ADDRESSING PATRIARCHY THROUGH FORUM THEATRE:

A PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION OF JANA SANSKRITI'S PROJECT IN PURULIA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL
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A Participatory Evaluation Report
By

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Jana Sanskriti

Jana Sanskriti, a 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. In the last thirty years, Jana Sanskriti (JS) has engaged with communities in rural West Bengal, especially in the South and North 24 Parganas districts and Purulia district, 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.

Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre is one of the important forms of 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. Theatre of the Oppressed is a set of theatre techniques developed by Boal in the 1970s. In its purest form, it is the oppressed people who make and perform the Forum Theatre. They make plays on the issues that affect them, drawing from their own real-life experiences. Forum Theatre is an empowering process and aims to conscientize the audience to become conscious of their living conditions and be able to critically analyse the problem and explore solutions collectively.

Theoretically, it can bring about both internal (individual) as well as external (structural) changes, which is what Sanjoy Ganguly, founder of Jana Sanskriti, calls a 'total revolution'. So, Forum Theatre tries to simply replay the situation of oppression prevailing in a community, and inspires the audience witnessing the "replay" to think of their own situation, reflect on their own opinions/attitudes towards the issue, express them, imagine solutions for the problem, and also rehearse them by participating in the play through role playing.

An important element of Forum Theatre is 'jokering'. The 'Joker' in Forum Theatre plays the role of a facilitator, breaking the hierarchy between actors and the audience and guiding the discussions on the issue that is being played out. It is a position that is usually handled by an experienced member of a team. According to Boal, the most important role of the Joker is that he/she "incites the audience in accordance with the theme dealt with in each play" (Boal, 1979, p.164). In the forum theatre when a particular situation of oppression is being played out, it is abruptly paused at a certain point, then the Joker intervenes and encourages the spectators to critically analyse the situation, and also to re-script and re-enact the play by assuming the role of any character in the play and put forward his or her opinion or argument or suggest possible solutions. In that way, Forum Theatre creates a highly democratic space and a communication process that is radically participatory in nature. This intervention by the Joker breaks the passivity of the audience not only during the play, but also in their real lives.

Forum Theatre, therefore, manages to mobilize the community and erects a platform for them to come together to introspect, question, and to formulate strategies to challenge oppressive systems and structures. Thus, Forum Theatre, in Boal's words, creates an opportunity for the oppressed to 'rehearse for a revolution' (Boal, 1979, p.120).

Social Change through Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre has a great potential of being used as a sustainable and powerful social change tool by the communities for themselves, because by nature this form of theatre is organic, easily reproducible with bare minimum resources and also due to its potentialities. In Forum Theatre, the spectators who come forward to play their own script during the intervention made by the Joker become 'spectactors' (Boal, 1979) or 'spectactivists' (Sanjoy Ganguly, personal interview), who are identified and documented by the theatre team for any focused community intervention later or follow ups after the theatre performance. These spectators can then form another local team and do their own theatre with their own stories, portraying their own problems, to mobilize solidarity and to drive a 'revolution' of sorts. Forum Theatre can be used to keep the spirit of democracy and critical consciousness alive in society. Sanjoy Ganguly rightly considers Forum Theatre as a 'culture of democracy' (Ganguly, 2010).

JANA SANSKRITI PROJECT IN PURULIA

The three-year project, starting from January 2016 to December 2019, was carried out by Jana Sanskriti (JS) in the Purulia district of West Bengal. In this project, JS aimed to raise awareness on patriarchy and gender discrimination, focusing particularly on abolishing child marriage and improving the retention of girls in schools in Purulia. The project, as reported by JS, was carried out in 30 high schools and in surrounding villages in the region. JS has employed forum theatre as a participatory tool to engage with the target groups. The target groups were high school students (especially girls), teachers, families, and the wider community in Purulia, mostly tribal and disadvantaged communities. The envisaged project beneficiaries were the girls and young women aged between 13-21 years in the Puncha, Manbazar 1, Manbazar 2, and Hura blocks of Purulia district.

A pilot project undertaken by JS showed how their work is positively impacting retention of girls in schools, indicating reduction in child marriage. During the nine months of the pilot, they have reached over 3000 students, more than half of them girls. According to JS, there has been a 18% reduction in incidence of child marriage. Purulia suffers from very poor human development indicators relative to other districts of West Bengal. Out of a total population of 2,927,965 - 21% are scheduled castes, 24% tribal, and almost 40% are considered socially excluded.

Stated Objectives of JS Project in Purulia

As JS embarked on this project, the following were its articulated objectives:

1. To reduce the cases of girl child marriage in the intervention areas;
2. To significantly reduce the dropping out of girl children from school;
3. To change the perspective about girl child marriage and about girl's education among the community;
4. To create an inter-generational dialogue between students and their parents;
5. To improve the self-esteem and agency of girls and women in the community;
6. To create an improved understanding of the need for challenges and changes in the patriarchal order of society;
7. To enable the community for critical reflection and analysis and community cohesion;
8. To inculcate in the community respect for indigenous cultural forms and local culture;
9. To create better links between communities and relevant government agencies.

JS's Methodology

In the districts of West Bengal, where there is high-prevalence of child marriage, every second child is married off before they reach the age of 18 (the legal age for girls to marry in India), with Purulia (54.03%) being the most severely affected (as reported by JS in their project proposal, citing a 2011 UNICEF report). JS has designed this project based on the findings of

the one-year pilot project that they had done in Purulia during 2014-15 on patriarchy and child trafficking using theater in 12 high schools and the surrounding community.

The methodology that JS has adopted in Purulia works through a process of repeated creative engagement, using relevant local cultural forms incorporated in Forum Theatre, alongside discussions which are embedded in the theatrical process through both workshopping the plays and 'foruming' them, and then supporting community-led relevant actions. The process fosters critical reflection and analytical skills, which are precursors to communities being empowered to take meaningful control of their lives.

JS aimed to apply the following three-pronged strategy to carry out the project:

1. Organise youth actors and 'initiators' to recognise early girl child marriage as a problem;
2. Create a space for intergenerational dialogue to discuss the problem; and,
3. Establish an active information and rapid action network of school children, youth, teachers, parents, local government and media to critically understand and engage with the problem.

The Evaluation

Purulia District Profile/Relevant Blocks

Purulia is a district that lies in the western most part of the state of West Bengal. It is bounded by the state of Jharkhand in the northern, western and southern part of the district and in the east it is bounded by the districts of Bardhaman, Bankura and Paschim Medinipur. The district has three Sub-divisions, namely- (a) Purulia Sadar (East) (b) Purulia Sadar (West) and (c) Raghunathpur. The district is further divided into twenty Community Development (CD) Blocks. Purulia Sadar (East) Sub–division consists of seven CD Blocks namely Bandowan, Hura, Manbazar–I, Manbazar–II, Puncha, Purulia–I and Purulia–II. Purulia Sadar (West) Sub–Division consists of another seven CD Blocks namely Arsha, Baghmundi, Balarampur, Barabazar, Jaypur, Jhalda–I and Jhalda–II. Raghunathpur Sub–division consists of six CD Blocks namely Kashipur, Neturia, Para, Raghunathpur–I, Raghunathpur–II and Santuri. In total the district has 28 urban units, out of which three are municipalities and 25 are census towns. There are 170 Gram Panchayats in the district covering 2,667 villages.

The total population of Purulia district as per 2011 Census is 29,30,115 out of which 25,56,801 (87.3%) reside in rural areas and 3,73,314 (12.7%) in urban areas. The total population of the

district has increased steadily from 1951 to 2011. The percentage of rural population has decreased from 93.3 in Census of 1951 to 87.3 in Census 2011. The sex ratio of the district in 2011 Census is 957. Total sex ratio of the district maintains a decreasing trend from 983 in 1951 Census to 947 in Census 1991, then the ratio took a reverse turn and increased from 954 to 957 in 2011 Census.

The district is currently a part of the so-called Red Corridor. The Red Corridor is the name given by the Government of India to a region that experiences considerable Naxalite–Maoist insurgency. These are also areas that suffer from the higher illiteracy, poverty and other social issues.

The State-level literacy rate has always remained higher than that of district Purulia from Census 1961 to Census 2011. This is applicable for both male and female literacy rates. The literacy rate for the State has increased from 34.5% in 1961 to 76.3% in 2011, whereas for the district it has increased from 20.5% in 1961 to 64.5% in 2011. In 1961, 34.4% males were literate as against 5.9 % of females who were literate, whereas according to Census 2011, 77.9% of males and 50.5 % of females are literate. Though there is steady increase in percentage of literacy rate among women, it does not reflect the dropout rate.

In terms of caste and community configuration, according to 2011 Census, the SC population is 567767 (19.37%) and ST population is 540652 (18.45%) in Purulia district. Out of the total district population of 29,30,115, a majority (81%) are Hindus, with Muslims about 7.8%. Only 0.3% of the population belong to Christian community and 0.1% per cent are Jains.

Purulia is a land of tribal festivals in West Bengal, celebrated with much joy and enthusiasm, Chhau is a traditional and popular folk dance, inextricably mixed with the life and culture of the people. The cultural history of the district would be incomplete without a reference to the Jhumur songs of Purulia, which are mainly on Vaishnava themes and yet retain the elements of folk music.

Agriculture is the principal occupation of the people in Purulia. About 40% of the total land area is used for agricultural purposes. The main agricultural crops are paddy, pulses, oilseeds, maize, sugarcane and vegetables. The district is also picking up on the production of tea and teak (segun) tree cultivation.

(District information is sourced from:
http://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/DCHB_A/19/1914_PART_A_DCHB_PURULIYA.pdf).
If one examines the profile of the district by blocks, there is considerable similarity as well as variation. **Puncha Block** has total population of 123,855 as per the Census 2011. Out of which 62,676 are males while 61,179 are females. According to Census 2011, total 25,262 families

are residing in Puncha Block. The Average Sex Ratio of Puncha Block is 976. The total literacy rate of Puncha Block is 68.14%. The male literacy rate is 70.63% and the female literacy rate is 47.76% in Puncha Block. The sex ratio of Puncha Block is 976.

Hura Block of Purulia district has a total population of 143,575 as per the Census 2011. Out of which 72,867 are males while 70,708 are females. In 2011 there were total 28,368 families residing in Hura Block. The total literacy rate of Hura Block is 68.79%, out of which the male literacy rate is 71.32% and the female literacy rate is 48.22%.The average sex ratio of Hura Block is 970.

Manbazar-I Block of Purulia district has a total population of 154,071 as per the Census 2011. Out of which 78,039 are males while 76,032 are females. In 2011 there were total 31,939 families residing in Manbazar - I Block. The total literacy rate of Manbazar - I is 63.78%, out of which male literacy rate is 67.71% and the female literacy rate is 43.16% in Manbazar - I. The Average Sex Ratio of Manbazar - I Block is 974.

Manbazar - II Block of Purulia district has a total population of 97,164 as per the Census 2011. Out of which 48,943 are males while 48,221 are females. In 2011 there were total 20,133 families residing in Manbazar - II Block. The total literacy rate of Manbazar - II Block is 60.27%. The male literacy rate is 65.38% and the female literacy rate is 40.29%. The Average Sex Ratio of Manbazar - II Block is 985.

 (Block information is sourced from: https://www.censusindia.co.in/subdistricts/blocks-puruliya-district-west-bengal-340)

Evaluation Methodology

The research team, consisting of three professors of communication from University of Hyderabad, including one who occupies the UNESCO Chair on Community Media, and a PhD research scholar, undertook a four-day visit in September 2019 to Purulia district of West Bengal, mainly in Puncha and Hura Blocks, to conduct a qualitative, participatory evaluation of the project. Extensive discussions with the ground level workers of JS helped us to identify key informants for interviews, sample important sites and events for observations, and choose critical groups for conducting focus group discussions.

The team conducted **in-depth interviews** with:
- the founder of Jana Sanskriti, Sanjoy Ganguly;
- Headmaster of Tatari-Kendadi Higher Secondary School of Puncha Block
- ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) of a health sub-center at Manpur Village, Puncha Block

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with:
- JS's local theatre teams of Purulia
- JS's supervisors who manage/coordinate the theatre teams and theatre shows and facilitate follow up engagements with communities.
- Drama club of a school Tatari-Kendadi Higher Secondary School, Puncha Block
- Residents of Lagendanga village in Puncha Block (older and younger men and women)

The number of people reached through these FGDs was a little over a 100, of whom nearly 60% were women.

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

- Two forum theatre shows - *Kalank* (Stigma) in Tatari-Kendadi Higher Secondary School, Puncha Block, and *Shonar Meye* (Golden Girl) in Manpur Village, Puncha Block
- One community level meeting, with a mix of men, women, adolescent girls and boys and RCC (Responsible Citizens' Committee, a community level group formed by JS) at Gurda village under Hura Block.

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

Conceptually, the evaluation team mapped the issue of Jana Sanskriti bringing about social change through forum theatre in terms of 'structure' and 'agency', with the former referring to institutional frameworks, socioeconomic inequalities, and state policies, while the latter to individual and community actions. This understanding, gained through background reading and literature review, led the team to formulate certain key research questions as follows:

Structure	Agency	Research Issues/questions
1. Patriarchy/ gender norms	Getting girl married early Girls dropping out of school Boys dropping out and migrating for work Mixed gender friendships, love affairs, elopement Inter-caste marriages	State focusing on symptoms by financial incentives. Does it address deeper structural factors? Does Rupashree even reinforce existing social norms rather than challenge them?
2. Socio-economic inequalities – class, caste		JS trying to go beyond symptoms and address deeper issues of patriarchal norms. To what extent are they successful?

3. Globalization, liberalization		Does the premise of patriarchal norms leading to early marriages and girl child dropouts still hold? How wide is the trend of boys dropping out and girls staying in?
4. State policies/schemes		Aspirational things – the city, media exposure, mobile/smart phones, motorcycles; notions of masculinity; internalization and normalization of violence
		Class hierarchies, identities (religion, caste, tribal) influencing agency and the extent to which structural factors impinge on their decision-making – middle class, lower class/caste

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.

Evaluation Objectives

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of the JS campaign using forum theatre to address some of the specific manifestations of patriarchy in Purulia district, such as child marriage and girl child dropouts in school.
2. To analyse the method adopted by and the content of the plays created by JS for its intervention;
3. To assess the participatory character of the JS initiative using forum theatre to bring about change in the status of girl child in Purulia district;

Evaluation Questions

A. What manifestations of patriarchy has JS identified as significant in the district?
B. How did Jana Sanskriti engage with local communities in the district in order to understand the consequences of patriarchy?
C. In what ways does Jana Sanskriti incorporate local understandings of patriarchy and local narratives of lived experiences into scripting of its plays? How do the content of the plays used in forum theatre interventions of JS depict the prevalent gender roles and patriarchal practices?
D. How are existing social norms challenged in the process of forum theatre and debate and dialogue enabled around the key issues?
E. What perceptible changes have come about in the incidence of child marriages and dropouts of girl children from school following the JS campaign?
F. To what extent have the changes in specific practices (mentioned above) also resulted in broader transformation in attitudes towards women and the girl child?

Findings

Child Marriage in Purulia through the lens of Jana Sanskriti

When JS started their intervention, their focus was on the issue of child marriage and retention of girl children in schools was their goal. In the process of engaging with various stakeholders on the issue, different factors contributing to the issue were unravelled. JS activists came upon a surprising trend in school dropouts, as more boys than girls were dropping out of schools. This trend was also confirmed by the headmaster of the Tatari-Kendadi Higher Secondary School, Puncha Block where we have visited and witnessed the performance of a forum theatre play, followed by a group discussion with students of drama club of the school formed by JS.

The government scheme called *Kanyashree*, where the state government gives an annual incentive of Rs. 750 to the girls in the age group of 13 to 18 years (studying in Class VIII equivalent or above every year if they continue their education and provided they are unmarried at the time) and an amount of Rs. 25000 when the girl attains the age of 18 years, provided she is engaged in an academic or occupational pursuit and was unmarried (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/). The scheme is contributing to more families retaining their girl children in school, whereas there is no such scheme for boys.

In an in-depth interview, an ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) of a health sub-centre told us that there are instances where the girls get married, but they continue to go to school by hiding their marital status in order to continue to avail the scheme. On the other hand, the boys feel pressured to provide for the family and lack of jobs in the village and the neighbourhood leads

them to migrate to other States for small jobs like in Gujarat (Zardozi work), Maharashtra (embroidery work), and as far as Tamil Nadu (T-shirt printing) and Kerala.

The boys are perhaps burdened by the patriarchal social norm of the men in the family being the providers. So instead of being seen as a burden to the family by going to school, they drop out and try to contribute to the family income. This is clearly a manifestation of deeply entrenched notions of masculinity and gendered expectations of boys and girls. When they come back with some money they have earned, they flaunt their recently acquired smartphones and motorcycles, and try to woo young girls into relationships. Although we have no concrete evidence of the extent of this phenomenon, we were told by many community members in Purulia district that elopement of under-age boys and girls, sometimes in inter-caste relationships, is quite widespread. This adds a layer of complexity to the understanding of the school dropout issue by JS and its field-level activists. While state intervention through the financial incentive may be addressing the problem symptomatically, JS is now compelled to take a wider view by putting patriarchy itself under the lens. Their understanding of patriarchy evolved through the process of their engagement with the community, and the girls and the boys in the discussions and various activities initiated through forum theatre.

Staging Reality: the content of the plays

The local theatre team in Purulia has been performing mostly *Sonar Meye* (Golden Girl), which was made by the actors and activists of the central team during the early days of JS. Interestingly, some of the teams in Purulia have developed their own plays based on the local context. For example, *Kalank* (Stigma) is a play that can be said to be a variant of *Sonar Meye*, with focus on elopement, an issue that seems to be animating some of the communities in Purulia.

As the plays cannot be too long and must be scripted to generate interest as well as stimulate new thinking, JS follows a storyline that has emotions as well as scenes with which people can identify easily. The central issue of the play is is foregrounded and the possible consequences highlighted on the basis of day-to-day practices prevalent in the community. Based on research and interaction with the community, the actors present many scenarios, which they call as images, e.g. (i) the mother does not have much say in matters related to the family, (ii) girls treated differently at home by parents, (iii) poverty playing a major role, (iv) girls giving up their studies in spite of having aspirations to work, (v) pressure by mother herself on daughter to adjust in the family, (vi) consequences of early marriage – taken from local cases (vii) reasons for elopement – through interviews. Also, when these plays are scripted with involvement of local actors, they share how things work in their respective communities. The content gets enriched with local flavour when spectators are invited to engage in role-play. Such participatory methods help generate reflexive thinking among community members about their own practices – a mirror to reality as it exists and its possible consequences.

Kalank, the relatively new play of JS, whose performance we were able to witness in a local school, is about a young girl who elopes with a boy to get married, resulting in the family getting stigmatized by the rest of the village. The family starts placing restrictions on their younger daughter and plan to get her married off to the same boy with whom they wanted to get the older one married. Despite the girl's protests that she wants to continue to study, the parents, especially the father, insists that they cannot risk another elopement in the family. The mother makes some feeble noises about letting the daughter study. A 'viewing' ceremony is arranged for her with the boy's family demanding dowry, including jewellery, cash, gold, and wedding expenditure. In a poignant scene, the father is shown bent with his face down, suggesting he is too burdened. Meanwhile, the play depicts the sad life of the elder daughter in her in-laws' house. She is struggling to continue her studies while trying to balance their demands to do housework and performing other duties expected of a daughter-in-law. With the husband also not supporting her, arguments between them leads to domestic violence. The play is frozen there and the audience is invited to start the forum.

During the forum discussions, it emerged that many families tend to arrange early marriages for their girl children because of the mortal fear of their daughters being lured into relationships, resulting in elopement. The consequent dread of the stigma that would bring to bear on the family compels them to deprive their girl children of the opportunity to complete their schooling and realise their full potential. This new play is an outcome of the process of play-making, that JS describes, in which members of the community contribute to scripting the play, and, thereby, to the overall narrative.

A Forum on Stigma: Problematizing Patriarchy

In the focus group discussion we had with adolescent girls and boys (who are also members of the newly formed drama club in the school) in Tatari-Kendadi Higher Secondary School in Puncha Block, the intersection of old and new norms was visible, albeit somewhat indistinctly. This could be understood from the incoherent articulations of the young girls and boys during our discussion.

This FGD was conducted right after the performance of a Forum Theatre (FT) play called *Kalank* (Stigma) made by the local FT team of JS that depicted a more recent social reality of elopement and the consequent shame that it brought upon the girls' parents. Many of the girls in the group felt that the play depicted reality quite accurately, but they could not recall any specific incidence of elopement, except for one girl who spoke about an elopement case in her uncle's family. Most of the children insisted that boys and girls are treated equally at home. But, when asked what issues should be taken up for future plays, some of them mentioned 'equal treatment of girls and boys by parents'. When asked how many of them want to go for higher studies, all of them raised their hands, and all of them said they want to get married only after the age of 18 years. Looking bright and cheerful, these girls insisted that they would have parental support for them to realise their hopes. While the discussion did not reveal any normative pressure on girls for marrying young, we were left wondering whether they think these things do happen in the community, but not with them and in their families. Was this a sign of transition of a social norm? A transformation?

There were only four or five boys who took part in the discussion as against 20-25 girls. One boy who was persuaded to give his opinion, with some difficulty, insisted that there was not anything wrong with elopement, especially if the boy and girl fell in love. When asked how he would take care of the girl, he said he would take up a job and provide for the girl. The boy's insistence about love and elopement elicited constant giggles and laughter from the girls in the audience, although it was not clear if they approved of his comments. But the stubborn insistence of this young high school boy that he will 'provide' for the girl with whom he could elope is, perhaps, another sample of the norms of masculinity that were evident from the phenomenon of boy-child dropouts from school.

Continuities and Ruptures in Patriarchy: A View from the Community

During another group discussion conducted in a village called Gurda in Hura block in the house of a school teacher, with a mixed group of men and women (most of them members of Self-Help Groups), young girls and boys (school and college going), the prevalence of child marriage and the complex factors responsible for it were revealed. This was a mixed caste village. All of them agreed that elopement is indeed a major problem. They said boys and girls seem to fall in love and elope. It would not be a problem, they said, if the boy is from a 'good family' (same community?) and is 'settled'. They said they would feel the stigma if the girl returns after some time for a variety of reasons, including abandonment, marriage breaking up, or ill-treatment by the boy and his family. They said the boys' families feel less of a shame when their boy runs away with a girl.

When we asked why girls are married off at an early age, some of these women said although they do not know of many families where elopements have actually happened in their village, they have heard of its incidence elsewhere. So this fear that their girls could elope with some 'good-for-nothing guy' seem to drive them into marrying off their girls at an early age. When we asked why the 70 SHG women (in the seven groups they mentioned) cannot come together and address this problem, the women said there were too many divisions among them for them to be able to take a united position on the issue. Caste and community divisions

could be one reason, but other reasons such as one woman's boy eloping with another woman's girl do not permit them to come together.

That many agencies are actively working to prevent child marriage and contributing to shifting the social norm was clear from our interviews with two ANMs of Manpur Village, Pura Block. The two ANMs, Mamata Mahato and Chhaya Rani Mahato told us the incidence of child marriage, from what they could observe during their visits to villages, has been declining in the area. The main reason they would discourage child marriages, as part of their professional duties, was because the girls were not physically ready for it. They observed that there were many miscarriages and some still-births among under-age mothers. Regarding the use of theatre for social change, they felt that theatre alone cannot bring about change. There were many other efforts, including from the government, that are going on at the same time. The incidence of early/child marriage was much more among Hindu families as the Muslim families seem to be taking advantage of the several schemes meant for them and keeping their girls in school longer. They also pointed out instances where girls get married and continue to go to school and claim Kanyashree benefits.

The prevalence of child marriage and the first hand experience of normative expectations that girls still go through in Purulia came out clearly from the interviews with the theatre actors

themselves who are engaging with the communities to work on the issue of child marriage. Rima is one of the actors, a young woman in her early 20s, who joined one of the JS theatre teams when she was in school, and is now in college. She said women are mostly confined to their homes; there's a tendency to think that if a girl is over 20, she has become too old. Because of government schemes, girls are studying, but rarely beyond class 12. In a village where a child marriage was happening, they took the help of the local *mahila samiti* (women's group) to intervene. But the villagers challenged the JS activists if they would take the responsibility of getting the girl married after she gets older.

The experience of these young women suggests that while, on the surface, the norm of child marriage itself maybe changing because of awareness programmes of various agencies, including the forum theatre activities of JS, combined with the support of state policy, there are deeper patriarchal values that persist, hindering a fuller and more egalitarian approach to the development of women in all its facets. For instance, those girls who participate in JS activities are still being seen as women of 'loose' character by many in the community. "We try to return home early so that we don't face these problems. It's still a struggle for girls to participate in JS activities" (FGD with theatre group).

Other related social norms attached to gendered expectations could also be detected from the fact that in 2013 while there were initially about 60 students who participated in JS's theatre workshop, by 2014 their numbers had come down. When the girls went to the villages, they would get harassed. Villagers did not take kindly to men and women working

together in close proximity around the practice of forum theatre. In these villages, when the traditional Jatra performances took place, they would hire women actors from outside the area because local women could not perform. The first performance of JS forum theatre group was a play called, *Sonar Meye* (Golden Girl), which is one of the signature plays of JS. They had a five-day workshop leading up to the performance. After that the girl actors did not show up for rehearsal. The girls had reported that their parents did not want them to continue, fearing retaliation from the villagers. The villagers had objected to the performers holding hands in a circle at the beginning of the performance. They also had a problem with bodily touch in certain scenes, such as the one where the protagonist says she wants to be liberated and 'get out' of bondage. The male performers were being taunted by other men in the village that they were 'having fun with girls' behind closed doors. During the second performance, the girls made it clear that it was to be their last performance. The parents said they had allowed them in the first place because of the involvement of their teacher, Mr Jahir Abbas. Subsequently, Mr. Abbas himself had to face criticism from the community.

From our fieldwork in Purulia, it does seem that, although on the decline, the phenomenon of child marriage does persist to some degree because of a variety of factors. These factors suggest that child marriage is one of the manifestations of the deeper ideology of patriarchy. The fear of elopement, combined with the associated sense of shame, is experienced by parents especially with regard to girl children. Restrictions on participation in theatre activities are placed mostly on girls. The social norm seems to be to marry off a girl early to a suitable boy of the same caste, irrespective of her wish to study further, thus constraining her

capacity to grow financially independent. On the other hand, patriarchal ideology manifests itself differently on boys, placing on them unreasonable expectations of masculine responsibility as sole providers for the family. While the social stereotype of the 'male provider' could be a factor in encouraging more boys than girls to go to school and get educated, it also explains why so many boys from economically deprived families drop out of school to earn an income from unskilled and semi-skilled jobs outside the region.

With intensive awareness activities and a normative shift initiated through various agencies, the norm of girl child marriage seems to be passing through an important phase. Though not completely changed, community is beginning to consider the new norm of not marrying the girls before 18 years of age. JS's forum theatre technique and follow up activities in the community do play a key role in addressing the issue at a deeper level. Having gained an understanding of the causal links of the issue, JS has successfully launched various communicative platforms at the community level, where the issue can be discussed and debated continuously among the oppressed themselves. The results of such a process are evident from the newly conscientized community that begins to think that child marriage is not a good practice.

Girl Child Marriage: A Social Norm in Transition

It was clear that the local JS team, with the help of the conscientization technique of Forum Theatre, could induce critical analysis and generate discussions on the issue of child marriage, reinforcing a message being circulated in campaigns and policies initiated by other agencies. In the plays we have witnessed, we could observe the arguments put forward by women themselves against their oppression, and it was evident that child marriage was far from being the ideal espoused by communities. These discussions were followed up by community-level mobilization efforts by the JS teams.

When we sought the headmaster's opinion about the play, he said he did not mind the theme of the play, but insisted that there were no girl-child dropouts from his school and that the incidence of such dropouts was declining significantly in the region as a whole. On the other hand, he pointed out that dropout rate has considerably increased among the boys who under economic pressures drop out and migrate for jobs elsewhere. Girls, on the other hand, cannot go out for such jobs and there are no opportunities for work locally. According to him, among the 522 students in his school, there were about 253 girls. Although he acknowledged the effect of Kanyashree, he suggested that this trend had started even before Kanyashree. He said during block-level celebrations and cultural events, it is the girl students who are present in larger numbers. There is greater visibility of girls brought about by greater awareness of the need for girls to get an education. However, one of the facilitators of JS, cautioned us not

to trust the official statistics given by the headmaster on girl child dropouts. When JS volunteers go around the villages, they do come across instances of dropouts among girls, although he did acknowledge that the phenomenon is on the decline. He said school authorities tend to fudge the data to maximize the benefits of the midday meal scheme and also to avoid any punitive measures from the Government that wants to hear about the success of the Kanyashree scheme.

The FGDs we conducted in a SC village called Lagedanga in Puncha Block gave us a clearer picture of the transition that the community is going through in terms of the practice of child marriage and attitudes towards girl children. It was a predominantly dalit village (lower caste), with all families belonging to the Bauri community, where most of the men folk are daily wage earners, doing construction work. We conducted separate FGDs with groups of men (young and old), women (mothers) and young girls. The women denied that they were getting their daughters married before the legal age. They also said they send their daughters to school, making use of the Kanyashree incentive. One woman even pointed to a girl amidst us who was availing Kanyashree. Even the younger women (about seven of them) said they did not want to get married early. On the other hand, a group of young men, most of whom were in high school, said the boys were dropping out of school because of economic necessity and the girls were staying in school mainly because of Kanyashree. There were no comparable schemes to prevent boys from dropping out, except for some SC welfare scholarships.

Fostering intergenerational dialogue

JS has been successful in creating an intergenerational dialogue between the children and the parents and between parents and grandparents by creating adolescent groups called Kishore-Kishori Vahini (KKV) in the villages. These groups conduct various cultural activities and organise discussions on critical issues like child marriage and adolescent health. These activities are held in the presence of parents, who slowly started trusting the JS members and allowed them to train their daughters and sons in games, dancing, singing, and acting. Most of the KKVs are girls-only groups, although a few have a mix of boys and girls. Such a platform creates opportunities for bringing together parents and children in the community, as well as teachers and students in schools to reflect and openly discuss issues that are otherwise avoided.

Promoting self-esteem of women and girls

Besides the space created through forum theatre where some of the oppressed girls and women in the community can speak up with momentary motivation and provocation during the forum session, the main work of JS actually begins after the forum theatre show. After a performance, JS members go to meet the 'spectactors' who participated in the forum session of the play and other audience members. Then, after repeatedly engaging with them, gradually a space is created at the community level, where they get more time and opportunity to reflect and speak more openly on the issues affecting them. JS is doing this quite consciously to create such spaces by forming various groups in the villages where they

are working, like adolescents' groups (KKV), mothers' forums and RCCs (responsible citizens committee), groups that consist of community members who voluntarily come forward to take social responsibility or at least participate in discussions and debates that are affecting them or others in their society.

KKV seems to be a good platform where girls can come together and safely and freely express themselves, learn new things, speak and exchange their ideas, by which their self-esteem and confidence are improving. In our FGDs with the actors of the local forum theatre teams, almost all of them have testified that their self esteem and confidence have increased since they have joined JS, as they got the space to express, discuss, debate, learn, and perform in public and engage with so many people. They never had access to such a space before they joined JS. They also told us about the transformations happening in the children they are engaging within the KKVs, where they engage with girls and boys by playing some games, conducting theatre workshops, teaching song and dance with the help of those in the theatre teams having professional training and experience.

In our interviews with the local theatre teams, we had asked about the most 'most significant change', both at the personal level as well as at the level of the community. At the personal level, many girls spoke about how their participation in the JS activity gave them greater confidence, reduced their fears to speak up, and made them more articulate and less inhibited. Some of them also narrated how they have been able to resist parents' efforts to get them married early; one girl mentioned how she called the prospective groom on the phone and told him that she was not interested in marrying him. Some of the girls narrated

how they had to overcome opposition from parents to participate in JS activities. Once they started working in the field, they were getting appreciation from their peers in the community. At times, senior JS staff had to go to the families and counsel them about their daughters and persuade them to permit their participation.

Effectiveness of the JS campaign

It is quite apparent that Jana Sanskriti's Forum Theatre interventions addressing the issue of patriarchy, generally, and girl child marriage, in particular, have had a marked impact on creating awareness and reinforcing new social norms on girl child education in Purulia district. However, it is to be noted that policy measures from the Government of West Bengal and efforts by other development agencies have created a positive ecology in which JS was able to contribute effectively through its forum theatre productions as well as community-level outreach. The development context where JS is operating is saturated with initiatives towards prevention of child marriage and women empowerment. Many of these initiatives deploy various communication strategies, such as IEC activities that focus on information dissemination for social and behaviour change. Jana Sanskriti's forum theatre, in contrast, does not talk down to the people and preach, but encourages the audience to engage in reflexive critiques of their own socio-economic conditions and search for solutions collectively. Some of the girls in the Drama Club with whom we interacted said that even as they were still trying to grasp the forum theatre technique, they realized that they were participating in critical discussions on their lives and on ways out of the oppressive social structures in which they are embedded. Additionally, JS theatre workers double up as community activists and intensify follow-up actions in the villages.

Forum theatre, as a form of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, is a radically participatory, democratic, and emancipatory medium. From our group discussions with Jana Sanskriti's local theatre teams in Purulia, the participatory character of the process of forum theatre became quite evident. While making their own plays, such as *Kalank*, *Bhadur Katha* (Bhadu's Story) and *Minur Prithvi* (Minu's World), they said everyone had the full freedom to contribute to the construction of the characters and give suggestions. They also asserted that the process of theatre making was also transformative for many of them at the individual level, shaping their worldviews and instilling in them the confidence to engage with people and to articulate coherently the ideas they espouse in public. However, the girls mostly have to carefully negotiate the degree and extent of their participation. At times, senior JS staff have to go to the families and counsel them about their daughters and persuade them to permit their participation.

At the community level, forum theatre creates a participatory space, open to the entire audience, both oppressor and the oppressed, to come and take part in the forum, to express their views and arguments. While it may be unrealistic to expect everyone, especially the

oppressed, to come out and express themselves openly, the conscientization process manifests itself in people returning to their homes after a play, somewhat disturbed, full of questions that challenge their long-held assumptions. This, Ganguly asserts, results in their gradual cognitive and intellectual growth. Also, the fact that they have been able to form drama clubs in schools, RCCs and KVVs in villages, with the active involvement of the community, shows that people's participation in the process of social change extends beyond the arena of the forum theatre into local communities where they mobilize and take concrete actions to address the issues at hand.

Conclusions & Recommendations

1. What manifestations of patriarchy has JS identified as significant in the district?

As in most parts of India, both urban and rural, patriarchy is the accepted way of life, and taken for granted as a given in Purulia district too. The norms and social practices as well as rituals are all guided by the male members of the family playing the role of the bread-winner and the women learning to manage the house and being child-bearers. Dowry and other such practices are also prevalent. Some of these constitute the structural framework within which communities engage in early girl-child marriage.

However, many of the government schemes *(mostly based on financial and other incentives e.g. *Kanyashree* and *Rupashree*)* are aimed at countering the early girl-child marriage issue and encouraging girls to be sent to schools and be married only at the legal age of 18 or later. These schemes may be succeeding to some extent in pushing people to send their daughters to school and not getting them married early, but is not backed by either a change of mindset towards girls/women, nor is it giving them the freedom to move around safely (without being targeted for being 'loose') or to work, or choose their own life partner. It is leading to other issues such as: a) false records to show zero dropout rates among girl students, b) fraud documents to show the girl's age wrong, c) money for education used to settle marriages, where the girl is shown to be unmarried by in-laws/parents to get the *Kanyashree* advantage, d) high dropout rates among boys as they do not get the government's support to study and have the extra burden to earn for the family, and, most importantly, f) mixed gender friendships, love affairs, and elopement.

Many of the above issues happen as the structural change being induced by the government schemes is not being matched by the change in social norms, mindsets, and practices. Suitable employment opportunities are not adequate for the new lot of educated youth. The standard of education does not prepare them for jobs, and families/society are not open to girls going out and working. The social set-up as well as infrastructure are not conducive for women's safety. Men and women, boys and girls too, are not prepared to adapt to the change and are getting carried away by its lures and freedom. Awareness about the advantages of women's and men's education, working women, marriage at a suitable age, freedom of choice, rights of women, and, above all, the right to safe neighbourhoods/community are not yet being given priority. Jana Sanaskriti has a major role to play in enabling this in order for some of the government schemes to achieve the purpose for which they have been formulated.

2. How did Jana Sanskriti engage with local communities in the district in order to understand the consequences of patriarchy?

Forum Theatre is a participatory form of engaging people in role-playing so that they can speak openly about how they experience a phenomenon within their social and cultural contexts. The added advantage is that sometimes the spectactors come up with their own

ideas of the change that must come about. In addition to the actual plays staged by JS, the entire process itself is of importance. The process consists of: A) Mobilising young people to get involved in this activity, B) sensitizing them to the manifestations of patriarchy and the meaning of equality, C) training them in forum theatre, D) convincing parents to send their daughters to participate, E) men and women working together, boys taking responsibility to see that women feel safe and comfortable around them, F) exhibiting behaviour that the community considers the theatre team socially responsible and not out to have fun, G) women becoming confident to enact roles that are socially unacceptable, I) counselling parents who want to get their girls married early, J) dealing with adolescents who have pressures to migrate and do jobs, K) motivating girls and boys not to be taken in by quick money and displays of affluence, resulting in such things as elopement, L) networking with local agencies and government officials for permissions, records, and other logistic support. All these constitute the mobilization processes and community engagement approaches of Jana Sanskriti and are training grounds for future citizens to be more socially aware and open to life of dignity for both men and women.

However, as the initiatives put in place by JS are still at a tender stage, the local actors and supervisors apprehend that unless these efforts are intensified, there is a possibility of these newly created communicative spaces waning in their significance and of the community retreating to the comfort zone of patriarchal status quo.

3. In what ways does Jana Sanskriti incorporate local understandings of patriarchy and local narratives of lived experiences into scripting of its plays?

This is done mainly by working through members of the community itself. JS mobilizes the community at the grassroot level by immersing in the local culture, doing research on the existing practices, learning from day-to-day interactions with community members, and engaging with local youth clubs and women's groups. On the one hand, JS works with and trains actors from the community itself, and on the other, it also gets its own trained personnel to motivate, mobilise, and counsel those who wish to participate. There is constant interaction and negotiation to persuade opinion leaders (*pradhan*, teacher, social workers) to join and facilitate the process of change.

4. How are existing social norms challenged in the process of forum theatre and debate and dialogue enabled around the key issues?

Through theatre performances in schools and villages, involving the audience, interacting with the community members after the play, inviting them to role-play, carrying out follow-up discussions, involving more people in theatre groups, and generating a discussion around topics that are taken as an accepted norm.

5. To what extent have the changes in specific practices (mentioned above) also resulted in broader transformation in attitudes towards women and the girl child?

JS works primarily on the issues of girl child marriage and the dropping out of girl children from school. While working on these, they hit upon new concerns about incidence of boys dropping out and their out-migration for work, and, consequently, about elopement of boys and girls. However, the perspective and attitude towards the marriage of the girl child and girl's education cannot be changed in a short duration. It is not so simple also to address the structural factors that cause migration and elopement. But, the latter are an indication that the younger generation is restless and looking for better opportunities. They are also exposed to the outside world as well as the media, which could bring in unexpected changes if not accounted for and understood systematically.

A consistent, long-term effort is needed so as to create the much-needed intergenerational dialogue between students, teachers and their parents. There is a need to work on generating self-esteem among girls and women and giving them agency, and not just getting them educated and expecting them to follow all that the society has pre-determined for them. Boys too need to be understood in terms of the pressures they undergo – both from the family and their peers. The new generation has aspirations and may get misguided if kept in the binds of the existing patriarchal or other restrictive norms. Changes in the patriarchal order of society or adapting to new thinking among the younger generation requires steady hammering away of the issues, leading gradually to critical reflection and analysis by the community as a whole. The project needs to be taken up with more fervour and must be sustained over time to take account of the rapid socioeconomic and demographic changes in the area.

It is also important for JS to network more systematically with other local and national agencies so that they can build on existing government programmes and make efforts to address deeper aspects of patriarchal ideology and the attitudes and practices it spawns.

References

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