



DRIVING SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH FORUM THEATRE

Jana Sanskriti's 'Response to Gender Issues through Theatre'

A Participatory Evaluation Report

By



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Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed

Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed was set up by Sanjoy Ganguly over three decades ago as a pioneering initiative in West Bengal for development of the individual self, the community, and to bring about wider social change through the use of a form of theatre designed and made famous by the Brazilian theatre activist and scholar, Augusto Boal.¹ In the last thirty years, Jana Sanskriti (JS) has engaged communities in rural West Bengal, especially in the Sunderbans area (South and North 24 Parganas districts), to address critical issues like child marriage, domestic violence, child trafficking, maternal and child health, and alcoholism. With about 30 theatre teams reaching out to an approximate audience of 200,000, Jana Sanskriti is easily one of the largest such operations anywhere in the world.

The Project: Responding to Gender Issues through Theatre

South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal is bounded by the Bay of Bengal in the south, Bangladesh in the east, Kolkata and the North 24 Parganas district in the north, and Howrah and Medinipur districts in the west. The district encompasses the Gangetic delta, and because of its geographical peculiarities, communication and transportation infrastructure are relatively underdeveloped. In the district, JS has been working mostly in the Patharpratima, Kulpi, and Kakadweep blocks in more than 100 villages across 11 gram panchayats.

In the current project called “Responding to Gender Issues through Theatre,” Jana Sanskriti has sought to address some critical gender issues by deploying the methodology of theatre of the oppressed. Started in October 2016 with the support of Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the project took up focused work in the Patharpratima Block of the district. As part of the project, the organisation aimed to cover seven gram panchayats (GPs) constituted by a total of 46 villages and engage about 29 government schools in the Block.

Using theatre of the oppressed or ‘forum theatre’², Jana Sanskriti uses the methodology of repeated creative engagement to not only initiate public discussions and foster critical thinking among the people of the area, but also to promote community-led actions on the ground.

Jana Sanskriti identified the issues of child marriage and child trafficking for this initiative as 50% of all marriages conducted in West Bengal are, reportedly, of under-age girls (i.e. below the age of 18). A substantial number of these ‘marriages’ in the South 24 Parganas district result in trafficking, with little or no contact with their families, causing grave harm to the survival of the girl child. Jana Sanskriti aimed to interrogate the patriarchal mindset of individuals and families

¹ See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer), new edition (originally published 1974), London: Pluto Press, 2008.

² A variant of theatre of the oppressed, ‘forum theatre’ is so called because it often takes on the character of a public discussion or forum. Please see later part of the report for more on this form.

that underlie this unfortunate phenomenon and bring about a change in the culture as well as in tangible terms by reducing the number of child marriages. One of the ways in which the latter could be achieved, the organisation reasoned, was by ensuring retention of girl children in schools, thereby enhancing their life chances. In order to achieve this, Jana Sanskriti decided to eschew the service-delivery approach and concentrate on strengthening the systems in the rural areas through community participation. Forum theatre became a crucial tool through which the organisation sought to promote a culture of dialogue and critical thinking as well as collective problem-solving at the community level.



Map of Parthapratinipur Block

The South 24 Parganas has a population of about 8 million, with Muslims constituting more than a third of the demography and a similar proportion of the population is made up of dalits (scheduled castes). It has a sex ratio of 956, about the level of the State average, and a female literacy rate of 71%.³ The literacy figures become skewed when differentiated by minority community and scheduled castes. More than a third of the households in the district are listed as being below the poverty line (BPL), with an occupational structure dominated by those working in the unorganized sector as agricultural labour and migrant workers.⁴ Development

³ Census, 2011. <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/17-south-twenty-four-parganas.html>. Accessed on April 10, 2018. Also, Government of West Bengal data in https://www.wbhealth.gov.in/other_files/2006/1_10.html. Accessed on April 10, 2018.

⁴ Official website of the district: <http://s24pgs.gov.in/s24p/page.php?nm=Message>. Accessed on April 10, 2018.

indicators in the Patharpratima Block suggest that the poverty ratio is over 40%, with less than 1% of the households having access to electricity, and a female literacy rate of under 40%.⁵

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes of the Forum theatre intervention by Jana Sanskriti in the Block, as stated by the organization, include⁶:

- Massive reduction in underage marriage and child trafficking in the region during the lifetime of the project;
- Massively improved retention of girls in education in the region;
- Creation of much closer and better informed and supported communities able to appreciate and support girls' aspirations;
- Creation of much closer links between communities and the authorities, such as teachers, government officials and the police, to work together to enforce the law in relation to the rights of young women in respect of marriage, education and dowry;
- Enhancement of self-esteem, firstly in girls, then in all young people, and finally in the marginalised communities they come from, enabling them to develop critical awareness and confidence to act for the long-term well-being of their communities; and,
- Enhancement of the valuing of culture, performance and folk arts.

A Qualitative, Participatory Evaluation

Objectives

A qualitative evaluation of the above project was undertaken by a team of researchers from the UNESCO Chair on Community Media at University of Hyderabad with the following objectives:

1. To understand the methodology and process of forum theatre in bringing about social change;
2. To assess the extent and prevalence of child marriage and school dropout rates of girl children in the Patharpratima block of South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal;
3. To understand the contributions of Jana Sanskriti in addressing the above issues;

⁵ District Human Development Report, Development & Planning Department, Government of West Bengal, 2009. http://www.wbplan.gov.in/HumanDev/DHDR/24%20pgsSouth/TITEL_SOUTH%2024.pdf. Accessed on April 12, 2018.

⁶ Proposal submitted by Jana Sanskriti to Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

4. To assess Jana Sanskriti's contributions in bringing about changes at the individual, community, and institutional levels, especially with reference to the issue of the girl child;
5. To identify the challenges in the process of social change, in relation to early child marriage and trafficking, and to delineate ways in which Jana Sanskriti seeks to overcome them;
6. To identify innovative structures and practices put in place by Jana Sanskriti to prevent child marriage and to ensure the protection of the girl child; and
7. To understand the extent and ways of collaboration with government authorities in bringing out social change.

Methodology

The research team, consisting of two professors of communication, including one who occupies the UNESCO Chair on Community Media, and a research assistant, undertook a five-day visit in February 2018 to the Patharpratima Block of South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal to conduct a qualitative, participatory evaluation of the project taken up by Jana Sanskriti with the support of Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Extensive discussions with the staff of JS helped us to identify key informants for interviews, sample important sites and events for observations, and choose critical groups for conducting focus groups.

The team conducted **in-depth interviews** with:

- the founder of Jana Sanskriti, Sanjoy Ganguly;
- local elected representatives, including the President of the Block and the Pradhan of Digambarpur Gram Panchayat.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with:

- adolescent girls from the villages of Digambarpur, Indranarayanpur, and Ramganga;
- Jana Sanskriti supervisors representing the seven gram panchayats in which the project is being implemented; and,
- six theatre teams of Jana Sanskriti.

The number of people reached through these FGDs was about 75, of whom nearly 90% were women.

The research team had opportunities to conduct **participant observation** sessions in different settings, including:

- a cultural performance by children at Muktamancha, Jana Sanskriti's field headquarters in Digambarpur GP;
- two forum theatre performances, one in a rural locale in Baddimod village in Dakshin Raypur GP and the other in a school in Ramganga GP;

- a stakeholders meeting held in Srinarayanpur-Purnachandrapur GP that was attended by about 30 women frontline workers, and 10 others representing the local government and Jana Sanskriti; and,
- a meeting of the Responsible Citizens' Committee (RCC) in Gangadharpur GP that was attended by about 20 women leaders and members.



The research team in a discussion with Forum Theatre Supervisors

In addition, the team also perused **documents** pertaining to forum theatre, Jana Sanskriti (proposal, reports, etc), and district and Block-level information made available by the government.

On the whole, we would like to suggest that our research may be seen as a participatory evaluation, one in which an assessment of a programme or policy is conducted in consultation with the key stakeholders. This has been implemented primarily in the process of evaluation design and data collection. This approach, we believe, helps in identifying locally relevant evaluation questions, explaining the processes underlying an initiative, and contribute to organizational learning and growth. While in ideal terms participatory evaluation calls for longer-duration immersion in the field setting, time constraints on our research meant that it ended up being more of a rapid participatory assessment.

Theatre of the Oppressed *aka* Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre: Embedded in Empowerment Paradigm

There is at least five decades of history of using theatre for development and social change. Theatre as a propaganda tool and in contemporary statist development practice for promoting such things as immunisation or sanitation has been well documented. Most such uses of theatre tend to be interventionist, in the sense of downward dissemination of messages for bringing about attitude and behaviour change among the poor and the marginalized. However, a critique

of the dominant paradigm of communication for development has led to the emergence of more participatory theatre forms that are embedded in the empowerment paradigm.⁷

Forum Theatre is a school of theatre conceptualised and developed by the Brazilian writer, activist, and politician, Augusto Boal, who used it for ‘radical popular education movements’. Famously known as the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), this form of theatre grew out of Boal’s work with the Brazilian peasant community.⁸ It soon grew as a form and is now used all over the world for social and political activism, for resolution of individual and group struggles, community building, therapy and treatment, and in the making of government legislations.⁹

Inspired by Paulo Freire’s landmark work on education, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), the aim of TO is to promote critical thinking among people by engaging them in plays, and thereby, attempt to bring about transformative changes in society and the polity. This type of theatre activity involves the players in well-designed and structured games that sensitize them to basic human communication and enable the creation of a community-based forum for initiating dialogue, deliberation, and instigate the Freirian reflection-action-reflection cycle.

In TO, a play conceptualised on real-life incidents is performed among audiences and is interrupted at crucial moments. Members of the audience are invited to role play characters in the performance and show how they would have dealt with the situation differently. The other actors remain in character, improvising their responses. A facilitator (referred to as Joker) enables communication between the players and the audience. This strategy flattens the hierarchy between the actors and the audience and encourages audience members to enact different courses of action based on their own life experiences and definitions of the situation. This process empowers otherwise marginalized members of the community to speak up and question dominant narratives and ideologies. Theatre of the Oppressed is more about interrogating dominant social structures and triggering a process of collective resolution of problems.

Forum Theatre does not purport to offer solutions. Rather, it encourages audience participation by transforming passive spectators into active ‘spectactors’ (spectators who become actors). Sanjoy Ganguly of Jana Sanskriti takes this transformation further by suggesting that the spectactors must ultimately turn into ‘spectactivists’ in order to usher in social change.

⁷ See Alex Flynn and Jonas Tinius (eds), *Anthropology, Theatre, and Development: the transformative potential of performance*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

⁸ Throughout this report, we will be using ‘theatre of the oppressed’ and ‘forum theatre’ interchangeably for the sake of convenience.

⁹ See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Also, <http://www.janasanskriti.org/index.html>, and <http://www.cdc.in/about-theater-oppressed>. Accessed on April 12, 2018.



Children staging a play at the Jana Sanskriti

'Scripting the Play': Jana Sanskriti's Adaptation

Jana Sanskriti's adoption of the Theatre of the Oppressed has the effect of audience identification with the real-life situations from which these plays are forged.¹⁰ JS's version of the TO believes in 'scripting the play' rather than 'playing the script'.¹¹ It believes that a 'script' that evolves from interactions with the audience will enable the latter to think critically, which, in turn, leads to activism. Sanjoy Ganguly says the inspiration for this approach comes from the rich folk theatre tradition in Bengal.

When I was working with the group in the beginning of JS I noticed that if they were asked to *play a script* it was too taxing for them because they cannot read, they are hearing and trying to memorise. In folk theatre, actually they don't often 'play the script' they 'script the play'. I noticed this, so therefore I decided to approach from a different angle and let them script the play, because if they script the play themselves they will be able to remember.¹²

¹⁰ For a good understanding of the how the plays of JS are sourced from the socio-political context of rural West Bengal, see Sanjoy Ganguly, *Where we stand: Five Plays from the Repertoire of Jana Sanskriti*, Kolkata: CAMP, 2009.

¹¹ These critical aspects of forum theatre or theatre of the oppressed are derived mostly from our interview sessions with Sanjoy Ganguly, February 21-25, 2018.

¹² Interview with Sanjoy Ganguly conducted by Robyn Kirkby, July 30, 2013. In Sanjoy Ganguly, *From Boal to Jana Sanskriti: Practice and Principles* (edited, Ralph Yarrow), London & New York: Routledge, 2017, p.91.

The performances have well-designed breaks when the play is stopped and the audience is invited to enact possible options from the point of view of the oppressed character and erecting a public forum in which various opinions are deliberated. Besides the actors, the play also has a facilitator or the Joker. Rather than the standard proscenium theatre, the play is characterized by simultaneous dramaturgy where the spectators take on roles at crucial moments and work out ways of approaching different situations. There is potential for a plurality of voices to emerge from such a process, thereby democratizing communication.

One of the key characteristics of Forum Theatre is that the community setting provides a safe environment for the oppressed to assume various role positions and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. By providing a voice to those who have been silenced, the play creates opportunities for learning for the entire audience and draws them into empathizing with the situation of the oppressed. This empic response from both the ordinary people as well as authority figures could potentially lead to social and political change.

An important variation in JS's approach to forum theatre is that audience members are invited to not only play the role of the oppressed, but also that of the oppressor. Sanjoy Ganguly reasons:

This is because, in a complex society like ours, even the oppressor is a victim of circumstances, peer pressures, social customs etc. By offering up the 'oppressor' character also for role play by spectactors, we provide an opportunity for our audiences to introspect on the complex society, its customs, and the many circumstances in which even the oppressors are caught.¹³

'Rehearsal for a Revolution': Forum Theatre in Action

Jana Sanskriti regularly stages Forum Theatre performances in various villages. Although JS's headquarters is situated in Badu, about 15 kms from the Kolkata airport, their work has been concentrated in South 24 Parganas and Purulia districts.

Our methodology works through a process of repeated creative engagement, using relevant local cultural forms incorporated in Forum Theatre, alongside discussion which is embedded in the theatrical process through both workshopping plays and 'foruming' them, and then supporting community-led relevant actions. The process of our work encourages the development of the critical reflection and analytical skills which we have

¹³ Interview, Digambarpur village, February 22, 2018.

found to be the essential precursors to communities being empowered to take meaningful control of their lives.¹⁴

In a one-year period of the project, JS delivered about 220 performances across the seven GPs, reaching over 27000 audience members, of whom about 845 participated as spectators.¹⁵ It is to be noted that a large number of these participants are reported to be women and children.

Performance 1: Village Setting

During our visit, the research team got an opportunity to witness a Theatre of the Oppressed/Forum Theatre performance in a village setting. This was in a predominantly Muslim village, Baddimod, in Dakhsin Raypur gram panchayat, where JS was performing for the first time. One of the women members of the theatre team explained that they constantly shift venues because they are conscious that each *para* (hamlet) within a GP tends to be dominated by a particular community and by performing at different locations, they ensure outreach to diverse audiences.

By the time we reached the village at around 4.30 pm, there was a buzz of excitement with a few people gathered in a small clearing of 40'x40' space. There were children, young women, boys, girls, and parents with babies in their arms. Initially, most of the audience was of women, with the men slowly joining. There was a sound system erected on a 'motor machine' and two loudspeakers booming out to the village. They were about to start at around 5 pm, when there was a call for *azaan* (Muslim prayers) and the women performers waited for it to be completed before they started. They set up simple props, with two live musicians accompanying. One person in the team was ready with a notebook and pen to note down any interventions from audiences that might happen later.

A team member announced the topic of the play – child trafficking – and its importance to the community. There were a few songs, including what was apparently the JS anthem, and a stick dance (similar to *kolatam* performed in the Telugu states) before the main feature started. Children sat in the first two rows, followed by adolescent women, and mothers. Men formed the last layer of audience. The team noticed that several very young women were carrying at least one child in their arms. The play was performed by the Ramnagarabad Theatre Team. All the performers, except for the 'Joker', were women. Women also played the role of men in the play.

¹⁴"Responding to Gender Issues through Theatre," Progress Report -- October 2016-September 2017, Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed.

¹⁵Progress Report -- October 2016-September 2017.



Play in progress in a village setting

The protagonist of the play was a young girl, daughter of an alcoholic rickshaw puller and a mother who works in people's homes as a maid. The drunk father wastes away all his income in drinking. The family is struggling to send the girl to school and afford her books and other essentials. Two unscrupulous traffickers from a neighbouring state tempt one of the women in the village with a job offer for the son and in exchange ask her to find a young woman for a 'suitable job' in their state. The woman then goes to the rickshaw puller's wife and, taking advantage of their poverty, she and the two traffickers persuade her to send her young daughter for 'work' outside the state. The girl ends up in a brothel with a 'madam' who seems to be getting a regular supply of sex workers through trafficking. At this juncture, the 'Joker' interrupted the play and invited audience participation. The idea of forum theatre is to narrow the gap between performers and spectators and turn the latter into what Boal had called 'spectactors'. The audience is encouraged by team members to respond to different characters, situations portrayed, and to the premise of the play itself. As mentioned earlier, Ganguly raises the bar by suggesting that the 'spectactors' must then become 'spectactivists' by working in the community to bring about change. This follows Freire's concept of 'praxis' where dialogue for understanding one's social reality is accompanied by actions that seek to transform the oppressive environment, in a cycle of action-reflection.¹⁶

¹⁶ <http://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>. Accessed on April 20, 2018.



A girl from the audience takes on a role in the play



A woman becomes a spectator

It was quite exciting to watch audience members, many women, who got provoked by the play and responded to this invitation. They were then welcomed into the performance space and asked to raise questions, give their opinions, and enter into a dialogue with the different characters. It seemed that most of the older women who came up to speak were quite agitated about the drunk husband and berated him for wasting all the money on alcohol and neglecting his family. Not much attention was paid to the trafficking aspect. It seemed like they traced the root cause to alcoholism and attacked it. At a discussion our team had with the JS theatre teams, Bandana Bera Biring, one of the actors in this play, explained it when she said, “The focus of that play became alcoholism because that is the reality in their villages.” She suggested that people were quite conscious that the mother is also a victim of strong patriarchy that exists in families and communities and they wanted to bring out that aspect in the play. As the play unfolded, people began to author their own script, thereby constructing shared meaning.

One young woman from the audience vehemently argued that the family should not have let the girl just go away with some strangers without verifying their identification and credentials. Another woman from the audience said the parents should focus on educating the girl child so that she can get married at a more mature age. “Suitable boys will come for her sooner or later,” she reasoned. One articulate young man came up and spoke of the illegality of the whole thing – underage girls being married off against their will. He also mentioned government schemes and social institutions that play a role in addressing such problems. Another tall, bearded man came into the performance space and chided the drunk father character for using poverty as an excuse for his irresponsible behaviour towards his daughter.

The play clearly functioned as a trigger for dialogue and incited critical thinking among the villagers. Anirban, a theatre graduate who accompanied us on the performance, said he was very impressed with the audience participation. According to him, while the traditional proscenium performances only elicited passive responses from the audiences, this was different because audience members themselves were role-playing. He said the open articulations by women in the community also helped convey to the others in the village the girl’s perspective, changing social norms, and about their own perceptions of social norms.

It was clear that drinking excessively with loss of income and domestic abuse was no longer an accepted social norm. One of the female performers, Malati Manna was herself a victim of domestic abuse some years ago. She had taken refuge in Jana Sanskriti headquarters. JS had intervened with the husband and supported him to start a service that supplies AV support for performances. Now he is transformed and is a crucial part of the JS theatre activity. He brings in his 'motor-machine' wherever the team performs a play. He also helps transport the team from place to place.

The woman who played the role of the alcoholic father played a crucial role during the intervention period by raising a lot of issues that were not dealt with earlier in the play. For instance, when someone questioned about 'his' drinking habit, 'he' retorts: 'Ask the government to stop selling, then I will stop drinking'. The character also brought up the need for exercising collective responsibility of the community toward their neighbours and for showing greater alertness to things that are happening in their neighbourhood, thereby sowing the seeds of spectactivism.

Performance 2: School setting

Our team witnessed yet another play on child marriage that was staged in Goda Mathura Adarsha Binoy Vidyapeeth, located in Ramganga GP. The GMABV is a well-kept school and is perhaps the largest building in the gram panchayat, with a playground and garden. The play was to be staged after class hours at around 4 pm and was targeted at students of the 9th and 10th standards.

JS's six satellite theatre teams have been performing in schools on a regular basis, covering 29 schools in seven gram panchayats under Patharpratima Block, with 53 performances in a one-year period of the project, reaching about 6800 audience members, of whom about 240 students participated as spectators. The Forum Theatre performances in schools focus on preventing dropouts, early girl child marriage, dowry system, and trafficking of the girl child.¹⁷

As a result of such performances, the desire for dialogue between teachers and students is becoming a reality. Girl children in schools are sharing their problems with their teachers. A few teachers are attempting to go beyond their teaching responsibilities. The challenge is to ensure direct involvement of more teachers to address issues like child marriage and retention in school.¹⁸

The play was staged on the second floor of the school in a tin-roofed hall. It was attended by over 100 students of the high school of which majority were girls. A few teachers who joined in, sat in

¹⁷Responding to Gender Issues through Theatre," Progress Report -- October 2016-September 2017, Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed.

¹⁸Sanjoy Ganguly, Interview, February 23, 2018.

the last row. The theatre team, consisting of four men and four women, created a small space for the performance and set up props.



Play on Early Child Marriage in progress in Goda Mathura Adarsha Binoy Vidyapeeth, Ramganga GP

The play focussed on strong performance with less dialogue and interspersed with songs. The play depicted differential treatment of boys and girls at home, with the former getting preferential treatment over the girl in the typical patriarchal household. The parents are shown giving less value to the education of the girl, the older of the two children, while showering all the attention on the boy. Later in the play, the parents are also shown forcing her into early marriage at the age of 14 years. The father is seen telling the mother that a 'well-settled' family wishes to make her their daughter-in-law and that it was not an opportunity that could be missed.

The family of the prospective bridegroom visits the girl's family. This situation was depicted in a sarcastic fashion, with the key characters sharply caricatured. The actors tended to 'over perform' in the situation in order to convey the message convincingly. The girl is depicted as an object that has to be displayed for the boy. She is asked to 'display' her hands and legs and asked to walk around for the boy's parents to judge. The parents of the girl are shown negotiating a tough dowry demand and the wedding is ultimately performed, with the girl's father taking a huge loan to meet the costs. He promises to settle the rest of the dowry during or after the wedding. The play then shifts to her husband's household with the in-laws subjecting her to torture for the rest of the dowry. We could observe many girls in the audience emotionally moved by the play, with some wiping their tears. It is at this stage when the emotions have been raised to a peak that the play is halted.



Glimpses from the performance in the school

The Joker, a role performed by Sanjoy Ganguly, then walked into the audience and invited their participation by way of role-play and raised critical questions about different situations. Various parts of the play were re-enacted and spectators were invited to assume the roles of the protagonist, the brother, and that of the mother. Although the girls were initially hesitant, one after the other, they came up to the stage and confidently took on the roles. Many were obviously angered by the situations presented in the play and reacted quite aggressively. They defended the right of the girls to education, challenged the social norms of early child marriage, and even asserted the right to the choice of a partner. Laxmi Rani Mondal, who assumed the role of the harassed daughter, in a spontaneous re-enactment asserted: “I am only 14 years old, I am not ready for marriage. And, if the groom’s family can come to see me, I too want to visit the groom’s house and his family.” Other issues such as dowry and the embarrassing display of the bride were marked out in the dramatic re-enactments by the spectators. They also asserted the illegality of child marriage. Poulomi Das who eagerly came forward to be a spectator said angrily: “If this is the way girls are treated, I would prefer not to get married. If you [the parents] stand by me, I am prepared to fight even the system. Why do you think only your son will take care of you when you grow old? If you educate me, I can get a job and I too can take care of you.”



Sanjoy Ganguly performs the role of Joker



A student becomes a spectator in the play

Suman Patro, the only boy who volunteered to become a spectator, assumed the role of the brother and challenged the father’s ill-treatment of the sister and defended her right to education. Sumita Mondal, who assumed the role of the mother, raised objections to the display

and ill-treatment of the girl during the visit of the groom's family. Poulomi Das said change may begin with individuals, but could spiral into a change that envelops society as a whole. "Change has to begin at home," she said. When the joker asked how many of them will resist child marriage, most of the girls raised their hands. A few boys too joined in.



Girls reacting to a situation in the play

The structure of the play was such that it dramatically brought alive everyday situations in many families. Some of the characters were deliberately drawn in stark contrast so as to problematize the oppression. The strong characterisation helped in evoking reactions from the audience who also in some instances recognized and empathised with both characters and situations. In the second part, where the interventions begin, the joker asked for re-enactment of certain scenes and invited the spectators to actively respond to them by taking up different roles. While the play itself did not provide a closure, this half of the play enabled spectators to think critically and articulate opinions, challenge prevalent social norms, offer possible solutions, and declare their intent to social action. It is apparent that after the play is constructed and performed, the discussion and dialogue results in deconstructing it. Mamani Halder, during our discussion with theatre teams, in a coherent exposition of Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientization*¹⁹, explained:

¹⁹ Freire used a Portuguese term, *conscientização*, to describe "the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action." <http://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>. Accessed on April 15, 2018.

The purpose of forum theatre is to provoke people into thinking. Every person has the capacity to think and come up with solutions. We only provide a space for them to speak their minds. If you impose something on people, change will not happen. Jana Sanskriti is not into solving people's problems, people have to solve their own problems.

The responses from the students go on to show that empirical and normative expectations of social norms are being challenged. This way, existing social norms come to be questioned. This could perhaps be the beginning of a reversal of the social norm. Invitation to the audience to play the role of the son/brother was in addition to Boal's approach where they are only invited to take on role-play of the oppressed protagonist. JS believes that in some cases even the 'antagonist' is a victim of circumstances and social pressures. Providing such opportunities to role-play also leads to critical thinking among the spectators. Augusto Boal had once described theatre of the oppressed as a 'rehearsal for revolution' and others have called the spectating as a 'rehearsal for reality'.²⁰ This was visible in the way many of the girl students came forward to take on positions of resistance in re-enacting scenes of oppression. Boal had referred to such re-enactments as 'image of the ideal' as against the images of oppression that preceded the original rendering of the play.²¹ These minor acts of rebellion were, of course, in role-play and in the comfort of the company of their friends and classmates. One can only guess to what extent these will serve as a rehearsal to the actual positions they would end up taking when faced with real-life oppressive situations at home.

Dialogic Performance and Interrogating Oppression

While the school provided for a controlled situation where the audience was more or less homogenous, the performance in the village, described previously, provided for an uncontrolled situation where there was a heterogeneous audience. The research team noticed that the joker for the performance in Baddimod village required more experience. He was not able to draw in as many audiences into the play as one would have expected. However, Sanjoy Ganguly, who took on the role of the Joker during the school performance was able to bring out the best from the students. The performance in the school was able to problematise the dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed, presenting it as a more complex relationship. Sanjoy Ganguly's experience also seemed to help in moving away from demonising a character in the play (the parents, for example), and humanising them (on the premise that they too are victims of certain embedded social systems). For the social norms to change, it is important that such complexities are addressed by the Joker and the audiences pushed into thinking about the root causes and contextualising the situations in which such norms existed. As Ganguly spelt out:

²⁰ Sanjoy Ganguly likes to call it a 'rehearsal for the total revolution', both internally, in terms of individuals' intellectual growth and critical thinking on issues, and externally, in terms of actually overthrowing oppressive social relations. He insists that the former must precede the latter. Interview by Robert Klement, *From Boal to Jana Sanskriti*, 2017, p.87.

²¹ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

The Joker moderates the play; creates dialogue about the relevance of the play to the reality of their lives; invites people to come forward and assume the characters, do role play. Structurally, it's not possible for one of the performers to play that role, so we need a neutral person to play that role. The Joker problematizes.... Observes the spectators closely and helps in making them spectators. The Joker has to listen to the interaction closely and take it to a deeper level.²²

The two performances, located in two different contexts, also provided insights into the way audiences tend to react to situations. While a couple of parents from the audience were able to take on the roles in the Baddimod village, students in the school had to role-play parents too. This way, the team was also able to witness the responses when different people become spectators. Another important learning that emerges from our observations of these two performances is that social change that is often reduced to individual, behavioural terms by development agencies has a clear collective, communal dimension. This comes out starkly from the way in which these theatrical events are experienced by the audience, responding both at an individual level and as a member of a community. Jane Plastow, in her work on theatre for development in Africa, pointedly articulates this critical aspect:

What I think these experiences show is that dialogic performance work has at its heart an engagement with people that promotes a heightened awareness in participants of their rights and thoughts, emotionally and intellectually. This, I would argue is the essential precursor to challenging individuals and societies to make meaningful change. If we do not value the self-reflected and considered interaction between individual and collective humanity, there will always be room for manipulative and not-interrogated oppression.²³

Our discussion with the gram panchayat supervisors of JS gave us an understanding of the community-level mobilization and research that goes into the preparation for a play and the follow-up activities that spur actions on the part of the more engaged members of the community. Gopal Chandra Kapat, supervisor for the Dakshin Raypur GP, who covers about 40 hamlets in the panchayat, explained:

We go and survey the place where we want to do the play. We meet the villagers and introduce ourselves, ask them for a convenient time for staging the play. Sometimes we need to get authorization from the Block President, BDO, or GP Pradhan. If they are new to our work, we also do a demo show and screen a video of a previous performance. If we choose a school for a play, we have to make sure the headmaster is cooperative and

²²Interview, February 23, 2018.

²³ Jane Plastow, "Embodiment, Intellect, and Emotion: Thinking about Possible Impacts of Theatre for Development in Three Projects in Africa," in Alex Flynn and Jonas Tinius (eds), *Anthropology, Theatre, and Development: the transformative potential of performance*, 2015, p.123.

that they have no objection. We follow up after the play by interacting with all those who made interventions as spectators.²⁴

In our discussion with the six theatre teams of JS, many women have pointed out that plays are often workshopped, using experiences from real life to construct the script, underlining the participatory communication processes involved in the production of plays.

Often it is the real stories in the villages that get into the plays. For example, an incident of trafficking in Gangadharpur village developed into a play. Similarly, a woman who rescued a girl also said it would get into the play. We bring the incidents and events that we or our neighbours have experienced and workshop it into a script. Also, we hear things during performances – for example, an elderly audience member asked why their issues are not being represented. We also consult the Core Team of JS for their inputs to develop the play further.²⁵

To a question about whether the ‘forum’ situation only allows the more articulate and relatively better off people to speak up, Aloka Bera, who is also an enthusiastic, amateur poet pointed out:

It is the more oppressed who speak out more. They are already so embedded in the oppression that they eagerly respond to our triggers.²⁶

However, the theatre activists of Jana Sanskriti are acutely aware that critical reflection and action, in Freire’s terms, must go together if oppressive social realities must be altered. Unlike regular theatre performances, in forum theatre, fresh work begins as the curtain (metaphorical, in the case of theatre of the oppressed) falls on a performance. The actors/activists make a note of the names of those who made interventions during the play and follow up with them later, through meetings held in the village. Jana Sanskriti has formed community-level groups such as the Responsible Citizens’ Committees (RCC), which would include some of the spectators, mothers, NGOs, SHGs, and social workers. There are monthly meetings of RCCs and Mothers Forums where issues are deliberated more intensely and follow-up actions closely monitored. The theatre teams, as they shared with our research team, do a lot more than theatre – they play the roles of social worker, researcher, mobilizer, facilitator, and community monitor. Many members of the theatre teams end up being members of committees being set up by the gram panchayat and other local bodies.

On their part, the local government officials seem to be appreciative of the role played by this form of theatre work being done by Jana Sanskriti. Mohd. Abdur Rezzak, the President of the Patharpratima Block clearly saw JS, with its theatre of the oppressed, as filling a gap in a context

²⁴ Focus Group Discussion with GP Supervisors, Digambarpur, February 21, 2018.

²⁵ Chandana Halder, FGD with theatre teams, February 23, 2018.

²⁶ FGD with JS theatre teams, February 23, 2018.

where rural people's lives are defined by the absence of electricity, infrastructure, and communication resources. JS, he said, "is using drama to highlight oppression, exploitation, and making people think about these problems."²⁷ In fact, the Pradhan of Digambarpur GP, Rabindranath Bera had a critical perspective on mainstream media when he told us that theatre can effectively counter the ill-effects of the media.

One of the women we met during a meeting of the Responsible Citizens' Committee (RCC) in Gangadharpur gram panchayat²⁸ placed the whole thing in context when she said:

One drama performance cannot change norms, people can visualize their problems and think. Audience start a discussion, they empathize with a situation; the drama can make them imagine what they would do in real life situations. Our work doesn't stop with the play; we follow up with people who have opinions and are trying to elicit solutions from the community itself.

Transforming Lives: Personal and the Social

Changing Social Norms

At a micro-level, there is a perception that attitudes and behaviour towards the girl child in the villages have visibly changed. During our discussion with about 10 adolescent girls at Muktamancha, Digambarpur²⁹, many of them asserted that there is much reduced discrimination against girls ever since Jana Sanskriti started spreading awareness and motivating people to refrain from performing child marriages. Priya Mondal, who is currently doing her final year BA and actively involved in JS, thinks that her own example demonstrates the shift in attitudes in the community:

The most significant change I can see is that boys and girls are increasingly being treated as equal. People's attitudes have changed, with many villagers stopping the practice of child marriage and encouraging girls to not only go to school, but also get involved in activities like sports and theatre, which were taboo earlier. Now girls are allowed to make a choice, to make their decisions. Discrimination has certainly reduced.

Other girls in the discussion claimed that a greater number of their peers are now getting married late, without their parents getting taunted for it by nosy neighbours. Another indication of

²⁷ Interview, February 22, 2018.

²⁸ February 24, 2018.

²⁹ FGD with adolescent girls, February 21, 2018.

changing social norms could be sensed from an incident narrated by one of the theatre team members. At the end of a play that they performed in a village, one couple approached them and told them that they had refused to pay dowry for their daughter's marriage. The groom's family had walked out in a huff, but returned later agreeing to their terms.

That some of the girls came to our meeting after taking part in a football match nearby seems to stand testimony to the change that is being alluded here. Seventeen-year old Tahera Khatoon, one of these football players, spoke about how she had initially faced resistance at home to her playing, but gradually as her academic performance improved alongside her sporting achievements, her parents had yielded. Of course, that this change is neither evenly spread nor is it transformative became obvious when we heard the story of Nibedita Jana, a class 10 student, who broke into tears sharing how her aunt and uncle (with whom she stays) went along with her tuition master to prevent her from participation in Jana Sanskriti activities as it disrupts her studies.

Transformation of the Self

It is important to highlight the personal transformations that individuals associated with the JS work have themselves undergone in the process of bringing about social change. Women members of the theatre teams of JS shared with us their own stories of empowerment.³⁰ One woman, who suffered torture at the hands of her in-laws, says:

We have thrown out our veils. I used to be a shy woman, but after joining JS I have become confident. I was abandoned by my husband, but I struggled hard to have my financial independence. I am now invited by the government to stage plays and be on committees. Earlier, people used to taunt me about taking part in plays and attending meetings, but now I travel by trains, and organize rallies and processions.



Members of the Mothers' Forum at Gangadharpur GP

³⁰ FGD with theatre teams, February 23, 2018.

To our question on how they manage to overcome patriarchal family attitudes and get involved in activism, one of the women at the RCC meeting in Gangadharpur GP said they are able to convince their families that they are working for a good cause. She said she always 'takes permission' from her husband to go out for meetings and performances. It was apparent that positive changes in gender relations are not always an outcome of radical and revolutionary acts, but a product of, often invisible and slow, processes of complex negotiations by women to earn their independence and freedom and to be able to participate in the public sphere.

Aloka Bera started small in JS, but now grew into playing supervisory roles and writes poetry for reciting which she has earned a well-deserved reputation. Niroda Jana shared her experience working for Jana Sanskriti:

In other organisations, people may require skills to enter, but in JS many of us entered without any skills. We picked up the skills and JS helped us grow. Earlier we used to be confined to home, but now we are in all kinds of social spaces and speak up without fear.

One woman at the RCC meeting in Gangadharpur GP asserted firmly, "Now that we have experienced freedom and life outside the home, we are not going to let anyone shut us in again."

The Big Picture

At a macro-level, the President of the Patharpratima Block, Mohd. Abdur Rezzak claimed that the incidence of child marriage in the Block has come down from about 40% to about 10%. Although he did not mention any timeframe within which this decline has been registered, he emphasized the contribution of Jana Sanskriti to this change. As he put it, "the Child Protection Committee cannot be active everywhere, JS is helping monitor the early marriage situation."³¹ It may be noted here that the Child Protection Committees (CPCs) constituted in West Bengal at the village and Block level under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme were expected, among other things, to build community awareness on child rights, monitor violation of child rights, and promote behaviour change in families.³² The work of JS in addressing the issue of child marriage is thus being seen as a vital supplement to institutional mechanisms. The Block President, in fact, went on to report to us that enrolment of girls in schools in the Block has gone up, with 18 out of 19 children who graduated high school recently from a particular school being girls.

This view is reinforced by the Pradhan of Digambarpur GP, Rabindranath Bera. According to him, child marriage was the social norm even five years ago. He suggested that there is almost no

³¹ Interview, February 22, 2018.

³² "Guidelines for the Formation and Strengthening of Child Protection Committees in West Bengal," (Undated). Department of Women and Child Development & Social Welfare, Government of West Bengal, and UNICEF. http://malda.gov.in/Acts,Orders%20&%20Circulars%20related%20to%20ICPS%20,%20Child%20Protection%20&%20Social%20Welfare/VLCPC_Book_14.pdf. Accessed on April 16, 2018.

incidence now of child marriage in the area, a claim that we were unable to validate. The field supervisors of Jana Sanskriti have recorded that about 30% of all marriages held in Digambarpur GP in a four-month period last year were of boys and girls who were below the legal age of marriage. In Digambarpur GP, the Pradhan says, JS supplements the work of government agencies in preventing child marriage. He also attributes it to the general empowerment of women, because of which many more women are visible in such things as monitoring employment guarantees under the MGNREGA scheme and participating in budget-making.

It is this important relationship of JS with the state that we discuss next.

Forging Critical Synergies with the State

Jana Sanskriti is a non-governmental organisation, albeit an atypical one, that uses theatre at the centre of its activity. As with many NGOs in the country that perform various roles -- developmental, mobilizational, and political -- JS has been striving for a delicate balance of these roles over its three decades of experience of working with marginalized communities at the grassroots in the South 24 Parganas district (and, more recently in Purulia).³³ This often calls for carving out a meaningful relationship with the state, avoiding getting coopted, while at the same time, fully conscious of the state's welfare mandate, negotiating a constructive engagement with it. There are several instances of such engagement in India resulting in more humane state policies, specifically, on such areas as health, environment, and education, and, more generally, on development practice.



The Pradhan of Digambarpur Block with the research team

³³ See Anil Bhat, "Voluntary Action in India -- Role, Trends and Challenges," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, Issue No. 16, 22 Apr, 1995.

At the block and GP level, our research team met with the Sabhapati (President) of Patharpratima Block and the Pradhan of Digambarpur GP in the same Block. During our in-depth interviews with them, they have testified about their long relationship with JS, and the partnership of JS in almost all the important social welfare activities in the Block. The field activists of JS work continuously with various government agencies and functionaries in the Block -- 29 Government Schools, seven Gram Panchayats, the Block Development Office, the Sabhapati, the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), and with two Police Stations (Dhola Hat and Patharpratima).

Creating New Structures

In order to build a good relationship between communities and the local government, JS participates or organizes regular meetings and discussions with various state representatives. In the past one year, several meetings were conducted and many activities were taken up jointly by communities and government authorities. At the community level, Responsible Citizens Committees and Mother Forums have been formed by JS to address child marriage and human trafficking in the project area. These groups include government officials like the Pradhan (In charge GP office), Sabhapati, MLA, BDO, SDO, Police, Child Line Officials, PHC Officials (ANM and ASHA workers), and ICDS workers working closely with JS field workers.

During our visit we observed one convergent multi-stakeholder '4th Saturday meeting' (a monthly meeting held by GPs with various stakeholders like ASHAs, AWWs, ICDS workers to review and monitor maternal and child health indicators in the GP). The meeting, chaired by an elected member of the GP, includes JS workers who are there on invitation.

Partnering for Development

Apart from testifying about their active involvement, all of them also commended about JS's unique approach -- addressing the root causes of issues, rights-based strategy -- using the methodology of Theatre of the Oppressed. As stated by the Block President, Mohd. Abdur Rezzak- "they are rights-based unlike other NGOs; there are many government schemes for girl children, but JS goes to the bottom of these problems". The Pradhan of Digambarpur GP, Rabindranath Bera also stated, "Other NGOs focus on their own infrastructure, while JS works with the people, for their transformation, making people aware...they use drama as a tool for change". Sharing his 15 years of experience of collaborating with JS, Bera also feels that they work towards common objectives, on issues like social security, women's rights, education, children, and cultural development. "JS is a partner in all the development activities of the GP. JS has close relationship with the people of the GP."

The government functionaries we met appreciated the wide and holistic involvement of JS in various social change activities, contributing to both social and behavioural changes, from getting pucca roads, electricity, functioning of the hospital, to promoting new norms through prevention of alcoholism, girls' education, and prevention of child marriage. As one Upa Pradhan of Srinarayanpur-Purnachandrapur GP stated, "We started working with JS since 1998. All the changes we see today is because of this partnership. We are grateful to JS for their help. They are always present in meetings, we get feedback and solutions from them." He seemed quite upbeat about development in the region, mentioning improvements in education ('several college-educated young people in every *para*'), health, and sanitation ('the GP declared as open defecation-free in 2016'). In all these developments, they have no doubt that the use of theatre of the oppressed or forum theatre has been very effective. However, they also suggest that while JS has played a vital role in mobilizing and sensitizing the communities to various issues and provoking them to action, various government welfare schemes have created the enabling environment, complementing and amplifying the efforts of JS.

Working on the Frontlines

Furthermore, at the grassroots level, we could observe critical synergies between JS and the government frontline workers (FLWs). Many women who work as functionaries of some government programmes are also engaged with JS, and those who have worked with JS as theatre activists are now serving as ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists). It is evident from our interaction with members of the Mother Forums and those of the recently formed RCCs that there is a well-functioning network of government and JS workers in the community, often with seamless overlapping of roles and functions. One woman at the MF/RCC meeting in Gangadharpur GP said, "Ananda Dhara members are also being invited into the MFs. Many are members of upa sanghas; inducted upa sangha leaders into JS MFs."³⁴



JS is an active participant at the meetings of the Asha Workers held every fourth Saturday

³⁴ The National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) takes on the avatar of Anandadhara in the state of West Bengal. Its agenda is to mobilize rural poor and vulnerable people into self-managed federated institutions and support them for livelihood collectives. See <https://wb.gov.in/portal/web/guest/anandadhara>. Accessed on April 20, 2018.

Another important aspect of JS's relationship with the government was revealed by Mohd. Abdur Rezzak, the Block Sabhapati. According to him, the government in West Bengal used to undermine the role of NGOs, but now the government-NGO relationship is getting strengthened. JS's interventions are helping to bridge the gap.³⁵

The Upa Pradhan of Srinarayanpur-Purnachandrapur GP told us during the 4th Saturday meeting that many of the positive changes that can be seen in the area today can be attributed to a great extent to this partnership. He cited the example of how JS was at the forefront of a people's movement to activate the ICDS centres, buildings for which could not be completed because of land problems or shortage of funds. The Pratichi Child Report of 2015 on the state of ICDS in West Bengal and Bihar pointed out 'serious deficiencies' in the work of the ICDS centres, with one-third of them in West Bengal without their own buildings and 80% of them without toilets.³⁶ Out of 24 ICDS centres, 21 now have proper infrastructure due to JS's intervention. There is reduction in malnutrition cases from 70 to 15 in the last 10 years at Srinarayanpur-Purnachandrapur GP. After the repeated staging of a relevant play by JS, ICDS centres have become more active. ICDS staff initially used to treat JS as their enemy, but now they cooperate and collaborate with them.

Government representatives have also been reacting with alacrity to some of the innovative ideas that came from Jana Sanskriti to address major social problems, including child marriage. The Pradhan of Digambarpur GP, Bera shared with us his eagerness to implement the maintenance of a marriage register at the GP level as suggested by JS for better community monitoring of child marriage. A further illustration of the synergy between the government and JS is that the Pradhan had the so-called Kanyashree Brigade (Girl child education govt. scheme) also work as informers on child marriages and contribute to the data being maintained by JS.³⁷

Another area of JS's partnership with the government is in the health sector. In Srinarayanpur-Purnachandrapur GP, there is now 100% institutional deliveries and improvement in immunisation. A government hospital was in bad shape, and JS's intervention helped improve the hospital and make it among the best in the region. When the government hospital was in bad

³⁵ It may have something to do with Communist Party rule in the State for over three decades, during which ideological as well as strategic factors prevented active civil society involvement in the development sector. This, however, is beyond the purview of this report.

³⁶ *The Pratichi Child Report II: ICDS in West Bengal and Bihar*, Pratichi Institute, Kolkata and Asian Development Research Institute, Patna, 2015. <http://pratichi.org/sites/default/files/Pratichi%20Child%20Report%20II.pdf>. Accessed on April 20, 2018.

³⁷ The Kanyashree Prakalpa in West Bengal is a government programme that seeks to improve the status and well-being of girls, especially those belonging to socio-economically disadvantaged families, by incentivising continuation of schooling by girl children and disincentivising early marriage. The programme operates through conditional cash transfers (Rs.750 per year per child as scholarship and Rs.25000 as a one-time grant at the age of 18) and institutional mechanisms for promoting behaviour change at the community level. See https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_4.0/kp_objectives.php. Accessed on April 20, 2018.

shape, people were forced to go to private hospitals. JS activists helped clean up the hospital and conducted rallies to get power connection to the hospital.

Innovative Interventions for Change

With several years of experience of working with the community, Jana Sanskriti has come up with some innovative ways to effectively monitor and prevent child marriage and trafficking, and promote education of girls. These innovations work in tandem with various government schemes and programmes that create an enabling environment and a supporting system. Some of these structures and networks set up by JS are composed of community members -- parents, youths/adolescents, school teachers, existing community level groups, government functionaries, and JS activists.

For example, the JS supervisors regularly meet the teachers of selected schools and discuss about the various social issues like child marriage, trafficking, dropouts, and domestic violence. Parents and RCC members often participate in such meetings. Teachers play an important role in stopping cases of child marriage and trafficking.

Responsible Citizens Committees (RCC)

Along with the 'spectators', i.e. those who participate in the plays by making interventions, JS field workers conduct *para* (hamlet) level meetings regularly, where they spot those participating actively for follow-up actions. These meetings eventually took on an institutional form as Responsible Citizens Committees (RCCs), an innovative civic engagement structure created by Jana Sanskriti. In the meetings of RCC, JS workers disseminate information related to child marriage, gender discrimination, child trafficking, school dropout rates, domestic violence, and effects of alcoholism. They also discuss the laws on Child Marriage Prevention Act of 2006, its application, and support services offered by the government.



The research team in a focus group discussion with RCC and Mothers' Forum members

In the last six months of the first year of the project, 37 RCCs, comprising of 10-15 members in each group, have been formed in seven GPs, and the process is continuing.³⁸

Mothers' Forums (MF)

JS activists also conduct monthly meetings with the Mothers' Forums in the project area. These MFs meet at least twice in a month. One of the two meetings is conducted by JS workers where they sensitize the mothers to the harmful effects of child marriage, including the negative impact it has on the reproductive health of the girl child. Some of the members of these MFs are also the part of RCCs. In the last six months of the first year of the project, JS has engaged 75 MFs in 7 GPs and the process is continuing. MFs monitor maternal and child health issues and the uptake of entitlements from government schemes.

³⁸ Responding to Gender Issues through Theatre," Progress Report -- October 2016-September 2017, Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed.

Kishori Bahini / Adolescent Girls Group

Kishori Bahini (literally, Adolescent Girls' Force) is a group of adolescent girls constituted from selected government schools and adjacent villages with an aim to give more agency to young women on issues related to the girl child. Apart from consciousness-raising work, these adolescent girls also act as community informers/monitors of child marriages in their villages. JS field activists train these groups on a regular basis through various awareness activities such as meetings, discussions, games, theatre performances, etc. Jana Sanskriti has conceptualized these groups as resulting in creation of a frontline social workers dedicated to prevention of child marriage. There are cases where girls from such adolescent groups have reported the vulnerability noticed by them among girls studying in the same school. Action was taken based on those reports.



Focus group discussion with members of the Kishori Bahini

According to Jana Sanskriti, till now in seven GPs, six Kishori Bahini, comprising of at least 10-15 girls in each group, have been formed. Along with Kishori Bahini JS is also trying to form adolescent boys' group. They are planning to use 'introspective theatre' in future to create a democratic space for discussing the problem of adolescents often not expressed because of social taboos. It is important that attention is paid to attitudes and values of boys if the intention is to usher in non-hierarchical gender relations in an atmosphere of mutual respect. This idea emerged quite dramatically during the play performed at the school (discussed above) when the Joker invited one of the boys in the audience to come into the performance space and assume the role of the passive, yet privileged son in the family. As the boy could not tolerate the sharp

discrimination to which his 'sister' is subjected and spoke up in her defence, thereby taking the first step to liberating himself from the position of the oppressor into which he has been pigeonholed. In a classic forum theatre moment, the boy started re-scripting the play.

JS has so far formed two boys' groups, comprising of at least 10-15 boys in each group, with the objective of carrying out activities similar to that of the Kishori Bahini. This process of forming boys' groups is ongoing and it is expected that their number will be increased over the next year.

Village Level Marriage Register

Jana Sanskriti's fieldworkers have designed an innovative system to track child marriages and prevent them by maintaining a database of marriages. They have started negotiating with the Gram Panchayats to maintain such registers at their offices. The simple template requires information about the names of the couple getting married, their dates of birth, village, details of parents, and the date of marriage. As there is no reliable data at present about child marriages, they hope that these marriage registers, if maintained diligently, would yield information that permits the government as well as the activists to effectively address the issues of child marriage and trafficking.

Three Gram Panchayats so far have come forward to implement the idea in their respective areas. JS is hoping for the rest of the GPs under the project area to also adopt the marriage register so that the problem could be tackled at the level of the Patharpratima Block as a whole. JS field supervisors, on their own, have already started maintaining such data GP-wise to create a systematic village level marriage database. Mohd. Abdur Rezzak, the Block President, while appreciating the idea, suggested that GPs should also maintain records of out-migration in order to track potential trafficking incidents. Jana Sanskriti has also been mobilizing various marriage-related service providers, such as priests and kazis, audio rental businesses, decorators, and barbers, to participate and cooperate in the organization of the wedding ceremony only after verifying proper certification by the GP regarding the ages of the couple.

Village Drama Clubs

With the intention of collaborating with talented folk artists, JS has started creating GP-level drama clubs. JS field activists have met with many local youth individually and encouraged them to take part in theatre activity and contribute to bringing greater awareness and critical thinking among their communities. They have so far set up drama clubs in four gram panchayats and more are in the offing.

Conclusion: Social Change and Challenges

1. Jana Sanskriti's use of forum theatre or theatre of the oppressed and the community-level mobilization work has certainly created greater critical awareness among the people in the villages of Patharpratima Block and has succeeded in motivating them to change the social norm of child marriage. However, it is important to acknowledge that the complexity of the situation on the ground suggests that JS's work is one of the significant contributory factors, favourable government schemes and programmes being the other, in tackling the problem effectively.
2. Our team's discussions with various stakeholders suggest that, at least in the GPs where JS has been active, marriage at the legal age is emerging as the new social norm. Some of the women theatre team members told us that some villagers who are desperate to perform child marriages in their families are now compelled to travel to a faraway place to do it because the community of which they are a part does not any longer condone the practice.
3. Regarding the original objective of JS of bringing about 'massive reduction in underage marriage and child trafficking in the region during the lifetime of the project', our research team was unable to find any reliable data to verify to what extent they have succeeded in doing so. We have statements on record by representatives of local government that claim a decline in incidence of child marriage, even to the extent of complete elimination in some GPs. In any case, we are tempted to conclude, that whatever contribution has been made by JS to bring about conspicuous social change could be a result of the organization's long-term engagement with the region and may not be an outcome of only the project period of the last year or so.
4. On the other objective of JS to bring about 'massively improved retention of girls in education in the region', we have not been able to ascertain any verifiable data for enrolment and dropouts in the Block. As a baseline, which is not very recent, the Human Development Report of 2009 for West Bengal shows Patharpratima Block to be in the 21st position among 29 Blocks in the district, with female literacy at about 38%. The 2011 Census, on the other hand, puts female literacy rate in the Block at a much higher, 65%. We did get oral testimonies during our research visit that the number of girls graduating high school has gone up and that girls in most villages now go to school. Government schemes like Kanyashree (discussed earlier in the report) that encourage retention of girls in schools may have also been a complementary factor.
5. Jana Sanskriti has successfully forged a productive partnership with the government, especially at the local level, to help strengthen existing systems and structures such as the ICDS centres, and to ensure that people get access to welfare entitlements. Improved infrastructure for ICDS centres in the Block are partly being attributed to the intervention of JS. Similarly, a government hospital that was non-functional was re-activated with JS's initiative and saved people from spending a fortune at private hospitals. Innovations like

the Village Marriage Register have been embraced by a few gram panchayats and others are in the process of adopting them. The marriage register idea, in particular, deserves to be scaled up to the district of South 24 Parganas, and gradually to the entire State of West Bengal.

6. There was adequate evidence during our interviews and discussions that the participatory approach to social change adopted by JS has led to personal transformations of women from marginalized backgrounds who overcame oppressive conditions at home and assumed leadership roles in the theatre teams. They have now become more confident, experience greater self-esteem, and feel empowered to question authority figures; and their increasingly public activism has gained acceptance both within the family and in the community.
7. Jana Sanskriti has managed to build a strong sense of community monitoring of child marriage and trafficking through the creation of such groups as Mothers' Forums, Responsible Citizens' Committees, and Adolescent Girls' groups (Kishori Bahini), who exercise vigilance at the village level, report on incidences of child marriages, and inculcate greater consciousness about girls' education.
8. The organization developed a close, working relationship with schools, forging good rapport with principals and teachers. Their regular engagement with the schools has also helped motivate teachers to be more involved with the issue of girl child education and child marriage. Many teachers, who would rush to their homes in the nearby towns at the end of the school day and paid scant attention to urgent social issues affecting their students, have now started taking seriously their roles as motivators and keep a keen eye on any girls staying away from school for long periods or any tell-tale signs of depression among the girls caused by domestic pressures.
9. On the issue of sustainability of various initiatives of Jana Sanskriti, we need to differentiate between *social* and *financial* sustainability. In terms of social sustainability, there is clear evidence of a grassroots social movement built up by JS through three decades of its engagement in the region. Community activists that we met seemed quite self-assured that the changes brought about by JS are now so deeply ingrained that even if there were to be no external intervention henceforth, people would sustain them through their everyday lives. The women who broke out of patriarchal norms to assume leadership roles in the theatre and community development activities were confident that with their potential realized, they would continue to be in the forefront of struggles for empowerment of women and girl children. With the intensive field level activism in the villages, JS activists have ensured that there is a steady stream of new volunteers for their theatre activities as well as for follow-up actions. However, financial sustainability could pose a challenge for JS, as fund flow has been patchy and unsteady. Many of the innovative ideas that JS has introduced into the social space of the Sunderbans area deserve to be scaled-up and intensified that require resources, both human and material.
10. People interviewed for this research and who participated in our discussions have mentioned other challenges that JS has to reckon with, some environmental and

sociological. For instance, spread of mobile phone technology in rural areas, especially for women, often seen as liberating, has spread new anxieties among parents as young boys and girls develop relationships online and offline, at times leading to disastrous consequences for naive girls who tend to get manipulated by unscrupulous traffickers. Parents, then, are eager to get their daughters married off at an early age. Although there is evidence of shift in social norms towards greater concern for girls' education and marriage at the legal age, deeply rooted value systems and patriarchal attitudes continue to offer resistance to change.

11. JS activists are finding their work in schools and with students to be tough as the general pressures for educational attainment (as can be seen from the pervasive private tuition culture) among parents and teachers, some scepticism about the value of theatre activity in education, and relatively low motivation among teachers are proving to be roadblocks. The organization is conscious of these obstacles and is striving hard to overcome them through a patient process of conscientization involving intergenerational dialogue with parents, teachers, and children.
12. Other challenges shared by JS include: inadequate infrastructure facilities for reaching villages located in difficult terrain; dealing with entrenched value system, especially in sensitive areas with predominant minority population; and, local political leadership that is sometimes reluctant to disturb internalized cultural values and social norms.



Members of the Forum Theatre teams of Jana Sanskriti at Mukta Mancha

UNESCO Chair on Community Media



Recognising the growing impact of the Community Radio phenomenon as a powerful medium of community engagement and empowerment, UNESCO has set up the first ever **Chair on Community Media** at the Department of Communication, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, India. Established for an initial period of four years in 2011, the Chair serves as a knowledge and resource centre delving into the various facets of Community Media.

The specific aims and objectives of the UNESCO Chair on Community Media are to:

- Research and document good community media practices in the country, and provide inputs based on research feedback to stakeholders on issues such as community participation, community mobilization practices, financial and social sustainability, appropriate content, participatory monitoring and evaluation;
- Establish an open access repository of media content online, which would provide key information related to licensing, policy, production of content and technology options to community-based organizations around the country;
- Build capacities of community members to operate media; provide ongoing training on community mobilization, content development, programming, and management of community media outlets in India; and,
- Engage with policy-makers and practitioners to sustain a democratic and citizen-friendly community media landscape in India