

Jana Sanskriti has just concluded an almost month-long campaign on the issue of the need for participation of the common man in Panchayat matters. There is a brief write-up on the campaign below. From this write-up it will be clear to you that it has not made the local political leaders happy. The unhappiness cuts across party lines. We have already begun to receive feedback from local vested interests such as

- “they have stoked a fire, will they be able to handle it?”
- “ do they want to stand for elections this time”
- “ we know how to put such organisations in their place”

A new play by Jana Sanskriti, about the malpractice in the various Panchayat schemes for the newly identified BPL (below poverty line) families, was performed in many villages. Forum theatre, a form of theatre that builds up people’s initiative has been used for this issue and has resulted in extensive mobilisation of public opinion about the functioning of Panchayats in our state.

Thanks to your profession as a journalist, I am sure you are well aware of the intolerance of political parties in our state towards any dissent or expression of independent opinion. Jana Sanskriti believes it has raised an issue that is of utmost urgency in our state – we need support from various quarters in this movement. And that includes media support. That is why I am writing to you – to request you to do a piece on this campaign.

### **“Swadhinata Padayatra 2003”**

Jana Sanskriti has just concluded a series of *padayatras* in 6 Anchals of South 24 Parganas. “*Swadhinatar Janya Hatun*” was the slogan. It called for freedom from political leaders’ monopoly over the village Panchayats. It called for the common people to wake up and take interest and responsibility for development of their own village.

People from almost 100 villages joined the Padyatras from February 10 to 25 in Karanjali, Keoratala, Ramganga, Srinarayanpur-Purnachandrapur, Ramgopalpur and Digambarpur Anchals of the district. Women carried their conch shells and blew them in unison every time the procession entered a village. In each village, there was a short “show” – in which members of the local Manab Adhikhar Suraksha Samitis spoke on the issue, members of Jana Sanskriti theatre teams sang songs and short plays on the issue. The walk also featured clowns, stilt-walkers, magicians and puppeteers. Every evening the day’s walk culminated in an impromptu *mela*.

Prior to these Padayatras activists of Jana Sanskriti spent two months going to each home in these Anchals to convey the need for such a movement and to raise funds to support the walk. They also wrote on the walls about the need for the common man to wake up to his own ability to contribute to the future of his village. Contributions in kind, almost 10 quintals of rice, among other items, poured in. So feeding the 200 odd people on each day of the Padayatra did not seem such a burden.

The messages written on the walls gave villagers a good idea of what Jana Sanskriti is talking about –

“let us not depend on vote beggars, let us take our destiny into our own hands”

“ we are the rightful claimants to various schemes from the Panchayats, political leaders have no right to use them as largess.”

“there must be more participation by villagers in planning at the Panchayat level”

“ the Panchayat is for the people, of the people – no political leader can dominate it”

“Stop Panchayat leaders from acting like feudal lords of the olden days”

Since the year 2001 Jana Sanskriti has been holding meetings in every village on this issue and has encouraged the formation of Manab Adhikhar Suraksha Samitis which will demand participation in the functioning of the Panchayats and see to it that a cohesive civil society is revived in our villages.