

Passionate Plays and Public Protests: Jana Sanskriti's unique struggle against illegal liquor

If you took your cue from government policy and practice, you might think that everybody loves some good illegal liquor in their neighbourhood. The illegality stimulates money transactions in the form of bribes, creates demand, and keeps the price relatively high. Good business for people in desperate search for income in rural Bengal and a stable source of revenue for the government. A happy unintended consequence: people race each other to get the secret nods and scarce licenses from the government.

A happy outcome. For whom? Alls not well if we look closely. And looking closely is just what Jana Sanskriti has been doing for the past 20 years. Illegal liquor production is not alright with those who protest the drain on household income. Domestic violence inevitably accompanies a drunk. Not least, this alcohol is totally debilitating for the manual labourer's bodily health and devastates his capacity for work in a matter of two-three years. Not surprisingly, some are convinced that liquor is a conspiracy, akin to being the opium of the Bengali masses. Jana Sanskriti's anti-liquor struggles have always been marked by fervour, as people with these convictions raided liquor shops, seized the liquor and even destroyed it before a public gathering. In the past, the enthusiasm did not last, the struggle died down and the liquor sellers resumed business as usual. Today, something more lurks backstage.

Alongside the intermittent anti-liquor agitation, Jana Sanskriti has been doing Forum Theatre in rural Bengal for more than 10 years now, on different issues such as non-payment of minimum wages, and corruption in government schemes, domestic violence, sexual exploitation of women at work, and so on. They have found that raising issues through Forum Theatre helps people to think analytically, collectively and produce a plan for thoughtful action. What is crucial is the space that Forum Theatre offers them. In the case of the anti-liquor movement, our activists realised that until people understood the issue with their own analytical abilities, the agitation would not take the shape of a mass movement. It will just remain a movement led by a theatre group. This understanding of activism is rare and radical.

Any old theatre will not do. 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 and informed spect-actors. Spect-actors come onstage to enact the solutions they have thought of, debating with trained activists on the feasibility of the solutions suggested. Thus individuals publicly engage in tackling a problem that has thus far provoked the most profound cultural silence and acceptance. This exercise gradually suggests possibilities for liberation from that oppression in real life. Over the years Jana Sanskriti has seen that the experience of "spect-acting" has motivated people to be active outside theatre as well.

During the last 8 months, the twelve Jana Sanskriti theatre teams active in Kulpi and Pathar Pratima blocks of South 24 Parganas have been portraying the socio-economic dimensions of sale and consumption of illegal liquor in the content of their plays. The plays are performed before audiences all too familiar with the problem. For them, this has created a regular public space in which long discussions take place between the actors and the spectators. This theatre has created a political space where people are analysing the situation and exploring possible solutions. People have welcomed such a space because here they don't follow a prefabricated solution and nor are they blinkered by a charismatic leader. Instead, the regular practice and performance on this space has nurtured logical and critical thinking, as well as imaginative solutions. As a result the anti-liquor movement in these villages has taken an organized and determined shape. Hundreds of men and women of Keoratala and Karanjali anchals in Kulpi block and Digambarpur and Shrinarayanpur-Purnachandrapur anchals in Pathar Pratima blocks have joined this movement. And they have risen above religious, caste and party differences for this.

All of this has taken its time, but when it came the liquor businessmen and administration were compelled to sit up and take notice. Local producers had to stop transporting illegal liquor from one place to another. The initially indifferent Panchayat too has expressed solidarity. Reluctance and indifference is no longer an option for the administration, political parties, and Panchayat members. The role of the Digambarpur and Srinarayanpur-Purnachandrapur Anchal Panchayat leaders shows that where there is a will to listen to the changes people advocate, there can be cooperation for transformation.

To get the administration to act on its promises, Jana Sanskriti activists realized that they would have to resort to a road-block. Within minutes of setting up the rope across the highway, policemen stormed in, in larger numbers than the area had ever seen. They tore down posters, confiscated the microphone, battery, and glue, picked up six Jana Sanskriti activists and sped off to the Pathar Pratima police station. In the name of maintaining law and order the police used force on a peaceful means of protest.

Little did they know that such repression could not curb people's heartfelt outcry against illegal liquor. No one left the site, and certainly not the wives and children in homes suffering the consequences of alcohol. In fact, the police expressed their surprise as more and more people gathered, the media came, the wives spoke their mind knowing that they would inevitably face the most immediate risk in all of this upon their return home. From low- to high-level police officials, no one could leave despite the initially debilitating action on the road-block plan. Pradeep Sardar, one of the activists, summed it all up brilliantly as he put a high-handed police officer in his place as Sardar was being taken to the police station, "You are spineless policemen. You find our work illegal, and the illegal production of liquor looks completely normal to you because it is in your self-interest. You think we are not intelligent enough to what makes certain things legal and others illegal?"

As in the Forum Theatre play, these activists are trying to address violence in people's daily lives before it reaches the point of no return. Hence, offstage these passionate plays

and public protests the most pressing question today is this: How far will the non-violence take this struggle if the government sees no other way of generating revenue and liquor production becomes entirely licensed and legal?

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