

Annual Report 2000-2001



Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed

Background

Jana Sanskriti started work to counter the theatre in which the oppressed masses are passive, mute spectators only, at the receiving end, theatre which is a one-way communication, a monologue. Jana Sanskriti strongly believes that this monologue is the root of all kinds of oppression. We wish to break this culture of monologue. Through its interventions Jana Sanskriti, seeks to stop the oppressed from thinking that they are inferior, weak and incapable of analytical thought. They must become aware of their ability to plan constructive action and provide dynamic leadership in the process of development of human society.

The essential first step in the process is the establishment of dialogue at all levels - at home between a man and his wife, father and son, at school between teacher and students, at work between employer and employee, in a political party between leader and members, in a state between government and the people.

We, at Jana Sanskriti, believe that there is perfection latent within every individual – waiting to be discovered and manifested. When a person discovers this perfection he is able to overcome the sense of inferiority imposed upon him by the centralised social culture. He becomes articulate, confident and capable of confronting challenges, which come on the path of development. Jana Sanskriti's goal is to create a space in which the oppressed will have enormous scope for introspection and discovery of the self. Jana Sanskriti's goal is to facilitate a meeting between the individual and the perfection within himself. For, "what is this perfection but the richest resource of human society?"

Brief organisational history

Jana Sanskriti was the first group in India to feel the need for Theatre of the Oppressed, as different from Theatre for the Oppressed. From its very inception it has played the role of an organization. Over a period of time it has worked with a number of NGOs working on development issues in West Bengal and outside. Thus it has dealt with a variety of issues ranging from domestic violence, alcoholism and atrocities on women to citizens' rights, awareness on women's health and education.

After the first five years or so, Jana Sanskriti was faced with a question – how much importance are we giving to people's voice? Since we were working mainly through various voluntary organisations, the theatre was virtually becoming a mouthpiece of those organisations. It was almost a monologue. After that Jana Sanskriti started practising (for the first time in India) Forum Theatre¹ which delegates more power to the spectator and transforms the spectator into the spect-actor. Jana Sanskriti's theatre would no more provide a solution in its theatre. Every issue, every situation of oppression depicted in theatre is thrown open to the community for debate, discussion and finally consensus. This consensus seemed to provide a more permanent answer to most questions that were raised by the community.

Jana Sanskriti started its work in a small village in the Sunderbans in 1986. Today it has 30 theatre teams in West Bengal, one each in Tripura and Jharkhand. Jana Sanskriti has worked in close association with groups in Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttarakhand and is on the verge of forming its own theatre teams there. The central team has also been abroad on two occasions, to France and Brazil in response to invitations from other Theatre of the Oppressed groups. Since 1991 Jana Sanskriti has interacted with many theatre groups, universities, activists and researchers in western Europe and U.S.A.

¹ Forum Theatre was conceptualised by Brazilian theatre exponent, Augusto Boal

The year that has gone by

An overview

There are two significant features that have dominated Jana Sanskriti's work and activities during the year that has gone by. The first was the construction of the organisation's own office and training centre. And the second was the severe shortage of funds for ongoing activities. The construction of Girish Bhavan has been a labour of love for the entire organisation. When we started off, we were armed with a fierce determination and an extremely limited amount of money. Girish Bhavan has been made possible mainly by the generous amounts of time, energy and



The Samanvayee Shakha

actual physical labour contributed by the core group of Jana Sanskriti. For all of us, who have seen it happen, Girish Bhavan will always remain a monument of commitment and dedication of a group of young people in rural Bengal.

The second feature of this year – shortage of funds - has also put to test our commitment to Jana Sanskriti's ideals and objectives. It has been a problem, but never a distraction. In fact, our core group (which has remained constant for almost a decade now) took it as a challenge and proved yet again that all these years of working together has imparted an immense strength to this group. However, most of us, including the artistic director, have had to divert most of our time to fund-raising and fund-managing. The creative output of the organisation has therefore been below normal. Also, as this report will show, we

have not been able to hold as many workshops, put up as many performances and started as many campaigns as we would have liked. But we hope the worst is over.

The Jana Sanskriti Shakhas

Today Jana Sanskriti has 30 theatre teams all over southern West Bengal – each team comprising men and women from agricultural worker families. As no work is available in the village, many of them are compelled to migrate to the city in search of work for some months of the year. In the city they work as construction labourers, as domestic help, as night-watchmen, as odd-job boys at garages and teashops, as decorators in pooja pandals – all under very unsafe and exploitative conditions. In most cases it is seasonal migration, with the men returning to their villages at the time of sowing and reaping the annual paddy crop. Jana Sanskriti has no monetary linkages with the theatre teams. This is Theatre of the Oppressed done by oppressed sections of society. These men and women do the theatre in spite of the fact that it may rob them of a day's wages each time. They do it because there they have found



Shakha team rehearsing at Muktamancha

a space where they can express themselves, where they have found the courage to point out the causes of oppression in their lives. These theatre teams – growing, evolving, and expanding over the last decade – have indeed given birth to a range of social initiatives.

There are 30 such teams today, belonging to 30 different villages in North and South 24 Parganas. They put up a performance at least twice a month in or around their village reaching at least six thousand people in every month. Every six months or so the artistic director conducts a theatre workshop with them. Members of these teams are also the eyes and ears of Jana Sanskriti, in the sense that they suggest the issues with which the organisation's plays should deal with, the issues that need to be addressed through an intensive campaign, they collect feedback from the people on various initiatives taken by the organisation at the field level and so on.

Of all Shakhas of Jana Sanskriti, the Samanvayee Shakha needs a special mention. It is the coordinating team of Jana Sanskriti which comprises seventeen men and women hailing from various villages of South and North 24 Parganas. They meet for five days at the end of every month for intensive theatre workshops. The artistic director, Sanjoy Ganguly, has been working closely with this team for eight years now. All his laboratory work is done with this team. In terms of acting skills, this is perhaps the most skilled team of Jana Sanskriti. At these monthly workshops, they are also exposed to inputs on leadership and animator skills which in turn help them to carry out theatre activities independently in the field area.

Workshops:

The artistic director, Sanjoy Ganguly, conducted four workshops for the Samanvayee Shakha – one each in October, January, February and March. Dr Ralph Yarrow, who is on the Faculty of the Department of Drama, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK and a good friend of Sanjoy's conducted a workshop for the Samanvayee Shakha at Girish Bhavan in December. Julian Boal, practitioner of Theatre of the Oppressed from Brazil, conducted a four-day workshop with the Samanvayee Shakha in February 2000 at Girish Bhavan.

Of the Shakhas, it was possible only to hold workshops for the Bagda Shakha – in July, August and February.

Meetings and rehearsals:

These were held with the Bagda Shakha in July and November. During the monsoons it was possible to hold only meetings with the Bajberia, Ramdebpur, Bhebia, Kanmari and Bajarberia Shakhas. During November and December meetings and rehearsals were held with the Basar, Jamtala and Shyamnagar Shakhas. The same were held with the Digambarpur Shakha in December.

Performances:

Given below are some of the important performances that were put up last year. This list does not include the village performances.

| Month | Place | Show |
|-----------|---|--|
| April | Kasiabad, Pathar Pratima | 'Shonar Meye' & Forum Theatre |
| April | Moyrar Chowk, Pathar Pratima | 'Shonar Meye' & Forum Theatre |
| August | Bhawanipur | 'Gayer Panchali' |
| September | Kolkata (at NAWO conference) | 'Eije ami ekhaney' & Forum Theatre |
| October | Pailan (on invitation from CINI) | 'Shonar Meye' & Forum Theatre |
| November | Barrackpore (on invitation from Sukhchar Pancham) | 'Gayer Panchali' |
| November | Grand Hotel, Kolkata (on invitation from GTZ, West Bengal) | 'Shonar Meye' & Forum Theatre |
| November | DhrubaBajar, Pathar Pratima | 'Gayer Panchali' & 'Shonar Meye' |
| December | Girish Bhavan, Badu | 'Shonar Meye' & Forum Theatre |
| February | Girish Bhavan, Badu | 'Aamra Jekhaney Dariye' ; 'It-bhatar Gaab' & Forum Theatre |
| February | DhrubaBajar, Pathar Pratima | 'Shonar Meye' & Forum Theatre |
| February | Digambarpur MadhyaPara, Pathar Pratima | 'Gayer Panchali' ; 'It-bhatar Gaan' & Forum Theatre |
| February | BDO, Bhawanipur | 'Gayer Panchali' |
| March | New Market, Kolkata (on invitation from Concern for Calcutta) | Clown Show, 'Shonar Meye' & Forum Theatre |



Other activities :

- (i) **Maasanta Parab:** In 1996 one of the Jana Sanskriti Shakha teams floated the idea of a Maasanta Parab (month-end festival) in the village, with the objective of reviving the old tradition of frequent melas and festivals which is replaced today by video and commercialised folk forms. Today, five years later, Maasanta Parab has become a regular event. The whole village meets on the last Saturday of every Bengali month. There is an air of festivity as young boys and girls, folk performers, theatre groups – all vie with each other for limelight at the Parab. The special attraction of the Maasanta Parabs in Digambarpur this year were the all-women full-length stage production put up by the Digambarpur Mahila Shakha and the Jaatra put up by senior members of the community. These were preceded by months of rehearsals, which brought everyone very close to each other. Both these were extremely popular and to an extent, helped to bring back the ethos of earlier civil society.
- (ii) **Cycle rally:** In February the Bagda Shakha organised a cycle rally in their area, to mobilise public opinion in support of their demand for a Muktamancha in Bagda. This is in continuation of a campaign launched by Jana Sanskriti in 1996. The first achievement of this campaign was the Muktamancha (lit. open stage) at Digambarpur. A round platform with pillars supporting a thatched roof, this Mancha was constructed entirely with straw, bamboo, rope, cement, money, land and even labour donated by the villagers. Jana Sanskriti aims to construct one such Muktamancha in all the Anchals that it is working in.
- (iii) **Padayatra:** The members of Jana Sanskriti's women's group in Bagda organised an 8 kilometre march around the block expressing their demand for a society free of corruption and fundamentalism. About 300 women participated in this march.

Jana Sanskriti's work with women:



Members from Mahila Shakhas

24 Parganas. These meet for theatre workshops regularly and put up performances. On their own initiative they have started savings and credit groups. These teams have also participated in a number of workshops on women's health.

The women Jana Sanskriti is working with have large families to look after, they get up before sunrise and often work late into the night just to be able to finish their routine chores. As most of the men go to the city in search of work, the women have to shoulder all the responsibilities of the household. All this makes them very overworked and hard-pressed for time. In addition there are the social values which dictate that young married women should stay at home and not be seen interacting with outsiders, let alone do theatre. In spite of all these difficulties – these women are enthusiastic about theatre rehearsals and workshops.

Today there are 8 all women theatre teams active in North and South

Meetings, workshops and rehearsals have been held in May, June, July, September, November, January and February with the Digambarpur, Basar, Bagda and Kolkata Mahila Shakhas

The small savings groups, named Dishari, have been meeting every month to deposit money. At the end of the year there were 14 groups with bank accounts and the savings amounting to about Rs 40,000.

Jana Sanskriti has had to adopt the role of a referral agency by virtue of its constant presence in the villages. Advising patients about which hospital to go to, accompanying the patients to hospitals in Calcutta, consulting with doctors on their behalf. Our women activists have also referred women patients to RH clinics.

Jana Sanskriti Karmi Sammelan (Activists' Convention)

The Sammelan was held on February 6 and 7, 2001 at Girish Bhavan, North 24 Parganas. It was attended by 200 members of Jana Sanskriti from districts of North and South 24 Parganas and Kolkata. Due to funds constraint, only one team outside West Bengal was represented, the Tripura Shakha. This Sammelan was special for two reasons. One - it was held in the organisation's own premises for the first time. Two – it reflected the success of Jana Sanskriti's work with women over the last four years as more than half the delegates were women.

On the first day each Shakha team presented a report of the previous year's activities. The entire proceedings were interspersed with group songs and solos. The next morning all the participants went for 'prabhat pheri' (walking in a procession, singing songs, and using the microphone to talk about Jana



Prabhat pheri during Sammelan

Sanskriti's activities) in the neighbourhood of Girish Bhavan.

Then there was a session to discuss

theme of activities for the next two years. In the evening each Shakha put up a short 10-minute play by turns. The last event of the Sammelan was a night-long performance of Putul Naach and Torja Gaan which was open to the public.

Nibedita Shikshayatan

Jana Sanskriti is running 50 pre-primary learning centres in rural areas of West Bengal. The programme has been named after Sister Nibedita who was a pioneer in the field of women's education. The curriculum has been developed by our organisation, with stress on child-centred and activity-based techniques. The teachers are all women. There is an active guardian committee for each learning centre. The teachers participate in a training session once every two months. At these training sessions they are updated on the techniques evolved by our training team – theatre, puppetry, song, dance and games are the various media through which the children are taught. The objective of these learning centres is to prepare the child to enter school with a positive attitude towards education, some basic skills as well as the habit of staying away from their homes for long periods.

It has been our experience that mothers of the children who attend our centres get very involved in the child's learning experience. In our villages, women are still, by and large, illiterate. So we have started a Mothers' Forum for each school. The Mothers Forum meets twice a month. At these meetings they are taught literacy and numeracy skills. They are also given education on basic health and hygiene, prevention of common ailments, advised on women's health problems in particular.



In the past year teachers' training sessions were held in April, May and August. In the month of May Shishu Melas were held in seven villages, including children from 20 learning centres. In the morning of each mela, sports events were held for the children. All the children had lunch together and put up a cultural function in the evening. The entire proceedings were supported and conducted by guardian

committees of the village.

In the month of March further support for more learning centres was sanctioned. Recruitment of teachers for the new centres was done.

The Artistic Director at work

Sanjoy Ganguly conducted four workshops outside West Bengal in this year. The first was in association with a NGO at Almora in Uttarakhand. The next two were in response to invitation from BBC World Service Trust. The workshops were held in Chaibasa and Jamshedpur, in Jharkhand in July. In August Ganguly visited the Jana Sanskriti Tripura Shakha with an assistant. There he conducted a workshop on Forum Theatre. In May 2000 Ganguly was invited to a seminar on communication and development at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, UK. On his way back from there he stopped over at Paris and conducted a workshop at the Centre of Theatre of the Oppressed there. Ph.D. students from Cornell University and University of Chicago worked with Ganguly this year on the subject of Theatre of the Oppressed and its relevance in social activism. During this year he also started working on his book on the application of theatre philosophy in the field.



Workshop at Tripura

Sanjoy Ganguly was the recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship in 1997. Jana Sanskriti's work with women has been a collaboration between Ganguly's Fellowship and the grassroots network and human resources of Jana Sanskriti. Over the last four years, we have been able to develop eight all-women theatre teams and about 20 women's groups. The Fellowship has also given our work with women a strong orientation towards health rights.

Human Rights Protection Committees

Jana Sanskriti has begun work on the creation of Anchal-based Human Rights Protection Committees in its project area. The Committee in Digambarpur village is already quite active. This work has begun to take shape in the Shrinarayanpur Anchal of Pathar Pratima block in district South 24 Parganas, where we have already held a number of meetings.

Flood Relief



Submerged Bhawanipur School Building and our Relief work

Nine districts of West Bengal were seriously affected by floods in September-October 2000. Bagda and Bhawanipur in Jana Sanskriti's project area were among the villages affected by floods. Jana Sanskriti launched an intensive fund-raising drive (as we have no grant for relief work) before sending food and other relief material to Bagda. Ours was the first relief team to enter the area which had been water-logged for 20 days. As the water receded, other relief teams also entered.

Documentation

Julian Boal and Alexis Delcourt spent almost a month with us in February 2001 to shoot a film on Jana Sanskriti's work. They visited the villages we work in and recorded the various activities of Jana Sanskriti's work in great detail. They are now busy making a documentary film (51 minutes long, with a shorter 23 minute version) to be telecast on French TV.

Sanjoy Ganguly has recorded on his Handycam all the interventions in Forum Theatre during the year. This includes Forum Theatre in our villages as well as sessions held in Kolkata with district judges, NGOs etc.

Infrastructure

The construction of two office rooms, two dormitories and a toilet complex at Girish Bhavan has been completed. We are now raising funds for construction of a boundary wall, and an open theatre, an indoor workshop space, a permanent kitchen-cum-store room. We will be able to begin work on these only after we have collected about ten lakh rupees.

Funders

- Department of Culture
Ministry of Youth Affairs, Culture and
Sports, Government of India
- Sangeet Natak Akademi
- ICICI

Jana Sanskriti's Arsenal

Forum Theatre

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 posed in it. Passive spectators then become engaged spect-actors. Spect-actors enter the play to enact their solutions, debating with trained actors/activists who pose various questions about the solutions suggested.

The entire play is presented before the audience first. Then it is performed a second time and the audience is invited to participate. Here the actors' space becomes the non-actors' space. The actors and non-actors interact to find a solution to the problem shown in the Forum play. As a result of the interaction between spectator and spect-actor not only is a debate generated but also very often spect-actors and actors reach a consensus. A mediator called Joker moderates the interaction. The Joker plays a very important role in Forum Theatre. On many occasions, this consensus plays an important role resulting in social initiatives and community action. Therefore Jana Sanskriti claims that is it theatricalising social and political action. Jana Sanskriti is the only theatre group in the world that practises Forum Theatre in the rural areas.

Image theatre:

In image theatre actors, spect-actors recreate images of their own reality - through a consensus. They look at their reality in a very objective manner, try to understand it and analyse it. This is called the real image. The most interesting part of image theatre is that spect-actors then proceed to make the image of a situation that they desire - the ideal image in which the oppression will have disappeared.

We then return to the real Image and the debate begins. Each spect-actor must then show images of different stages in the possible transition from real to ideal. This entire experience gives the participants a very clear idea of how to deal with oppression in their own lives.

Introspective Theatre:

In Introspective theatre an individual enjoys the scope of being her/his own spectator. As a spectator she/he can introspect and can understand the reason for every small experience of oppression. She/he can also gather confidence and understand how various social values are acting in her/his mind and guiding her/his actions.

We have used Introspective Theatre among women who are doubly marginalised by the centralised social culture as well as patriarchy, so they have little scope for introspection. Introspective theatre helps these women to introspect and thus recognise and address oppression in their own lives. This gives them confidence and helps them become articulate. Thus a woman is able to handle oppression before it reaches a point of aggression when she is totally helpless. We have noticed that introspective theatre is a genuine basic need for these women. It allows a space which is very important in their lives.

Jana Sanskriti offers...

Jana Sanskriti offers training and workshops in various techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed. The Artistic Director visits the host organisation and conducts the workshop for which he charges a standard consultancy. Workshops of five days each in three fields of Theatre of the Oppressed are of-

ferred: (i) Introduction to Theatre of the Oppressed and Image Theatre; (ii) Forum Theatre and (iii) Introspective Theatre.

Sanjoy Ganguly's work on Theatre of the Oppressed

Founder Director of Jana Sanskriti, the largest Theatre of the Oppressed group in India today, also the only group in the world to practise Theatre of the Oppressed in rural areas

- Rishi Valley Rural Education Project, Andhra Pradesh – with teachers of large network of rural non-formal education centres
- Council of Churches in India – demonstration of techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed to a group of representatives from NGOs working in various fields at Nagpur and New Delhi.
- Amabaji, Godhra, Gujarat – with tribal people.
- Jaipur, Rajasthan – with street children.
- Agartala, Tripura – with village health workers.
- Bokaro, Bihar, - with tribal people.
- Almora, UP – with scheduled caste folk performers.
- Weekly workshops with group of women referred by a crisis centre in Calcutta.
- Panjim, Goa – with human rights activists.
- With Sanhita, a gender resource centre in Calcutta.
- Chaibasa, Bihar, with a group of tribal (Ho community) people referred by BBC World Service Trust.
- Dalma Mukti Bahini East Singbhum, Bihar
- Awaz, Madhya Pradesh.

Sanjoy Ganguly's work overseas

1991 - Participated in International Theatre Festival of Theatre of the Oppressed, Massey, France, with two plays directed by him

1993 – Directed and acted in inaugural show at International Festival of Theatre of the Oppressed at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

1993 – Performances in Toulouse and Paris, France.

1996 – Conducted workshop on Theatre of the Oppressed for activists from France

1998 – Conducted workshop on the concept of Clown for a group from France

1999 – Conducted two workshops at Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed, Paris

1999 – Conducted two workshops with Caravane Theatre, Toulouse, France.

2000 – Invited by University of Sussex (Institute for Development Studies) to participate in a conference titled “Popular Communication for Participation in the democratic transformation of society.”

2000 – Conducted workshop for the students of University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

2000 – Conducted workshop for the Department of Drama, Queen Mary College, University of London.

Areas in West Bengal where Jana Sanskriti has been working

| District | Block | Anchal |
|-------------------|----------------|---|
| South 24 Parganas | Mathurapur | Lakshminarayanpur North & South, Konkondighi, Kumrapara, Nandakumarpur, Companir Thek, Chapla |
| | Kulpi | Karanjali, Belpukur, Keoratala, Dhola, Shimulberia |
| | Pathar Pratima | Digambarpur, Srinarayanpur, Ramganga, Khetrāmohanpur, Purba Surendranagar, Raipur, Gangadharpur |
| | Kakdwip | Babur Mahal, Khirishtala, Ramgopalpur |
| | Kultali | Kishori Mohonpur |
| North 24 Parganas | Basirhat | Garakupi |
| | Hasnabad | Bhebia, Chapali |
| | Sandeshkhali | Kanmari, Boyarmari |
| | Bagda | Ranghat, Helencha |
| Medinipur | Mohanpur | Sautia, Padima, Aakpura |
| | Dantan | Bamanda, Haripura, Shodrang, Bamanbirua |
| | Belpahadi | Binpur |



Rehearsal of Co-ordination Team at Girish Bhavan



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