



MUKTADHARA - XI

(International Forum Theatre Festival)

22nd December'2026 - 2nd January'2027 at Kolkata, India

By Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed

BACKGROUND

The idea of Theatre of the Oppressed was born in South America in the early seventies from the work and practice of Brazilian theatre theoretician and director Augusto Boal. Jana Sanskriti was the first group to bring Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre to India.

In Forum Theatre, members of the theatre team select, construct, and narrate a social problem from their daily life. With artistic direction, this play is taken to an audience who must now find a solution to the problem. Passive spectators then become engaged "spect-actors". Spect-actors come on stage to enact the solutions they have thought of, debating with trained activists about the feasibility of the solutions suggested.

Since 1991, Jana Sanskriti has removed itself far from conventional theatre and spread the practice of Forum Theatre to remote villages of the Sundarbans in Bengal. With 20 theatre teams active in rural Bengal, Jana Sanskriti is today perhaps the state's largest theatre group. Jana Sanskriti has also taken this theatre pedagogy beyond the boundaries of the state to different parts of the country – to Tripura, Orissa, Jharkhand, Delhi, Uttaranchal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Jana Sanskriti believes that every individual is essentially intellectual. Not only great men think but also all men think, philosophy exists in the thought of so-called illiterate human beings. But they are not aware of it all the time. The political culture never takes care of this intellectual faculty of the people. They are made blind followers. Jana Sanskriti on the other hand, wants to develop rationality within the people. Throughout in last two decades, this is where Jana Sanskriti has focused its artistic activities. It has always tried to make the qualities of human beings that are normally invisible, visible to the people. Creating rational people is the main focus of Jana Sanskriti's work. This is how they want to bring change in the society. Jana Sanskriti believes the biggest form of violation of human rights is not to create democratic space for the people to think. They should not be seen as only implementers but actors who can contribute in the making of the policies. That is the reason, Jana Sanskriti left propaganda theatre and started Theatre of the Oppressed devised by Augusto Boal. We are the first exponent of Boal here in India and the largest and long-lasting Theatre of the Oppressed movement in the world according to Augusto Boal.

Today, Jana Sanskriti has created the Federation of Theatre of the Oppressed, India, where a number of large activist movements are present. They have handed over theatrical means (means of making theatre) to the poorest of the poor, to the tribal communities, oppressed castes, to the rural people. Jana Sanskriti is a work of art and the name of a space where total transformation is constructed.

It is an organization founded in 1985 which practices Theatre of the Oppressed among the most disadvantaged sections of Indian society. From its inception in one remote village, Jana Sanskriti now has constructed theatre teams consisting of men and women agricultural labourers. These actors come together transcending divisive social and political affiliations to plan constructive action and provide dynamic leadership for social justice and community development.

Their plays onstage and their political activism offstage feeds one another to mobilize around issues as wide-ranging as domestic violence to political violence, from reconstruction of public institutions to resistance against aggressive forms of development. Rather than using theatre to deliver development messages and services, Jana Sanskriti has used theatre to establish dialogue in society. They believe that dialogue allows for informed critical thinking and prevents a human being from following blindly – whether in pursuit of material things, an ideology, or a person. This form of dialogue is an aesthetic experience of life, an internal transformation which inspires action for external transformation. This is what we mean by total transformation.

WHY FORUM THEATRE FESTIVAL?

In our work on Forum Theatre, we have dealt with a range of issues which are relevant to different groups in different regions – Displacement, malpractices in the public distribution system, communalism, exploitation by contractors, undemocratic culture of political parties, and corruption in the Panchayat, blind superstitions, domestic violence, lack of quality in rural primary education, illicit liquor etc.

The important reason for holding this Festival is that it becomes a meeting ground for the Forum Theatre teams trained by Jana Sanskriti all over India. Each of these teams is active in their own regions; most of them are also heading organizations engaged in struggles to assert the rights of the marginalized. Though all these teams are linked to each other through their commitment to the Forum Theatre movement, they have had very little opportunity to interact with each other and see each other's work. At this Festival, we provide this valuable opportunity. This interaction has, as seen from its previous editions, no doubt, imbued each individual and team with the feeling that they are not alone in this challenging task of establishing dialogue in society.

Usually, Forum Theatre is performed before audiences who are also facing the problem portrayed in the play. Since problem solving and understanding the problem sociologically through collective action is the primary intention so the spectators and actors form a homogenous group. But in this Festival we will again try to have all kinds of interest groups involved and interested in theatre of the oppressed in the audience, from all over the world! And since Forum Theatre allows room for debate and discussion, the audience emerges from the experience with a more humane outlook.

Finally, the name 'Muktadhara'! 'Mukta' means free and 'Dhara' is a flowing stream. A flow that is free from dogma and all those structural constructs that prevent a dialogue between people, is what is implied by the term Muktadhara – celebrating movement in peace and togetherness! This is when the glory of development is said to have taken place – participation in togetherness.

WHERE?

The workshop will be conducted in an open-air mango garden near "Girish Bhavan", the main centre of Jana Sanskriti at Badu, Kolkata.

