

Evaluation of Jana Sanskriti, a socio-cultural intervention in South 24 Parganas.

A Report by Centre for training and Research in Public Finance and Policy.



insight

THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Scripting the idiom of change in Sunderbans

ROOM FOR DIALOGUE According to a World Bank-CSSS study, participative theatre in South 24 Parganas has helped empower women and transform lives

Shojibendu Bhattacharya
shojibendu@crpf.org.in

KALYANPRATIMA(SUNDARBANS): A girl sits cozily on a chair and endures scrutiny typically reserved for cattle at a livestock market.

Her prospective groom's family inspects her physical traits — the length, busyness and strength of her hair, dimples in her cheeks, and if she has a lump. Manner and etiquette follow: Is she looking straight into the eyes of the bride's? She is not supposed to. The bride-hunt for an arranged marriage in which the couple often doesn't meet before they exchange their vows is part of a play by an all-women satellite team of the theatre group Jana Sanskriti at Digambarpur village in the Sunderbans. Mid way through the inspection, an actor intervenes and asks the spectators whether they are happy with the prospective bride's response. "No!" shouts a middle-aged woman.

She is asked to walk up to the stage and replace the actor playing the wannabe bride.

The act resumes but the plot changes, as the new actor lodges her protest spontaneously: "You people cannot look at me like this. Am I as thin as to be sold in the market? Am I so old, or crotch?" The audience, mostly

women from different age groups, applauds. Now, a male from the audience, a middle-aged farmer, says he would like to play the bride's role. Soon, he is seen arguing against the prevalent culture. Within minutes the play becomes anyone's game. The script-writer or the director holds no control.

The actors were housewives from farmers' families living in the difficult Sunderbans — a mass of mangrove islands where the Royal Bengal tigers, as does a clutch of superstitious.

The play's form is called Theatre of the Oppressed, which was created by Brazilian theorist Augusto Boal, and now has West Bengal's Sanjay Ganguly as its most prominent global exponent.

"At every village, a play is staged three to four times in three months. The script remains the same but the scripted part changes. The solutions the spect-actors come up with usually become more radical with every show," Ganguly said.

The participation of local women has worked wonders in three poor community development blocks in South 24 Parganas, a study conducted by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSS), and part funded by the World Bank has found. "We are living through this change. We per-

formed the play at the neighbouring village. The result: several girls refused to go through such humiliating commotion in their life. Several local girls put their feet down against dowry," said Shyamali Pramanik, a housewife, whose husband and 16-year-old daughter also participate in these theatres.

IMPACT OF THEATRE The study is co-authored by Jyotana Jalan, professor of economics at CSSS, and Karla Hoff, lead economist, research department, World Bank. It was conducted among nearly 4,000 households from 35 villages. Most socio-economic parameters in these villages were more or less equal. But villages where Jana Sanskriti's teams operate have women playing a significantly greater role in family and social lives.

Alcoholism among men and instances of domestic violence were less and more parents were looking out for educated brides for their sons.

"Evidence gathered by us shows that Jana Sanskriti's intervention has led to greater voice for the wife in household decision-making (effectively) changes in opinion over a barta (prototypical) good wife" is (helped) men and women become more vocal about protests against wrongs in the community, effected fall in actual incidents of violence at home and increase in trust in wife by the husband and (parents) wanting more educated brides for their sons," the report concluded.

According to Jana Sanskriti, 80% of the members of their satellite teams are women. The villages constitute backward regions of South 24 Parganas district that shares a border with Kolkata but has its other end merging with the Bay of Bengal. A vast stretch of the district is occupied by the Sunderbans and most of these villages fall within it. The primary occupation is agricul-



Members of Jana Sanskriti rehearse a play on women empowerment at Digambarpur, Sunderbans.

SUBHANKAR CHAKRABORTY/HT PHOTO

SPECTATORS TO PARTICIPANTS

Theatre of the Oppressed was created by Brazilian theorist Augusto Boal

Jana Sanskriti

- Founded in 1983 and led by Sanjay Ganguly, it has become a global reference point in discussing Theatre of the Oppressed.
- Has 30 satellite teams, 10 of which are all-women.
- Of the satellite teams, 23 work in Purbachalia, Kankhal and Rajshahi blocks in South 24 Parganas and 9 teams are in Pancha and Paralia blocks in Purba district — all impoverished areas.
- Jana Sanskriti's work with marginalised people has become subject of research and discussion in more than three dozen universities, including Harvard, Cornell, Chicago, Cambridge, London and Manchester and East Anglia.
- Ganguly said the spect-actors who found it difficult to defeat the oppressor on the day return home feeling uneasy and keep thinking about solutions. This mental anguish helps in turning the spect-actor into spect-activist. "Providing the audience with a make-easy solution is not our agenda. The idea is to help them deepen their understanding of the problem in the context of life's complexities," he said.

The Study

- Conducted among 4,000 households at 35 villages where Jana Sanskriti works and 10 villages where the group never worked, all in three community development blocks in the Sunderbans.
- It was conducted between 2014 and 2016 at villages where basic socio-economic factors were nearly the same.
- The study records decrease in dowry transactions and domestic violence, reduction in alcoholism among men, increased interest by parents to get educated brides for their sons, change in the concept of good wife and that women among the educated represent stress or more independent of their husbands than in villages where Jana Sanskriti never worked.
- Spurred by Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta and World Bank, Washington DC.
- Report is authored by Jyotana Jalan of CSSS and Karla Hoff (World Bank).

Link excerpts of study