Taru have helped me to realize that dream as it has given Usha a chance to explore her future. I have never raised my voice or felt necessary to lecture others. But I have always spoken my mind to my husband and sons and hoped that they would welcome my opinion.
Before the broadcast of *Taru*, counterpublic discursive praxis was mostly uncommon and often not noticed. An occasional outburst by an unhappy daughter-in-law against the tradition of *purdah* or a tantrum by a teenage girl for not wanting to get married would be quickly suppressed by the gatekeepers of the patriarchal society. These discourses of resistance were unstructured and fragmented. They lacked the aptitude to compete with the dominant discourse. Hence, these voices would be unheard and ignored.

Seema and other young women listeners tried to stop the marriage of an under-age *dalit* (lower caste) girl by intervening the wedding ceremony and explaining to the community that it was wrong to marry her so young. However, a few years back, this would have been impossible as girls would have never dreamt of doing so. Seema believes that she got the strength from *Taru* to fight for justice:

I have been vocal about my feelings to my family as my father has encouraged me to do so. But my opinions have been limited to my family who has mostly disregarded them as frivolous. Whenever I have spoken about dowry to my family, they have just shrugged it off as unimportant. Even I did not know that I was onto something important. I thought I was just rambling and probably deserved to be ignored. But once I became a listener of *Taru* and started maintaining my diary, I realized that I was not wrong to believe in gender-equality. After that, I did not allow my family to ignore me and I knew how to conceptualize my thoughts and make them vocal. That is one reason why I felt confident to stop the wedding of that poor little girl. I knew how to represent my beliefs.

However, *Taru* created an environment of change and rattled the existing discursive hierarchy prevalent in Abirpur. If we were to consider *Taru* as a discursive manifesto of change, it supported the mission of the subaltern counterpublics and provided these bodies of people a platform to raise their voice and be noticed. While
Taru empathized with the plight of the counterpublic, it did not neglect the importance of the dominant discourses operating in the Abirpur society. In fact, Taru showed the way to incorporate dominant and subaltern discourse to create a discourse of emancipation and hope. I doing so, it provided a common language for the multiple groups fighting for uniformity and harmony.

Figure 16. Kum Kum (left), Soni (center), and Usha (right) showed the courage to stop the childmarriage in Abirpur (source: author)

In this scenario, the young female radio listeners decided to challenge the dominant discourse by occupying the space traditionally held by the dominant groups of Abirpur. The girls invited the children to meet in front of the village well and decided to abandon their expected role by walking out of their homes and teaching dalit children to read and write. This kind of deviant behavior by the girls and several boys surprised the
stakeholders (prominent men of the village) and they mocked the girls’ effort and chose to ignore it. This did not slow down the girls and they continued to publicly enact empowerment by starting the school. The girls visited each and every house and encouraged the boys and girls to come to their school. Gradually other male listeners of *Taru* joined the girls and helped them in enrolling the students. At times, they had to plead the parents to send their children to school. Through this process, the young girls discovered their own potential and felt every empowered. They enjoyed talking about the value of education to the villagers which in turn reinforced their own ideology and made them stronger individuals. In this excerpt, Kum Kum is trying to persuade a girl to join the school:

The next day I went to her again and asked her why she was not coming to the school. She said she did not like to study and couldn’t put her heart into it. I told her that education is like food; eat according to your appetite and save the rest for later. This time will not come back…now is the time for you to study.

Once the school became popular and successful, the elders of the village saw that it was doing no apparent harm to anyone. They mocked it for few days until they realized that the girls and boys were competent in handling this task and happily gave them their blessings. Little did they know that this school was not merely a school for these girls; it was a source of strength and symbol of power. The girls were now walking shoulder-to-shoulder with their male counterparts and were making their own decisions. They had invited themselves in the dominant public discourse by not simply occupying the visible physical space in the village but also by influencing the ideological space by changing mindsets and attitudes.
By Summer 2003, when I began my research, the school run by the young *Taru* female listeners was not in session. When I inquired about the school, the girls told me that the school had closed down due to cold weather in December – January and never resumed again. They were regretful about the school being closed and realized that once the broadcast of *Taru* was over, their motivation to mobilize the young and deprived children also diminished. They were nostalgic about the school and in one such conversation, Neha shared her feelings:

I miss the school…the school re-defined my identity and I realized that I have so much potential in me. I decided to continue my education and asked my parents to support me in this matter. This would not have happened if I had not helped my friends in starting the school. The school gave me confidence and self-assurance.

Although the school has closed and may never open again, this does not imply that the girls have lost their sense of confidence in pursuing social advancement. The girls continue to enact their empowerment in different ways like resisting child marriage, dowry, and many other social evils.

Sunita Kumari was an integral part of creating and teaching in the village school. However, she was unable to participate in the theater workshop as her father did not allow her to leave the village. Despite the rhetorical strategies used by Sunita and myself, Sunita’s grandfather refused to allow her to leave the village for the workshop.
For Sunita, the school has a significant meaning in her life as it encouraged her to continue in the path of social change and not give in to detriments on the way:

When I was part of the school, I felt so good and hopeful. As I taught the children, I realized my worth and decided to not waste my life by simply marrying and being a wife subservient to my husband. When the school closed down, I was scared and weary of the future. I thought I will lose my sense of independence and will go back to being influenced by others’ ideas of how I should live my life. When my father banned me from going to Kamtaul for the workshop, I thought I will break into pieces but I was pleasantly surprised. My inability to go to the workshop did not take away my confidence. I knew that I had to adhere to my family’s values and I respected my father’s decision. I realized that I have to learn to choose my battles and fight only those that are worth fighting. Going against my father would not have served any purpose as he would have been upset and would have taken away my most important privileges, i. e., education. So I compromised and realized that I would rather continue to study so that one day I can do all the things I wish too than go to workshop and live the rest of my life in resentment. Thus, the school lives in me and I feel strong I take small decisions of my life on a daily basis.
It is clearly visible how the initiation of school influenced the girls and gave them agency and confidence. Despite the closing of the school, the female listeners continue to be inspired by Taru and its product – the school.

**Ideological Enactment of Empowerment**

So far we have been able to see how the young women are enacting empowerment in their everyday lives by organizing in groups to change the traditional village society. We have seen evidence of how the process of organizing has been rewarding for these girls as it has carved a new discursive space for them within which they can strive for justice and equality. Influenced by Taru, the young women are reclaiming their physical space in the village society and articulating their identities by organizing in groups of interest. While they are demonstrating their passion for social activism, many young women are also reclaiming an ideological space in which they are negotiating the values and conventions that govern their existence.

Social issues that concern the women in Abirpur are deeply rooted in a rigid value system that has not been revised for generations. It is a set of code that gets handed down to the next generation and is sacred to the moral fabric of the village culture and heritage. These systems of values and ethics are the building blocks for ruling ideologies that run deep in the society and become the precedence for moral behavior. These moral behaviors become the norms of the society. Hence, it is very important that the operational norms of a society are continuously updated based on the need of the people and the time. The codes of behavior have to be challenged with the passage of time. If not, there is bound to be conflict and tension between the community members resulting
in fragmentation of the society. For example, a generation ago, it was customary for girls to stay at home and not go to school. However, with changing times, the girls clamor for equality with boys. For this to happen, the rules of the society that confine the girls to home have to be altered.

Social issues like practice of dowry, female infanticide, teenage-marriage, absence of education, exploding family-size, are some obstacles facing the village societies in India. Abirpur is a host to these issues and its community has been struggling to eliminate these social evils from its village. In order to eradicate these problems, the value system that supports these practices has to be changed. The ideologies that define the understanding of our world need to be revisited. If a society continues to devalue the woman and see her as inferior to man, the practice of dowry will continue to subjugate the woman. In order for the practice to be corrected, we need to alter the way we conceptualize the woman in our society. Hence, it is imperative to revisit the ideological constructs of the society before we can begin to change the society.

In Abirpur, young girls have started questioning the status-quo within their private homes and also in the public world they live in. They have started making remarks on the very foundation of their existence and hoping that these foundations will be re-visited and reconfigured. Baenju, a young radio listener, believes that the change has to come from within by reforming the ways we think and then finding ways to actualize it into action:

If I want to go to the village fair, I will request my father to let me go. If he declines, I will try and persuade him by telling him that I will be with friends or family and that he should trust me. He may allow and I will be happy to attend the village fair. Next time if I want to go to the neighboring village for my
friend’s wedding, my father will once again say no and I will try my best to persuade him and so on...this will keep on happening till we discuss the reasons he does not want me to go anywhere. So I decided to talk to my father and understand his point of view. It is then that I understood that he trusts me but the tradition and the norm is to decline such an offer when it comes from the girl. Girls are not expected to leave their homes. It is a value intrinsic in our society. So I talked to my father and explained him that maybe we should change this expectation based on questionable values...he agreed and now I live in Abirpur with my grandparents and attend the local school.

On probing further I learned that Baenju’s family lives in another village which has no school for girls and Baenju was very keen to study. Her grandparents live in Abirpur and she decided to attend school there. She was inspired by Taru to propose to her father to let her attend school in Abirpur. Influenced by the teachings of ‘Taru didi’, Baenju reasoned with her father and was successful in her mission.

It appears that Taru was a precursor to change in Abirpur. Most of the people in Abirpur welcomed Taru along with its revolutionary ideas. The young girls embraced the messages dramatized in Taru and tried to emulate them in their lives. To do so, they had to challenge the dominant ideologies ruling the minds of the community. In order to appreciate the efforts of the young girls to alter the mindsets of the village community and to comprehend the complexity of the social transformation taking place in Abirpur, we will explore the inherent tension and resistance embedded in the process of social change.

**Changing Face of Young Women in Abirpur**

Abirpur is a small village with a traditional society that is collectivistic in nature. When faced with a problem that affects the village society, people come together to solve the problem. For example, when the state-run village school did not provide for girls’
education in higher classes, the village community collected by the village well to discuss the issue and decided to send a petition to the local government. Their unified front was successful and in the following years, the school allowed girls to attend higher classes.

While the village representatives realized that it was appropriate to send young girls to school and advocated education for girls, they were also acting out of their own insecurities as community patriarchs. Their hidden agenda in doing so was reflective of their double standards towards the women of the community. Mukesh Maharaj explained to me the reason behind this effort:

Even the village elders (predominately men) know that the girls have started to voice their opinions and cannot be simply silenced. Although their ultimate reality is to get married, they can be amused by schooling. With woman representation in the local government, the men cannot keep the woman muted for very long. Hence, the village leaders realized that if a school does not open in Abirpur, the girls will want to go to neighboring villages to study. Once that happens, the new wind will bring in lots of changes that will be difficult to manage. Hence, it is better to have a school in Abirpur where the environment can be controlled by the village leaders.

On asking if the broadcast of *Taru* had changed any of the attitudes of these men, he explained:

*Taru* has further amplified the equality of gender. Founding of clubs like Listeners club and Drama club have encouraged interaction between men and women and free exchange of ideas. It is a scary time for the village elders who want to control the village society according to their rules. They can see that the woman in Abirpur is changing and that this change is going to impact the gender hierarchy.

Although the community of Abirpur is broadly collective, there are several rifts and fragmentations within the structure. The village governing body consists of only men and there is no female representation. Although the law provides for female representation in the local government, however the gender stereotyping privileges men
for administrative functions. The women are restricted to household domain. In some cases, elected women remained at home while their husbands attended the *panchaayat* (local government body) meetings and carried out official transactions on their behalf. Some of the elected women were approached by men only when their signatures (or thumb impressions) were needed.

In most Indian families, a daughter is viewed as a liability, and she is conditioned to believe that she is inferior and subordinate to men. Sons are idolized and celebrated. Although the woman is at the center of every household, seldom is she valued for her role in the village society. Her birth is never a reason for celebration by her family. She is a burden on her father and brothers who are required to collect dowry to be given at the time of her wedding. This is never easy as the sum to be given as dowry is always more than what the family can afford. Hence, she is never perceived as an asset to the family. As the nurturer, the woman is mostly confined to her household and cannot participate in village affairs. Since birth, she is trained to be a ‘good’ wife and a daughter-in-law. As a daughter she is free to move in and out of her father’s home but as a daughter-in-law (*bahu*) she has to follow several norms and conventions. Hence, the woman is always battling with complex power structures at home as she negotiates her role as a wife, a daughter-in-law, and a sister-in-law in her new home.

Interviewer: As the daughter-in-law, do you remain behind within the four walls?

Rita Devi: When my mom-in-law was alive, I use to always stay inside the house. But after her, I am the eldest woman in the house. So now I can move in and out. I take care of outdoor needs.

Interviewer: If Sunita (daughter) is the eldest *bahu*, will she have lots of comforts?
Rita Devi: Yes, this is the reason we will search for a boy in a small family where she can be eldest *bahu*. This way she will lead a comfortable life.

Like in most of rural north India, women in Abirpur are subjugated and confined to gender stereotypes. They are expected to be good mothers and wives and cannot emerge as enterprising bread-winner for their families. The overarching philosophy dictating gender roles in Abirpur is patriarchy. When asked what patriarchy (*purush-pradhaan samaaj*) meant to Seema, the sixteen year old smiled and exclaimed:

> It is a kind of life where men make all the decisions and everybody else has to follow them blindly. These decisions are not always good for the girls. For example, when we wanted to go to Kamtaul for the workshop, several men of our village criticized us and many forbade their daughters to go. That is not right! The men should have talked to us (girls) and asked for our opinion…that is how rural societies are…nobody cares about the women.

For ages the women have continued to be subservient and vulnerable. Under patriarchal influence, the women have been exploited by men and often by other women. In a typical rural household in Bihar, the *saas* (mother-in-law) is a powerful figure who dominates the *bahu* (daughter-in-law). *Bahu* is the gullible target who is ordered around by other members of the family. Under the influence of patriarchal forces, the *saas* avenges her own subjugation by bullying her *bahu* because she cannot show her discontent to the ‘patriarchs’ (men) of the family. Hence, the *saas* – a woman, becomes the prey and the *bahu* – also a woman, becomes the predator!

While women have been traditionally viewed as the oppressed members of the community, they are also the economic backbone of rural societies. Although the women in Abirpur work in the fields and contribute to the household income, they are not
considered at par with men. Their job is to care for the family and any effort to add to household income goes unrecognized.

When Usha Kumari stitched clothes for the village women and earned her living, her brother, Mukesh, was not very happy with it. He felt threatened and realized that Usha was making good money for her own personal expenditure. Mukesh Maharaj, her younger brother, had been tired of looking for jobs and had to ask his elder brother for his expenses. This would embarrass Mukesh but he had no choice in the matter. So, when he saw Usha making her own money, he was full of envy and jealousy. When I asked him why he felt this way, he answered:

Look, I am a man and I cannot stitch clothes. It won’t look nice and people will make fun of me. Besides I never learnt it as it is a woman’s job. So, here I am with my bachelor’s degree waiting for a job. I am not saying that Usha should stop working but I want to make sure she knows how to manage her money. Besides, it is not usual for ‘our’ girls to do business!

However, many women in Abirpur have begun to assert themselves at home and outside their homes. They are struggling to break out of their traditional image of the home maker and create new opportunities for themselves based on their capabilities. While many may not be successful in changing their current conditions, they have started to think about possibilities of change and share their dreams with other women. Many young girls have realized that their potential could lie beyond the four walls of their home and have begun to seek justice and equality.

**Changing Attitudes and Mindsets**

While *Taru* has provided a space for dialogue and critical reflection, it has also persuaded young women to challenge the attitudes and mindsets that have been followed
for generations. Sometime the shift in attitudes has been spontaneous and other times it has come with a price! In any case, the girls strive to reason and rationalize their dilapidated condition with their parents and point out the need to change certain attitudes. This change has been easy to advocate due to increasing interaction between the members of the family. Taru has sparked conversations between those members of the community that did not share anything in common. Earlier the women and men did not freely talk to one another or shared their opinions about social issues. In fact the traditional village society did not permit young girls to socialize with other young men. However, Taru lessened the gap between the youngsters and encouraged conversations between them.

The boys and girls interacted within the listener groups and discovered that they had a lot in common. They organized to change the existing social evils in their community by forming alliances and committing to their common cause. They knew that this kind of social change will only come if they worked together as a team. Hence, the prevalent mindset about gender stereotyping had to be openly challenged and modified. This resulted in intense conversations among boys and girls and also within the family units. The girls had to constantly reason with the elders of their household to revise the way they think about the status of women in the society.

Tinkoo’s story is illustrative of the complex processes involved in changing mindsets of her mother as a result of lengthy conversations over a period of time. Tinkoo is one of the youngest Taru listeners who idolizes her big sister, Usha, and tries to follow her footsteps in social change activities. When Tinkoo saw how Taru didi was engaged
in social welfare activities, she wanted to emulate that in her life too. She sat her mother
down and talked to her about the importance of education in her life. Tinkoo told her
mother (Pushpa Devi) how she wanted to go to school and serve the community. Pushpa
Devi was surprised to see her daughter so motivated and enthusiastic. Although she
could not understand her urgency to study, she realized that this was important for
Tinkoo. After lengthy conversations with Tinkoo, Pushpa Devi tried to empathize with
her daughter’s ambition but could not relate to her condition.

Understanding Tinkoo’s needs requires Pushpa Devi to reinvestigate her own core
values and reinvent them according to the current times. This is not an easy process as it
requires critical reflection and constant speculation. In order to understand Tinkoo’s
position, Pushpa Devi will have to look deep within and let the message pass through
several cognitive filters which may pose as obstacles to the process of change. These
mental filters are result of socialization over several years. These filters constitute the
code of morality and ethics by which every individual operates in a society.

In the case of educating Tinkoo, Pushpa Devi will have to consider the communal
expectations and gender roles professed by the society and then re-evaluate its relevance.
Pushpa Devi needs to be answerable to her peers who will question her decision of
sending Tinkoo for higher education. At every step, she will have to fight the numerous
taunts that the community will mete to Tinkoo for being bold and aggressive. The
biggest fear for Pushpa Devi is that if she allows Tinkoo to become like *Taru*, it will have
consequences for her daughter’s marriage. Educated girls are not popular for marriage as
they may be more qualified than their potential groom or be too smart to follow the
traditions of the in-laws. Since this shift in mindset is not happening at a societal level, the rest of the community may not appreciate Pushpa Devi’s decision to educate Tinkoo and may deem Tinkoo unfit for marriage. This dilemma is problematic for Pushpa Devi who believes that the destiny of a girl is to get married and serve her husband and his family. That is what she has been doing all her life! Hence, Pushpa Devi faces a dilemma and between what she thinks is good for Tinkoo versus what Tinkoo thinks is good for her.

However, Tinkoo’s constant persuasion resulted in changing the mindset of her mother who allowed her to go to the local school. The process of shifting her attitude and translating it into behavior was difficult and needed lot of reinforcement. As Pushpa Devi recalls:

> When Tinkoo asked me if I would send her to school, I thought it was a waste of time and futile for her to study. Her future is to marry and take care of the house…but she insisted and helped me to understand why she wanted to go to school. She said it would improve the quality of her life – even as a married woman! Education does not mean that she will become modern and disrespectful of elders. It only refines your personality and makes you more pleasant. I know that I may regret my decision later as the entire community laughs at me for listening to my daughter…I hope I won’t regret later. I think they do not understand because they have no one to tell them…I do now and I am happy.

**Resistance Leading to Social Change**

The girls have begun to challenge their traditional roles and are determined to re-claim a space for themselves in their society as they are recognizing themselves as productive citizens of Abirpur. Girls are now resisting predisposed behavior patterns handed down over generations. According to Usha:
The girl has to raise her voice. If she does not protest, why will anyone listen?
She knows what she wants and she can be adamant about her choices. If boys are allowed to do what they want and parents agree then why not the daughters get her way too. She keeps thinking about everyone else’s problems like her parents…but why should not she think about herself?

The emerging new woman, who is young and unmarried, has re-evaluated her status in her family and has begun to demand attention by other members of her family, especially the men. She wants to be heard and respected by others. When the elders in her family dismiss her, she confronts them and reasons her status within the family. She is not willing to be quiet but knows how to use rhetorical strategies to engage her family members in a conversation that is revealing of her potential. By doing so, she is enacting empowerment within her family and carving a distinct space for herself. Kum Kum almost was married at a very early age but was able to convey her dissatisfaction to her family and got around them to cancel the wedding. According to Kum Kum, “I talked to my father on my own. That is why people in my village gossip that I have no shame and am not shy at all. If I become shy in this matter, my life will be ruined.” (Personal Conversation, July 2003).

These resistances by the young women have caused a lot of tension and conflict within the family structure of Abirpur and in some instances, these changes have been dramatic. The young Taru listeners are facing a lot of obstacles and have to deal with them on everyday basis. They are openly expressing their mind and disregarding the presence of patriarchs who have ruled for eons. When Usha began to help Manoj
Maharaj (RHP) in running the *Titli* Center, she had to face a lot of resistance as she is a girl who is involved in advocating reproductive health services. Although she is the RHP’s sister, the patriarchs of the village did not appreciate her distributing condoms door-to-door. They were disapproving of it and voiced their sentiments to Manoj Maharaj.

Manoj Maharaj is a progressive man who is supportive of social equality. However, he was agreeable with the rest of the community and ordered Usha to discontinue handing out condoms. Usha was very disappointed with her brother and broke out in tears:

> Little change has come. People are talking about discrimination between boys and girls but they are not doing anything about it. In my home, my own brother stopped me from doing something noble simply because some men of the village had a problem with my initiative to advocate family planning. That is so mean of them to make such an issue about it. These men will not do anything to alleviate the social problem of exploding family size and will have several children of their own…they cannot see any woman doing any such work that involves interface with men…even if it is for the good of their society. My mother will also not reprimand my brother for this and will agree with him. She is a woman and she should support me. We (women) understand each others problems but cannot do anything about it! I feel so helpless.

While some families are supportive of the emerging new woman who is more self-reliant and reassured, most families have trouble negotiating their relationship with her. We can see how Usha is trying to appeal to her family to support her endeavors but cannot break out of the traditional boundaries set for the conservative woman. She has to compromise for the sake of her own survival and take whatever latitude she is offered by her family. If she were to rebel too much, she may lose the little flexibility she has in engaging in social change activities.
This constant resistance within the family structure is healthy as it constantly challenges the status quo and keeps the community norms under check and balance. The community handles these conflicts internally as well as collectively. The young girls desire to open a village school was negotiated collectively as the main players of the village society dialogued about the potential of this school and decided to give the children an opportunity. However, when Soni wants to attend the theater workshop in the neighboring village, she has to get permission from her parents. In this case, the resistance is dealt within the four walls of her home. In both these scenarios, the girls are discursively negotiating their boundaries and engaging in empowering activities inside as well outside their homes.

Apart from the omnipresent traditional values, the girls find themselves embedded in rigid gender roles that are reinstated everyday of their lives. These roles are enacted everyday by the community and are seldom open to any criticism. The girls and boys are born into these roles and grow up believing that this is the only way to live your life. The girls are the nurturer and the boys are the providers. Any effort to alter this is met with great resistance.

The young Taru female listeners were critical of these gender stereotypes that profess them to be inferior to the men. They decided to resist these gender roles by working around them. According to Baenju, the girls can do more for themselves by staying within the village society and following is rules. If they were to abandon the gender roles, they may lose any chance of improving their condition:

Girls have so much of work to do but they are not afraid to move ahead and improve their status in the society. They work at home and take care of the
outdoor work as well. The boys always find an excuse and say that they are busy. Instead they roam about here and there doing nothing. We can do all the things that the boys can do and probably do more than the boys. We choose to do the household chores so that the society can continue to operate. This way we have some flexibility to do other tasks that empower us like educating the children, participating in the theater workshop.

In this section of the chapter, we have established that Taru encouraged conversation among the young female radio listeners. We discussed how young women are organizing into groups to challenge the status quo. In the next section of the chapter, we will provide evidence to illustrate how the young women are using public spaces to share their stories and reshaping their realities through discursive practices.

**Politics of Discourse**

Research Question # 2: *How do young women in Village Abirpur, Bihar use the public sphere as a discursively constructed space for argument in which different interest groups compete to articulate conflicting worldviews?*

Like most rural societies in India, Abirpur is a host to several issues that exploit the women of the society. Issues such as dowry, early marriage, absence of education, and gender stereotyping continue to permeate through the social fabric of Abirpur and attack the social status of the women of the village. Often women cannot identify these issues and continue to live a life of disrespect and humiliation. Even if some women are able to identify the exploitation, they lack the language to articulate their experience. Besides they do not know who to talk to and lack any support for such communicative practice.

*Taru* has provided young women opportunity to exchange their views on burgeoning topics and share their worldviews with one another. It has also opened up
space for boys and girls to dialogue with one another. This unique discursive space created by \textit{Taru} may possibly lead to transformative practices by promoting interaction between different groups with differing ideologies. Here, it is important to note that not everyone is affected by \textit{Taru} in the same way. Hence, the varied reactions to \textit{Taru} provide a colorful collage of opinions and perspectives. To be able to understand how discursive spaces are created, maintained, and manipulated, we need to pay attention to how the women in Abirpur are using public spaces to exchange ideas and opinions with one another.

While \textit{Taru} was being broadcast, young girls gathered in the \textit{Titli} center to listen to the program and talk about burning issues like dowry, reproductive health, and gender roles in their village. Their visits to the center were carefully orchestrated around the listening of the broadcast of \textit{Taru}. Now the girls and boys are accustomed to meet in the center to discuss socially relevant issues. The center has become a place for such interactions.

\textit{Titli} center is a distinct place as lot of people visit the center for medication as well as for socializing. It is quite at the center of the village and serves as a meeting point. Manoj Maharaj (RHP) and his family live right opposite the center and invite lot of villagers to the center for conversations and cup of \textit{garam-chai} (hot tea). The RHP’s family encourages dialogue between girls and boys by being present in the center almost all day long. This makes the center a safe space for girls to hang out and for their parents to send them there.
During my stay in Abirpur, I conducted several interviews and conversations in the Titli center since the parents felt safe to send their daughters to the center. I convinced them that I would be present in the center to chaperone the girls and also to supervise their interactions with the boys. They also knew that the RHP’s family (including mother) would be around to oversee the interactions. Eventually they trusted me and were happy to let their children visit the center. Although the parents knew that prior to my visit to Abirpur, their daughters often visited the center to meet other girls and boys, however, they felt reassured that now these visits would be in my presence.

Titli center is a dynamic public space which is shared by people of all age group and gender. The village men visit the center and end up having conversations with the
girls. The older men visit the center three to four times a day and engage in long discussions with one another on topics ranging from national politics to local affairs. During my visit to Abirpur, a hot topic of discussion among the older men was the coming provincial election for the position of district representative to the local governing body (Panchaayat). There was heated discussion on who should be elected as their representative. On my asking about the status of the election, the men informed me that not only the representative had been decided by the several village headmen of the province, but the outcome of the elections was known to all. As always, the election was rigged and the ruling party had paid-off the village headmen to cast their votes in their favor. When I tried to talk about the presence of corruption in the election process, I was immediately silenced as it was inappropriate for a stranger to comment on their internal matters.

While the men discussed more political issues, the Rural Health Practitioner’s mother and sister engaged in conversations with other women about upcoming festivals and marriages in the family. They talked about matters that concerned their families and households. This is a newly created space for the women because traditionally this space (the center), has been occupied by the men of the village. However, the broadcast of Taru and group listening has transformed the nature of this space. Since the broadcast, the women and young girls gather in the center to listen to the radio and have been frequently visiting the center to gather and chat about their lives. Now, the boys and girls have the same access to the center. Hence, it has become a safe accessible space, leading to meaningful conversations and dialogues. It is a critical site for social change activities
as it provides a fertile discursive space for social activism. Crucial decisions take place in the center like the formation of the Taru Natya (drama) Club which is representative of the joint effort of boys and girls of the village.

During my stay in Abirpur, the boys and girls met in the Titli center to discuss the process by which they could convince the parents to allow the daughters to participate in the theater workshop. They would often get together in the center and chat about the different strategies they could use to convince the village elders. All these conversations between the boys and girls led to collective action to persuade the elders. Hence, the center played a critical role in creating a dialogic space conducive to social action.

The Titli center is a discursive space open to publics and counterpublics. In the Abirpur society, married women cannot frequent outside their home without the permission of the patriarchs of the family. However, the center is one place where the married women may be allowed to visit for medical supplies. Once she is allowed to visit the center, she engages in conversations with other women as well as younger boys. In case she comes in contact with men, she will remain quiet and put on her veil. It is not expected of her to engage in conversation with other men of the village. However, she still comes in contact with the outside world and eagerly listens to dialogues among other people frequenting the center.

Since the center is a health clinic, these visits by married women are limited in frequency. However the women look forward to these visits as they get a chance to interact with other women who frequent the clinic as well as with men such as Manoj Maharaj, Mukesh Maharaj and others who may be hanging out at the center. Since
Manoj Maharaj is the Rural Health Practitioner, he is allowed to interact with the women who may be married or unmarried. He has a special relationship with the women as he not only treats their ailments but also listens to their stories and issues. He has become a confidant for most of the married women and these women trust him with their dukhdas (sad stories). In a conversation that I had with Usha’s aunt, I learnt the special role Manoj Maharaj plays in the lives of many of the women. When I asked Usha’s aunty about studying further. She mentioned:

I have asked Manoj Bhaiya (older brother) to buy books and notebook for me so that I can study at home. Before my marriage, I used to go to school and I was a good student. After marriage my husband stopped me from attending school but he has allowed me to study at home. For this, I have asked Manoj Bhaiya to buy me books…I can only trust him to do this for me.

This quote demonstrates the connection Manoj Maharaj has with the community irrespective of male or female and the importance of the center to provide the women with such a space for dialogue. Talking to other women in the center provides emotional release to the women. Typically most of the married women do not have any channel open to them to communicate their feelings. They feel suffocated and lonely. Once they meet other women, they feel validated and renewed. The center has a cathartic effect on these women since they can unburden their hearts to one another.

During my stay in Abirpur, I observed the conversations happening inside and outside the center. The most discussed topic among the various visitors to the center was ‘dowry’. In a conversation between Usha, Kiran Devi, and me, it was easy to see the differing perspectives of Usha and Kiran Devi on the topic of dowry. Both of them believed that dowry was an illegal practice but had different notions of resolving it.
Usha’s response to practice of dowry was aggressive and involved immediate action to eradicate it from the society. However, in her Aunty’s opinion, dowry can be only abolished by men of the society as women have very little role to play in it. The following dialogue represents the generational gap between Usha and her aunt, Kiran Devi, on issue of dowry.

Usha: A girl should not be married at an early age and should say no to dowry…most people in her family do not care about her. They just want to get her married without considering its impact on the rest of the girl’s life.

Kiran Devi: What can she do? She is so weak. She cannot change the system!

Usha: Everybody has to go house-to-house to change the village society. I have tried to go door-to-door to explain and make them understand and some people have understood but most have not! It is important that the girls understand the repercussion of dowry and then explain it to their parents.

Kiran Devi: The girls need to live in this society and have to follow the rules. They will have to be soft and explain them sweetly…with affection.

Usha: If the girl has a conviction to make something possible, then she can. She should be self-dependent and move ahead. After thinking a lot I have arrived at this notion that if I don’t fight for myself, I cannot improve my life. Nobody will let me move ahead as there are plenty to pull me back. There is no one to push me ahead. So if I have to be rude, I will be. Being sweet does not help all the time. People do not take you seriously!

Kiran Devi: If I am solid from within then I will do it. But if I am weak from within I will not be able to anything. If one is determined, then anything is possible. I like what Usha is saying but it is not going to be achieved by being aggressive.

Usha is trying to use the public sphere to discuss critical issues so that she can be heard and take action. While Kiran Devi agrees with Usha, she recommends diplomatic ways of doing the same. Kiran Devi is married and realizes that in order to be heard, one has to be patient and strategic. She has the experience of being silenced as a daughter-in-law whereas Usha is young, passionate and angry!
It is not important whether Usha’s aggressive method to resolve issues is correct or Kiran Devi’s passive strategy is more effective. One needs to appreciate the critical dialogue that is brewing between these two women to address the issue of dowry. Suddenly there is a platform to talk and debate perspectives that were not brought to light earlier. To provide evidence to the ‘public’ nature of this engagement I recall the interview experience at Sunita’s house.

Once I had finished interviewing Sunita, her mother, and her aunt, I spent some time with the family in their courtyard. Across their home was another house where recently an older woman had been married to their young boy for a big dowry. Everybody at Sunita’s house was pointing to that house and telling the story. Everybody at Sunita’s house came together to narrate the story of the wedding. It was unique to see the men and women of the household sit in one place to discuss the incident. I used the opportunity to start a discussion on the issue of dowry and its complexity. It was then that Sunita and her aunty were able to talk in font of the house patriarchs about their views. They never looked straight into the eyes of the men but certainly felt comfortable to express their views. They acknowledged later that they felt this comfortable due to my mediation but also realized that they can be more relaxed to talk in front of their elders.

The women of Sunita’s house felt confident to share their views in this newly found public space within their homes. It becomes public as it is inhabited by both men and women of the household. In this space traditionally Sunita’s father and grandfather have reigned. No woman has ever been part of this space. However, now the women
feel comfortable to participate in this space with the men. When I asked Sunita’s aunt, Kanchan Devi, about how she felt speaking in front of her in-laws, she said:

First I was so scared to be in front of my father-in-laws. I have never faced them before. Then, to open my mouth and converse with them is a dream come true…I was nervous but slowly eased into the conversation. I could not have done it if it was not for the support given to me by Sunita, my mom-in-law, and you…thanks to Taru, we have you here and we all continue to change for the better.

While Usha is strategically using the public sphere as a discursive space, other are reaching out to their parents at home. For them it is important to be heard by their family and convince them in order to change the ritual of dowry. Sunita, does not expect the society to appreciate her stance and chooses to be modest while fighting against the custom of dowry:

I will speak at home but not outside, because people will criticize me for being so small to come up with such big ideas. Whatever I want to say, I say at home and to other girls of my age. All the girls I talk to say that this system will never end. I tell them if we all make up our mind and don’t give dowry and insist on not getting married maybe things may change…everybody starts laughing and say that they will think about it.

Dowry remains an annoying problem for the Abirpur society. People continue to practice it and condone it. Most of the conversations around the practice of dowry are reactionary. People are often defensive and react aggressively when asked about their opinion on the practice. The public sphere is used in this case for cathartic purposes. By talking about the problem, people like to believe that they are doing something constructive about resolving the problem. However, these conversations are important and crucial to eliminate the custom of dowry from the society. It is in these discussions that the people of Abirpur find a common reality and a mutual empathy. The girls conceptualize their plight and realize that they need to come together as a group to
eradicate this social problem. The parents of daughters’ realize that if they say ‘no’ to dowry, their girls are at risk of not being married. This collective realization brings the group together and comforts the parents that they are not alone. Similarly, the parents of boys cannot escape the realization that they are solely responsible for propagating the tradition of dowry in Abirpur. Their acceptance of dowry and demand (expectation) of it makes them guilty of promoting this institution. Hence, this discursive space is volatile as it germinates ideas that can become revolutionary and transformative.

The public sphere in Abirpur is a fertile ground for discussions among various groups that compete for dominance and control. The different groups articulate their point of views on variety of issues and represent themselves through their narratives. Through discursive praxis, some groups reinforce their hierarchy and supremacy whereas others merely assert their identity.

The men in Abirpur collect in various places in the village and talk about different issues. These include men who are old and young. They could belong to the higher or lower caste. They can be rich or poor. They gather in Titli center and share their views on political as well as social issues concerning them. Often these sorts of dialogues happen between the influential men who occupy reputation of respect and seniority in the village society. Many men gather in groups around chai ki dukaan (tea-stalls) and talk about relevant issues – education, local election, national politics, unemployment, etc. These sites of dialogic activity are common in Abirpur as men have traditionally participated in these spaces.
In my study, I observed that after the broadcast of Taru. Several young girls in Abirpur were asserting themselves and becoming more visible in public spaces. These girls were motivated by Taru to express their minds on issues of marriage, dowry, education, empowerment, with other women and men and establish their presence in the spaces traditionally occupied by men. We have established how Titli center is a symbol of women’s emancipation as it provided the girls a structured space to systematize their ideas into coherent conversation with other men. However, these girls were emerging as new occupants of public spaces which otherwise had been the sole domain of the men.

Taru inspired several girls to think about their condition as critical members of the community and to speak their mind whenever an opportunity rose. In this way, the girls would become equal with the boys of the community who have traditionally usurped the public sphere in Abirpur. The girls began to have critical dialogue with other women as well as men in agricultural fields, village school, Titli center, village shop, village temple, and village square. They asserted their identity as an important component of the village community by using rhetorical strategies to communicate with the men. Sometimes they would use humor to lighten the atmosphere and get across their point and the other times they would simply listen to other point of views and patiently respond when needed. This way the girls controlled the conversations and guided the interactions.

After the broadcast of Taru, the girls continued to assemble at Titli center. Earlier the girls met to talk about Taru, but now girls and boys would hang out in Titli center to discuss various issues affecting the village community. Traditionally the boys and girls
would vacate the center on arrival of the village elders but now they stayed in the Titli center to discuss and share opinions. Typically the girls would let the boys take the lead in these discussions and soon thereafter follow the boys in voicing their minds about the issues being discussed.

During my stay in Abirpur, I witnessed one such incident where the girls showed courage and spoke their minds to the prominent men of the village community. Once I was quietly sitting in the corner of Titli center and was busy writing my fieldnotes when I noticed a few elderly men walking into the center having a heated argument. I quietly sat and tried to listen to the men. These men were talking about the educational facilities available for girls in their village. Just then, Soni came into the center looking for Usha and the other girls. When she realized that the village elders had gathered there to discuss the educational facilities available for young girls in the village, she sat in the corner intently listening to their conversation. These men were not happy that young girls were leaving the village to seek higher education (class tenth onwards) to the neighboring town. This was unacceptable as by tradition, girls ought to stay within the four walls of the village till their marriage. Once girls are married, they leave for their in-laws’ homes and become their responsibility.

On listening to this discussion, Soni could not resist herself and joined in the dialogue with the men. She explained to them how important it is for girls to study and be independent. She talked about Taru (the character) and argued the importance of being self-dependent in life. I could see that the men did not appreciate Soni and began to silence her. Coincidentally, Usha and Kum Kum walked into this heated dialogue and
supported Soni and continued to offer arguments in favor of education for girls. Manoj Maharaj, who was sitting with these men and keenly listening to the discussion, showed his support by appeasing the men and requesting them to listen to the girls. The men heard the girls but did not participate in any discussion. The girls spent several minutes offering their arguments and requested that they be allowed to visit the high school in the neighboring town.

This kind of interaction between the men and the women is unique as it had seldom happened in Abirpur. Not often had a girl previously attempted to argue her opinion in public or challenge the dominant beliefs held by the men of the community. However, now girls like Soni were coming out of their homes into public space like the Titli center and finding opportunities to be heard. They were being openly supported by men like Manoj Maharaj who later represented the girls of Abirpur in their quest for social change activities.

As I discovered during my stay in Abirpur, Soni was not a very “diplomatic” person as she always chose to be direct about her opinions. I observed that she spoke her mind without any hesitation which made her quite unpopular with most of the village elders, mostly all men. However, Usha Kumari, on the other hand, used more thoughtful rhetorical strategy to convince the parents of Taru listeners to send their daughters to the neighboring village Kamtaul to attend the participatory theater workshop organized by the Ohio University research team. In order to persuade the parents, Usha strategically used the discursive public sphere to communicate to the villagers about the upcoming workshop.
In order to understand how the young women in Abirpur were using public sphere as a discursive space to share their thoughts on common issues, I asked them to describe their experiences of their interaction with other men and women of their community.

In an interview with Sunita, Kum Kum and Usha, I learned how each of these girls was establishing a public identity by actively engaging in public discourse of change and transformation:

Sunita: I think one can learn a lot from conversations. Ever since you have come to our village, every conversation that I have had with you, I have learnt something new. Similarly conversations are good as long as the other is willing to listen. In my home, no one wants to listen to a girl. They all think that they know a lot. Taru helped me to gain confidence and showed me a way to exist in this society. I realized that one has to be wise and talk at the right time or else one can lose all credibility. So now I wait for the right opportunities...

Usha: I make sure my family members listen to what I have to say. Then I explain them my perspective and I listen to their point of view. If we have differing opinions, we sit and talk and find the optimal solution so that we can all co-exist.

Kum Kum: If people do not listen to me at home, I simply sit them down and talk to them. See, I cannot say much to outsiders because I don’t know them but if my dad’s friends come to our home and they are sitting and talking, I participate in their conversations and do not remain quiet. I am not rude but I do get my point across. Either I will laugh and make fun of the situation so they also relax a bit and don’t take it too seriously.

Sometimes the conversations do not go very well and male elders are offended by the young girls’ participation in village affairs. Baenju experienced this with elders of her village:

Baenju: It is always challenging to have a public dialogue with people in my village as I make them very uncomfortable. The other day, in my village, some elders were sitting and talking about the new school that the government is planning to build near our village. So I went and sat with them (I recognized in the crowd my uncle was sitting) and asked them if
our village would have a school? They were so upset with me. I did not realize what I had done wrong. Later my uncle told me that it was rude of me to talk about such things to the elders. After few days I visited the same group of people and they stared at me. They expected me to leave but I went up to them and talked to them about the school...they were shocked but I pursued and kept asking them. I told them that I was not prying or offending them...I simply wanted to know why we could not have a school in our village. Most of them did not respond but few elders explained to me the situation and we had a decent conversation. I know for days I was criticized for being ‘talkative’ but I did not care...after a few days everyone forgot about this episode and life was back to normal.

It is clear that some girls of Abirpur have found a new confidence to raise pertinent issues. They have discovered a language to ask such questions and found a platform to represent themselves. These girls are not waiting for an invitation to express their minds but are spontaneously participating in a dialogue for change. They are indifferent to those contestants of this discursive space who are uncomfortable by their presence. These girls have found their own innovative ways to express their minds to people who do not wish to incorporate them into the privileged public sphere that they have occupied for so long. As Neha displays her enthusiasm for social change activities, she also exhibits calm perseverance and inclination to compete for respect and acknowledgement for herself in this discursive space:

I don’t care much about people’s opinions. They may like me and they may not. This does not stop me from being right. I have talked before in front of elders and have been misunderstood. That did not stop me from saying what is right. When we opened the school for children at Abirpur, so many people said so many things but I continued along with others to do what was right by me. I know it is difficult to turn a deaf ear as we all belong to the same biraadari (community) but sometimes I wish we could do that so that we do not get discouraged by these people. Conversing with a cool mind helps in convincing people. I think it is very healthy to talk and argue. That is the only way we can learn from one another. In my family, we mostly talk about education and lack of opportunities for girls in the village. We
talk and share our views which help us to know what to decide when decisions have to be made.

So, how are the young women using the public sphere as a contested discursive space to express their viewpoints? I analyzed the discourse of the women with the notion of speech as a form of mediated action. In this scenario, text is produced as an interaction among actors in specific settings. Intelligibility does not adhere to words independently of their use, but rather, only through social interaction within a system of hierarchical relations. As a result, the concept of dialogue suggests contention, negotiation, and struggle, rather than merely transparent communication. Discourse reflects collectively constructed interpretations about the meaning and value of social objects and practices. Because power is unequally distributed in the community, not all participants have equivalent opportunities of expression. However, the young women in Abirpur continue to carve their space by representing actively engaging in the public sphere typically occupied by men.

In this section of the chapter, I have tried to address the role of discourse in empowering the young women of Abirpur to improve their social conditions. These dialogues take place between young women and men and challenge the traditional dialogic expectations. Sometimes these conversations provoke the consciousness of the community and lead to some kind of change in the status-quo. Other times, conversations may only amplify the areas that need to be corrected for equality between genders. The next section explores the participatory theater workshop as a critical site for change where the public and the private sphere collide.
Theater for Change

Research Question # 3: *How does the participatory theater intervention provide a site for interface between public and private sphere?*

When everybody works together, problems reduce. If one does it alone, it is difficult to change.

(Usha Kumari, Village Abirpur, July 2003)

Abirpur is a small village with approximately 500 people. Until the radio soap opera, *Taru*, the society lived by very rigid gender roles in which the woman is confined to home and domestic chores. She stays between the four walls of her home and does not raise her voice. The men have no such restrictions and are free to do as they please. After being exposed to *Taru*, some of the young girls in Abirpur started to assert themselves and began to create a distinct space for themselves within the public sphere. They started questioning the social norms and engaged in extensive debates over what is right and wrong with their elders.

Given that some distinct changes were happening in Abirpur society pertaining to equality between girls and boys, an intervention such as a participatory theater workshop would be ideal to test their commitment to change. Based on the dialogic theorizing of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970, 1994, 1998) and its application by Augusto Boal (1979) in his performative intervention the “Theater of the Oppressed”, the participatory theater workshops were designed with the plan to involve all the four villages where initial studies had been carried out and create a participatory theater intervention in village Kamtaul. Harter et. al (2007) noted that the week-long workshop was designed to
empower each group to develop a unique participatory theatrical performances so that it can capture the personal and group listening experiences of Taru and the folk performances could empower the participants to engage in the realm of public discourse.

Fifty members of Taru listening clubs from across the four villages participated in the participatory theater workshops and performances. Participants ranged in age from nine to 27 years old, with 25 female and 25 male participants. The three-day workshops that were held in the village of Kamtaul were followed by two days of public performances. The performances were held in all the four villages and were organized and managed by the workshop participants. There were no professional actors that were used in the performances; instead, participants scripted their own stories, selected their own cast, and directed their own plays.

The performances were like cultural programs that were entertaining and educating. Before the plays were enacted on stage, folk and popular songs were played on the loudspeaker and participants sang on the microphone to attract attention of the villagers and invite them to see the show. The shows received huge audiences ranging in numbers from 300-500 people. The audience consisted of women, men, and children.

The plays were interspersed with folk songs, folk dances, self-composed poetry, jokes, and dances by the local community members. This kept the audience engaged and at times somebody from the audience would happily volunteer to perform on stage. This informal atmosphere was deliberately created to stimulate participation and post-performance discussion among the community.
Workshop as an Empowering Site

One of the biggest challenges in executing the theater workshop was gaining the permission of parents for their daughters to participate by commuting to Kamtaul everyday. Although Taru inspired girls to assert their identities and re-conceptualize gender roles in Abirpur, neither is it customary for Indian girls and young women to participate in the public sphere (through performances) nor leave their respective villages until marriage. At the same time, young girls are a valuable resource for the parents as they are engaged in performing necessary daily household chores (e.g., preparing and serving meals). These were main reasons for parents’ unwillingness to allow their
daughters to participate in the workshop. This reaction from the parents did not dampen
the enthusiasm of the girls and they continued to persuade their parents with the help of
researchers and their own perseverance. According to Tinkoo:

I was so happy to hear about the intervention in Kamtaul. I wanted to go but I knew
that my parents would be unhappy. So I asked Usha didi and Saumya didi to talk to
my parents and convince them that this was not a bad thing. We were going to be
performing good plays.

The girls realized that they had to convince their parents by using the help of
opinion leaders like Usha Kumari, Manoj Maharaj, and Mukesh Maharaj. These were
credible people in the society and would certainly impress the parents to send them to
Kamtaul. Along with the support of key opinion leaders, my presence in Abirpur perhaps
helped in securing female participation. Usha had to personally vouch for the safety of
the girls and reassure the parents that she would take care of them:

They (parents) told me that ‘Usha you better watch out as you will be criticized
and so will be our daughters…you will have to be very careful…it is your
responsibility. Please be thoughtful when you tread on this path knowing that we
should not be disgraced.’ I had faith and confidence that I can do this! But before
this no one had told me that I could do it…I had no support and help. But after
your arrival to our village, I have been helped. Now I know that I can do it.

My stay with Usha’s family (RHP’s house) in Abirpur established credibility with
other families of Abirpur. I initiated conversations with parents and comforted them
about sending their daughters to Kamtaul. According to Kum Kum:

I was quite shy at first. I did not know how to sit together with all the boys and
girls. But now I am not scared at all. I can talk to their face. You saw how much
we talked to the boys in Kamtaul…earlier we could never talk like this.

While Kum Kum felt scared and shy of meeting new people, Baenju gained
strength from knowing that other girls shared her anxiety. She noted that, “I met all the
girls and they all felt same. They were equally anxious. It was good to know that everybody was a beginner. If they can do it, so can I. I can watch them and learn.” (Personal Conversation, July 2003).

The girls felt empowered as they left their village in search of a whole new experience. They knew that this was the most significant thing that has ever happened to them. They knew that they were going to learn a lot from this experience.

The process through which the girls persuaded their parents and larger community to participate in the workshop was transformative and emancipatory. The girls thought about the workshop with a clear head and realized that they would benefit from attending it. They were sure that this was a good thing for them. Their transparency of thought was reflected in their calm and poised arguments with their parents. This in itself was a critical dialogue with their parents that re-shaped their relationship with them.

The idea of performing the plays in front of the village community was scary and redeeming. The girls knew how much the community had resisted their attending the workshop and wanted to show them what they were capable of. These girls participated in the workshop with this responsibility that they have to give back to their community and satisfy the curiosity of the villagers. While they do so, the girls will be reassuring their parents that they made a wise choice and have no regrets. As Soni points out her motivation of participating in the workshop, she confirms her commitment to social cause and justice:

I would wonder how I would perform in front of a new society. I did not know how I would talk on stage. But when we saw one another, we became strong and I knew I could do it too. I learnt from others and became confident. I felt very good to perform in out village. I was happy we had an opportunity to show our
society that a girl can also be strong and not only a boy. In my society, they suppress girls so I wanted to show my village that girls and boys are equal. I also wanted to show that dowry is a crime, and marrying girls at an early age is a crime too.

In some instances, the girls confronted verbal abuse by some community members who criticized their intentions and accused them of being flirts. Girls like Usha responded to such allegations with courage and clarity. She explained to her accusers how the workshop would benefit them and their society:

I told the women who were accusing me that you (researchers) are trying to help us because our society does not guide the girls and show the right way to progress. You (researchers) are trying to show us a way to improve our lives. If we walk on these paths, we may live better lives. Some women who were slightly educated understood me but those who were uneducated dismissed me. Finally I told these women to wait for the day when we (participants) will come to the village and perform in front of all them. Then they will have to believe me!

While the workshop proved to be an empowering site for the girls, it was also a disempowering site for the boys. Never before had the boys shared their control with the girls. They had to partially unlearn the gender roles that stereotype women as subservient to men and re-learn the language of equality and social justice.

The workshop was not successful in empowering all the Taru female listeners. Young and enthusiastic Taru listeners such as Neha Kumari and Sunita Kumari were not allowed to attend the workshop. Both these girls had played an important role in precipitating the message of Taru in their community by starting a school for dalit children and questioning issues of female education and gender equality. The girls tried to hard to convince their parents along with Manoj Maharaj and Usha Kumari. However, they were unsuccessful in doing so.
Although such incidents inspire us to continue work in the realm of social change, we have to also applaud those girls who managed to find ways to attend the workshop in Kamtaul. In this way, the workshop became a site for critical discourse wherein traditional notions were constantly being challenged and re-negotiated.

**Workshop as a Site for Critical Discourse**

Although male participants of the workshop were disempowered of their previous control, they were simultaneously empowered by assuming new responsibilities as social change activists. One such person was Dhurinder Maharaj of Abirpur who was an active listener of *Taru* and participated in the theater workshop. He was an avid user of drugs and tobacco. After listening to *Taru*, Dhurinder was deeply moved and stopped chewing tobacco and started going to school. He reformed several of his friends by educating
them about the ill-effects of drugs and other addictive substances. Dhurinder also learned to respect women and give them equal status in the society. He saw how Taru worked for social justice and committed his own life to the cause. In a dialogue with his Uncle, Dhurinder Maharaj asserted that women were equal to men and deserved same respect.

When my uncle criticized boys and girls interacting together, I told him that the world has changed and it is not like old times. I used to think like him but I had to change with the new times. I told him that it is not his world anymore. Things have changed. The girls are educated now. Earlier they did not study but now they work hard to study and also work hard to nurture their family. It is not decent to ridicule them. He continued to complain about girls and boys going out together to another village to do drama. Barking dogs will always bark. I replied by performing the play! See, this is why I went and not for anything wrong…!

The workshop provided the girls and the boys to have conversations about issues that affected their lives. These conversations are significant since boys and girls did not interact much in Abirpur and had no opportunity to share their opinions. This dialogic space was conducive to challenge the status quo and fight for social justice. The scripts that were written by the participants were based on their lives and their experiences. These narratives were reflective of their condition and questioned the dominant narratives at play. Hence, these were counter-narratives that resisted dominant ideologies governing the village society. These narratives were critical to the process of social-change as they emphasized the condition of the subaltern counter public. The subaltern (young women) voices were not being heard and recognized. The theater workshop provided the subaltern counter public a platform to articulate their opinion and strive for social justice.

Once the counter-narratives were systematically scripted into stories, they were performed and reified by the participants in front of an audience. These participants
formed a community of counterpublic by sharing the counter-narratives of change and reform. When the groups began to share their stories, they exchanged schemata of experience that would help in the conceptualization of a community of interest. This community would result in social networks that would strengthen the emancipatory goals of the theater workshop.

While the participants composed their personal narratives, they shared a common vocabulary that connected them to one another. They realized that their individual narratives or counter narratives could be synthesized in one big macro narrative that could form as a coalition against the dominant narratives present in the public sphere. By virtue of being voices of the invisible (young women or counterpublic), the stories share common subjugation and marginalization.

In the performances, the participants celebrated their marginality and flagged it in the public sphere. They publicly performed and enacted their secondary status in the society. The female audiences were able to relate to the female performers as they watched scenes of oppression as experiences by them in their everyday lives. Through these performances, the participants tackled the hegemonic power at play in their society and redefined their own social existence.

Usha from Abirpur had similar experiences as Vandana from Kamtaul. They both belonged to different communities that shared similar problem like gender discrimination, dowry, and unequal opportunities for the girls.
Usha and Vandana worked in the same group during the workshop and became good friends. They realized how much they had in common once they started discussing the themes to enact in the play. Usha noted:

When we created a list of issues to write a script for our play, I was surprised when Vandana identified same issues as I did. We both share a common background as she is the daughter of the RHP at Kamtaul and I am the sister of the RHP in Abirpur. We both have been influencing the women in our villages to stand up against gender discrimination. Through our acquaintance, we felt more confident to change the conditions of women in our community.

The plays were performed by private bodies that were excavating their private experiences and performing them in the public. Through these performances, the private and the public collided to communicate the condition of the disgruntled. The young women used the meta narrative to talk about their lived experience and scripted them into
stories. These stories were very pious and private and in most instances had never been
shared before with anyone. Some men talked about their habit of tobacco chewing and
condemned themselves. According to Dhurinder, he was “saved” by Taru as he had been
abusing drugs for a long time:

I had become a social recluse who hung out in dark corners of the village doing
drugs. I lost connection with my family and became useless to them. It had
become so bad that I could not talk about it to anyone and did not know how to
help myself. It was horrible! Then I heard the radio program Taru on my friend’s
radio and started to hear it more and more. It is then that I found a way to heal
myself. I learned the lesson of self control and improved my life. I am surprised
that I can talk about it to my new friends…maybe because each one of them has
also learned something from Taru.

The sanctity of these narratives was preserved due to artistic expression
embedded in the theatrical performances by the participants. Hence, the private lives
were brought out into the open public sphere by using the medium of theater. The
publicness of the event was further glamorized by upholding the entertainment aspect of
the performance. In this case, the most deepest and private sentiment of the young
women was communicated by use of performative metaphors and imageries. As
Meenakshi of Madhopur commented after one of the workshop rehearsals:

It is so easy to enact our lives because we feel that this is a way others will
appreciate our issues and will listen to our voices. I am a very shy person but I
am enjoying the theater as I can be someone else while I perform and lose all of
my inhibitions. Initially I was not sure if I would be able to survive a day in
Kamtau… but now I look forward to coming here and meeting people who have
similar experiences and most of all are eager to make a difference.

Participants utilized the theater workshop to fulfill some of community needs.
For many participants this workshop was the first time they ever thought about their
social condition. Several young women had never thought about the ethical implication
of their choice and continued to participate in the workshop for entertainment value. These girls realized the empowering dimension of the workshop only after they were able to recognize something wrong in the way they had been living. These women considered themselves to be lucky in the company of other members of three different village communities but soon realized how their experience of the world was common and it was embedded in oppressive practices.

As the participants narrated their stories, they validated their experience and legitimized them in order to fight for social justice. The interventions allowed workshop participants to engage in narrativizing their lives and locate sites for change where private lives can interface with public discourse to create a discursive space of emancipation

**Summary**

The first research question addressed how young women of Village Abirpur are enacting empowerment in the public and private spaces that they occupy. These women enact empowerment by organizing themselves in groups and engage in social change activity. They are reshaping their world by challenging the traditions and gender roles and influencing public opinion.

The second research question addressed how young women in Village Abirpur use public sphere as a discursively constructed space for argument in which different interest groups compete to articulate conflicting worldviews. The girls inhabit the public sphere by engaging in conversations of reform. They redefine their role in the society by participating in discussions that were earlier dominated by men of the village.
The third research question addressed the different way participatory theater intervention provided a site for interface between public and private sphere. The workshop provided the girls and boys an opportunity to interact and share their views on issues that affected them as a community. This interaction was empowering and transformative for the young girls of Abirpur who performed their private lives on stage and enacted their narratives embodied in plays.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The present dissertation investigated the impact of entertainment-education soap opera, Taru, on young women in village Abirpur who were organizing for social change in their public and private spaces. To understand the young women’s enactment of empowerment, I chose to use the feminist lens of deconstructing public and private sphere as originally evolved by Jurgen Habermas. I proposed that these spaces are neither dialectically opposite to one another nor are they fixed in time. These spaces are in fact discursively created, maintained, and propagated by the young women of village Abirpur. To explore the lives of the young women, I used qualitative research methods for collecting data in the field. I used feminist ethnographic methods to observe the lives of the young women and encouraged them to share their stories with me by staying with them in their homes.

This chapter marks the end of a long journey of introspection and addresses the research questions that guided this study. Firstly, I will address the findings of this study by discussing the research questions posed in this study. Then, I will highlight the theoretical implication of this study. To do so, I will begin by making sense of theory of public and private sphere by juxtaposing it with my experience in the field. Secondly, I will discuss the areas for future research in the context of young women listeners who are emerging social activists in rural community. I will end this chapter by reviewing the strengths and limitations of this study so that future studies can benefit by this dissertation.
The purpose of this dissertation was to study how the young women of Abirpur are engaged in empowering activities in their public and private lives as a result of an entertainment-education radio soap opera, *Taru*. In order to understand their changing conditions and recognize the impact of media in empowering these women, this study was organized around three research questions:

Research Question # 1: *How are the young women of Village Abirpur enacting empowerment in the public and private spaces that they occupy?*

Research Question # 2: *How do young women in Village Abirpur, Bihar use the public sphere as a discursively constructed space for argument in which different interest groups compete to articulate conflicting worldviews?*

Research Question # 3: *How does participatory theater intervention provide a site for interface between public and private sphere?*

To address these research questions, I used qualitative research methods of interviewing along with ethnographic inquiry to observe the young girls of Abirpur. After living with these girls for several weeks, I was able to observe how they were performing transformative activities to improve their conditions in their public world and private lives. I carried out long and intense conversations with them and shared collective experience during the week-long participatory theater workshop held in the neighboring village Kamtaul. I was able to spend time with their parents and understand their commitments towards preserving the traditional societal norms and values that inherently limit the young women’s need for change. This dialectical tension between the daughters and their parents was critical to the investigation of the research questions.
In the following section, I will discuss the findings of the research questions and their implication of the study of public and private sphere.

**Enactment of Empowerment**

Research question one asked how the young girls in Abirpur enact empowerment in their public and private spaces. These girls are active radio listeners who have participated in systematic and organized listening of the entertainment-education radio soap opera, *Taru* by holding active discussions during and post-broadcast of the program. They have maintained diaries to record their impressions of every episode that was aired. They are members of self-directed listener clubs that fuel the process of social change in Abirpur. Traditionally, these girls have been providers at home and have never been engaged in any collective motion for change. However, radio has transformed their lives and made them more aware about gender discrimination in their society and proposed ways to empower themselves to challenge these discriminatory practices.

The young radio listeners have been engaged in organizing activities in order to continue the dialogue of social change. Along with the male listeners, these girls have founded organizations such as *Taru Natya* (Drama) Club in which the female representation is equal to male and many girls hold significant positions to manage the club. The women use this club as a platform to exchange ideas and define collective goals for social change. It is for the first time that boys and girls are putting their efforts in a unified mission to transform the conditions of women in their village. This engagement with one another is very empowering for the young women who have traditionally been forbidden to think about such issues.
These young women are motivated and influence the larger community of women to re-think their social status and raise critical questions to improve their otherwise very discriminatory conditions. For a rural-traditional society of Abirpur, it is quite an accomplishment to witness these young female listeners marching into homes of other women and discussing social issues like dowry, female-education, reproductive health, and reasonable age for marriage. This is a clear enactment of empowerment in the public spaces newly inhabited by the young women in Abirpur.

The young radio listeners also demonstrate these acts of bravery in their private spaces. The girls are fuelled with critical questions of change and have been attempting to raise consciousness within their families. These questions invoke serious evaluation of the current value system and propose alternate belief systems. Although the girls face a lot of resistance from their family members, they continue to probe their elders for answers and do not give-up without a fight. To be engaged in this ideological war between mindsets is of great significance to these girls as the process empowers them and gives them hope for change. In this way, the girls feel connected to one another and gain strength for this camaraderie. Hence, the enactment of empowerment is clearly being demonstrated by these girls in their private spaces.

**Public Sphere as Discursive Space for Change**

Research question two speculates how the young women in Abirpur are using the discursive spaces that have been created post-broadcast of the radio soap opera, *Taru* to voice their need for change. The discursive spaces are collectively created, conditioned, and maintained by young female *Taru* listeners to address the social status of women in
Abirpur and to propose ways to improve their conditions. These dialogic spaces often emerge due to overlapping ideas and conversations and are not essentially systematically constructed by the women. Although, *Taru* has provided these women an opportunity to organize their conversations of social change and systematically compete with alternate worldviews being presented simultaneously in Abirpur. These alternate views have dominated the ideological framework of the rural society for eons but now are being questioned by the young women. In questioning the competing dominant worldviews held by traditional society, the young women have created critical discursive communities that have gained visibility and prominence by the mainstream patriarchal society of Abirpur. Now the women have opportunity to dialogue and speak their mind!

These discursive spaces are limited in frequency and use. Not many women find comfort in engaging in these spaces as dialogues of transformation and change often upset the delicate balance of the society. However, the access to these discursive communities creates a safe space for those women who have been victimized for ages. Now, these muted women have a platform to voice their feelings.

In my study of the discursive spaces in Abirpur, I realized that *Taru* had provided the girls with common topics and themes to talk about. Now the girls were conversing about critical issues that affect their lives and have affected their mother’s lives too. They inadvertently pull their mothers into these conversations and learn more about their conditions of oppression. These conversations spark desires for change and motivate young girls to share their stories and experiences. Once these discursive spaces have
been created in Abirpur, women now have a chance to voice their minds and collectively engage in rhetoric of change.

**Participatory Theater Workshop as a Site for Change**

Research question three focused our attention on participatory theater intervention providing a site for interface between public and private sphere where social change activities can be administered. The young boys and girls of Abirpur participated in theater workshop to voice their stories and present them to a larger community to jump-start the process of social transformation by engaging in active dialogue of change.

The theater workshop was an empowering site for young girls of Abirpur as they had to break several barriers to attend the workshop. It is not customary for these girls to participate in public performances and occupy such spaces open to public speculations. However, the female participants encouraged their parents to allow them to participate in the workshop and express their identity by enacting their stories and voicing their views in the short plays. The process of motivating the parents was significant as it led to independent emerging identities of the girls who felt empowered to raise critical questions to their immediate society.

In the workshop, boys and girls shared a common space in which they engaged in lengthy conversations about their social, political, and cultural conditions. These dialogues were private in nature as personal stories of oppression and exploitation were being shared with one another. However, the discursive space occupied by the participants was very public in practice. Hence, the workshop was able to provide a unique amalgam of public and private where the girls felt comfortable to describe their
experience and enact them in short plays in front of a large audience. To conclude, private bodies performed transformative scripts in public forums to raise critical consciousness and engage in a dialogue of social change.

**Theoretical Contributions: Positioning Public and Private Sphere**

The bourgeois public sphere, which began appearing around 1700 in Habermas’s interpretation, was to mediate between the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic, and social life contrasted to the demands and concerns of social and public life. The public sphere consisted of organs of information and political debate such as newspapers and journals, as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, meeting halls, and other public spaces where socio-political discussion took place. For the first time in history, individuals and groups could shape public opinion, giving direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice. The bourgeois public sphere made it possible to form a realm of public opinion that opposed state power and the powerful interests that were coming to shape bourgeois society.

Although an Indian rural village like Abirpur cannot be called a bourgeois society of 1700 Europe, it does imitate certain elements like an obvious private and a public sphere that are geographical in nature. These spaces are gendered and inhabited by women and men respectively. The public domain in Abirpur is dominated by men who gather to discuss politics and render public opinions. The private sphere is inhabited by the women who are homemakers and restrict their influence to household activities.
However, *Taru*, the entertainment-education radio soap opera, blurred these spaces and recreated them. Now, some of the women (especially the young girls) of Abirpur could be found in the public spaces traditionally inhabited by men and subverted the control of these spaces. The women’s involvement in the public sphere did not dilute the power of the sphere. Even now, public opinions continued to be shaped in these locales with the difference that these opinions were now challenging the status quo and questioning the patriarchal control.

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere thus described a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power. The public sphere thus mediates between the domains of the family and the workplace -- where private interests prevail -- and the state which often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination. What Habermas called the “bourgeois public sphere” consisted of social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power.

Traditionally in the village society, man and women found spaces of convenience to interact and share their ideas. Men met in village headmen’s house or the village forum to discuss and chat while women met at the village well or the agricultural field to vent their minds. Dialogues have continued in these spaces that have been public or private in nature. However, these spaces have been gendered due to social norms of interaction between men and women. Now, with the women questioning the system of operation in Abirpur village, these gendered spaces are getting flexible and the boundaries between private and public spaces are getting blurred.
While addressing the forces of empowerment enacted by the young girls of Abirpur, I observed that the dialogues shared between the girls and boys determine often the nature of the public and the private encounter. For example, when Usha talks about family planning to a young bride within the confines of her room, she is raising some critical issues of status of women and control over her life. These dialogues are very opiniated and transformatory. They are being narrated within the confined of four walls but are extremely charged with political consequences. Hence, public and private spaces are discursively crated and maintained by the narrator.

Habermas’s study of the public sphere has been subjected to intense critical argumentation and his critics argue that he idealizes the earlier bourgeois public sphere by presenting it as a forum of rational discussion and debate when in fact certain groups were excluded and participation was thus limited. Habermas thus provided decisive impetus for discussions concerning the democratization of the public sphere and civil society, and helped generate productive discussions of the public sphere and democracy.

The public sphere thus presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making. Many defenders and critics of Habermas’s notion of the bourgeois public sphere fail to note that the thrust of his study is precisely that of transformation, of the mutations of the public sphere from a space of rational discussion, debate, and consensus to a realm of mass cultural consumption and administration by corporations and dominant elites.

While the dialogues in the village forum may include men and women, these dialogues are very restricted and controlled by the patriarchal system at play. The young
girls of Abirpur feel empowered to talk about issues of education for girls, marriage, and gender discrimination in the quest that they will affect some change. However, these dialogues are not received effectively by the patriarchs of their society and are often dismissed as unimportant. It is imperative that these dialogues continue raising the issues at hand but it is also true that these spaces are maintained by the opinion leaders who are the decision-makers of the society.

Hence, rather than conceiving of one liberal or democratic public sphere, it is more productive to theorize a multiplicity of public spheres, sometimes overlapping but also conflicting. These include public spheres of excluded groups, as well as more mainstream configurations. Moreover, the public sphere itself shifts with the rise of new social movements, new technologies, and new spaces of public interaction.

This is true for Abirpur society where the women have created their own discursive spaces within which they feel strong and confident. The women get together at Titli center to discuss their issues and find solidarity in these interactions. They do not need to confront the men by joining their spaces to prove their existence but carve their own places of influence to question the system.

It is creditable how Habermas’s analysis pays attention on the nature and the structural transformations of the public sphere and its functions within contemporary society. However, I would like to suggest that we should expand this analysis to take account of an expanded public sphere with new challenges and consider Habermas’s work as an indispensable component of a new critical theory that must, however, go beyond his positions in crucial ways.
Areas for Future Research

This study focused on the impact of the radio soap opera on the young women of Abirpur. It highlighted the empowering dimension of entertainment-education strategy for social change on female consumers of radio. These young women of Abirpur enact empowerment in their everyday lives and negotiate spaces of power and domination with their male adversaries. In order to deeply understand the process of social change, it would be imperative to study the impact of radio soap operas on male listeners as well. This comparison would be helpful to amplify the different ways male and female radio listeners consume messages and act on them. While this analysis would highlight the gendered media consumption, it would also articulate how female and male radio listeners negotiate change and co-create environment for social activism.

While talking to the young women in Abirpur, I realized that these women faced a lot of resistance to change by the male members of the community. The more the female listeners wanted to dialogue about change and transformation, the more the men felt intimidated by such conversations. A next obvious area for future research could be to study the impact of transformative activities of the girls on the men of the community so that we can understand the complexity of changing a system that is in practice for ages. This would help in addressing the process of social change where both male and female members of the community are working on collective goals to change the normative values of their society predicated on discriminatory gendered practices.
Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study’s major strength is in employing an ethnographic approach to collecting data and recording narratives of the young girls who have been silenced by their community for ages. Having lived with the young female listeners and interacting with them in their choice of place (mostly their homes), I could uncover their stories and experience their enactment of empowerment on a daily basis. I observed at leisure and was under no deadline to find answers. I let the spontaneity of human relations guide my inquiry. As much as possible, I refrained from imposing questions that had to be answered in a structured format. Instead I let my relationship with the young women radio listeners determine the extent of intimacy and comfort in addressing the research questions. This worked in favor of both the parties – the researcher and the researched!

The biggest limitation of this study was that it focused on the empowerment of the female listeners of Taru and completely ruled out the experience of the male radio listeners. The exclusion of men became a deterrent while administering the methodology of ‘participatory photography’ among the female listeners of Taru. I gave five female Taru listeners disposable cameras to take pictures of private and public spaces that they inhabit. After questioning the girls, I realized that their brothers/fathers/male friends took control of the camera and took random pictures. These men felt ignored and wanted to reclaim control and power by taking charge of the camera and producing images to their liking. Hence, the activity was a failure and could not assist in addressing the research questions.
Stepping Back: Entertainment Education and Role of Radio in Abirpur

Entertainment-Education is an approach to education in which social messages are incorporated into entertainment programs with the intention of increasing audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, engender favorable attitudes, and change behavior. Programs are characterized by an ongoing story line with several concurrent plots linked together by the characters’ personal relationships. Each episode ends with a hook that creates interest in the next episode, and a brief epilogue that poses rhetorical questions or provides information, such as the number of a telephone hot line.

The entertainment-education strategy is based on Bandura's social cognitive theory, which posits that individuals learn new behaviors by observing and imitating the behavior of others, who serve as role models. Another underlying principle is that individuals may increase their self-efficacy, or sense of their ability to carry out a task, by seeing individuals similar to themselves perform the task successfully.

The entertainment-education radio soap opera, Taru, was enjoyed by the young women of Abirpur as Taru (the female protagonist) taught them how to improve their lives and create a better future for themselves. She showed them the ways of becoming self-reliant and emphasized the role these young girls could play in the process of social change.

In Abirpur, radio was used as the media of choice to create a climate for change. Radio played an important role for the community of Abirpur. While other media could have been used to motivate social activism, radio was the obvious choice to facilitate social change. Radio could meet the needs of the local community. It has been shown to
be an effective way of reaching people in their homes. It can be a channel for giving new information, and for reinforcing what families may have learned from a health worker. Finally, it can help motivate people to act through entertaining and compelling presentations. Radio can reach communities who live in areas with no phones and no electricity. And it reaches people who can't read or write. Even in very poor communities, radio penetration is vast.

In the case of Abirpur, radio has comparative advantages over the other media as a tool for social change. It is still the most cost effective medium of mass communication. As a large proportion of people in Abirpur lack access to electricity and technology, radio is a medium which has the strength to reach people and provide information that may improve their social conditions. As an instrument for social change, radio has an advantage over other media due to its outreach and spread.
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