

**Scripting Power:
Jana Sanskriti On and Offstage**

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Notes on Contributors (in alphabetical order)

Till Baumann

Till Baumann is a freelance Theatre of the Oppressed joker and cultural activist based in Berlin/Germany. He started to work with TO after a research visit to CTO-Rio in 1999. Since then he has been conducting TO projects and training courses, mainly in Europe and Latin America. He has worked in prisons, schools, refugees' homes, squats and theatres, among other places. He is exploring the role of theatre in creative street protest, human rights activism and conflict transformation. His main places of inspiration and learning continue to be situated outside Europe: Rio de Janeiro (CTO-Rio) and Kolkata (Jana Sanskriti). In Germany he is part of TheaterDialog, the Paulo Freire Institute of the Free University of Berlin and sabisa – performing change. He is closely connected to Aktionstheatergruppe Halle: www.aktionstheatergruppe.de and went with several members of the group to Kolkata to participate in Muktheadhara III (2008).

Kavita Bera

Kavita Bera is an actor/activist with JS since the late 1980s. Kavita Bera is part of the Central Coordinating team. She is from Ram Ganga village, South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal.

Julian Boal

Julian Boal has worked as a theatre of the oppressed facilitator in more than 20 countries, in some cases alone and in others, as an assistant to his father, Augusto Boal. He belongs to two groups in France: namely, Feminisme-Enjeux on Women's issues and Groupe of Theatre of the Oppressed-Paris that works specifically on the relationship between bosses and workers. He has published the book entitled *Imagens de um Teatro Popular*, Hucitec, Sao Paulo, 2000.

Brian Brophy

Brian Brophy is the Director of Theater Arts at California Institute of Technology and has worked as an actor in theater, television, and in over thirty feature films including *Shawshank Redemption*, *The Player*, *Cradle Will Rock*, *Armageddon*, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. A theater director, playwright, and college professor, he holds an MFA in Creative Writing for the Performing Arts from UC Riverside, with an MA in theater and BS in Experimental Psychology. He was a Fulbright scholar to India at Banaras Hindu University (BHU) and his group won the Mravac Award at the 18th International Youth Theater Festival in Mostar, Bosnia for 'multicultural and social-consciousness.' With multiple years of funding from the California Arts Council and the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and the City of Riverside his work was selected as a national model for Service Learning by the National Youth Leadership Council.

Dia Da Costa

Dia Da Costa is an Assistant Professor in the Departments of Global Development Studies and Sociology, at Queen's University Canada. Her teaching and research

interests combine critical development studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory. Apart from journal articles exploring and conceptualizing theatre as a space of political economy, she has recently published an ethnographic analysis of Jana Sanskriti's theatre entitled *Development Dramas: Reimagining Rural Political Action in Eastern India* (Routledge, 2010).

Renuka Das

Renuka Das is an actor/activist with JS since the late 1980s. Renuka Das is part of the Central Coordinating team. She is from Uttar Kashiya village, South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal.

Birgit Fritz

Birgit Fritz is a teacher and drama pedagogue with special focus on the theatre of the oppressed. She has been a TO practitioner since 1999. She co-founded of Spielerei, the forum theatre group of the Amnesty International branch in Vienna (2000), and is chair woman of the TO-Vienna platform (2003). The TO-Vienna platform has been active in Viennese community housing projects, in cooperation with refugee counseling organizations in the Viennese-African and international community, with youth in human rights education projects. She is also active in the international theatre of the oppressed community (eg. Kyrgyzstan, the Basque country, Germany and Venezuela). She has worked as a free-lance facilitator and part time lecturer for transcultural theatre work at the University of Vienna since 2003.

Sima Ganguly

Sima Ganguly is an actor/activist with JS since its inception. Sima Ganguly is part of the Central Coordinating team. She is from Kolkata, West Bengal.

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Agneta Josephson

Agneta Josephson first encountered Theatre of the Oppressed in 1977 when her father did invisible theatre with Augusto Boal in Stockholm. She has worked with TO since 1984, mainly with Forum theatre and Image theatre. Since 1996 till the present, she has worked as director, actor, and joker in "Forumteatergruppen Breyta." Josephson educates Jokers and gives workshops all over Sweden, with a particular focus on the fields of healthcare and education. Since the 1980's, she has worked in three forum theatre groups. She was also the chairwoman of the Swedish TO-organization in the mid-1990s.

Martha Lee Kemper

Martha Kemper is an actor, playwright and associate professor of theatre at Penn State Abington College, who lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. She has led T.O. workshops in India, with actors in Jabalpur, teachers in Pachmarhi, and

activists of the South Asia Peace Alliance in Gwalior. She has created courses using T.O. practices, including Image, Forum and Invisible Theatre, and designed T.O. workshops on Forgiveness, with Quakers. Her solo autobiographical play, *Me, Miss Krause and Joan*, splices together scenes of surviving rape with scenes from the trial of Joan of Arc. Performances include the Philadelphia Fringe Festival and for the Friends World Committee for Consultation Gathering in Bhopal, INDIA. Martha has been a Roster Artist of the Pennsylvania Performing Arts on Tour, an organization linking presenters and artists who “maintain the highest standards of artistic quality and professionalism.” She acts professionally in Philadelphia and was a founding member of the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

Pritilata Mondol

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Doug Paterson

Doug Paterson is a professor of theater at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is founding director of the Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed — Omaha and initiated the Pedagogy of the Oppressed conference in the United States of America. Bringing together Augusto Boal (who wrote *Theatre of the Oppressed*) and Paulo Freire (author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) to conferences, Paterson has significantly advanced the networks and audiences of theatre of the oppressed in the US.

Jane Plastow

Jane Plastow is professor of African Theatre and director of the Leeds University Centre for African Studies. She works extensively as an academic, practitioner and trainer in the area of Theatre for Development. Significant publications include *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*, (1998) and *Theatre & Empowerment: Community Drama on the World Stage* (2004), both edited with Richard Boon and published by Cambridge University Press.

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Barbara Santos

Barbara Santos is a woman, Black, mother, sociologist, actress and Kuringa, She was Coordinator at Centre of the Theatre of the Oppressed, from 1994 until 2008. She worked with Augusto Boal, creator of the Theatre of the Oppressed, since 1991 until May 2009. At the moment she leads an international program (Brazil, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Angola and Senegal) of diffusion of Theatre of the Oppressed and qualification of TO-Practitioners.

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Mariana Villani

Mariana Villani received a Diploma in “Cultural Facilitation with specialisation in Theatre” in 1994 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In 2004 she was introduced to Theatre of the Oppressed and since then she has trained with various local and international experts. As a founding member of Teatraviesas GTO, she has worked since 2005 as a joker and actress in various Forum Theatre plays. She has designed and given multiplication workshops and training courses for different collectives such as theatre groups and groups of youths, women, immigrants, and refugees. She has been a lecturer, workshop leader and assistant in conferences, festivals and international workshops in Spain, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Austria, India, Algeria, Germany and England. She collaborated in the creation of Southern Latin American TO network (RelatoSur, Red Latinoamericana de TO del Sur), developing the “Argentinian Project” in 2007-8. She is a founding member of the Activist Platform of TO (PATO Plataforma Activista de TO) in Catalonia, of the International Feminist TO Network and of the Southern Latin American TO network (RelatoSur, Red Latinoamericana de TO del Sur).

Ralph Yarrow

Ralph Yarrow is Professor Emeritus of Drama and Comparative Literature, University of East Anglia, Norwich UK. He is a teacher, writer, director, and performer. His publications include: *Improvisation in Drama* (Palgrave Second Edition 2000), *European Theatre 1960-90* (Routledge 1992), *Consciousness, Literature, and Theatre* (MacMillan, 1997), and *Indian Theatre: Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom* (Curzon, 2001). Along with numerous articles, these books address questions about the functioning of consciousness and aesthetics in reading and theatre, fantasy, modernism, acting and directing, and theatre in and as development and social intervention

Introduction: Jana Sanskriti's optimism of the will and intellect

Dia Da Costa

In a world of wars and marketised social relations, where humanitarianism refurbishes a sense of superiority and activism often serves self-interest, Jana Sanskriti (JS) has completed twenty-five tireless years of struggling against the individualism, violence, and pessimism that marks our present. In his book, *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey asks us to respect Antonio Gramsci's call for 'the pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will', by acknowledging that unlike Gramsci who wrote these lines when he was close to death and behind bars in a prison in fascist Italy, 'we are not in prison cells' (2000, 17). We owe it to Gramsci then, Harvey says, to recognise the contingency of his times and ours by seeking an 'optimism of the intellect' and not just of the will (ibid.). In other words, we need pessimistic critiques of the present. But, we also need the intellectual work and political courage that constructs alternatives and squarely refuses the foreclosure of our imaginations. JS itself has plenty of reason and experience with pessimism of the intellect *and* will! If this book and moment in Jana Sanskriti's history is a symbol of anything it is a symbol of Jana Sanskriti's commitment to struggle for alternatives in the face of reactionary structural forces and compromised ideals, daily failure and repressed desires—that is, in light of myriad reasons for pessimism.

In the narratives and voices collected here, we see the different things JS has meant to its activists, audiences, and friends. In 2009, I conducted a writing workshop with some JS actors/activists. These writings which combined life history, social history, and organisational history were later reoriented, revised, and translated for this volume planned as a publication for the anniversary. In this volume, there are voices of those who felt inspired during brief and heady encounters at international festivals, others who gauge the strengths and weaknesses of Jana Sanskriti's work understood over decades of interaction, and the voices of those of us whose political coming of age was facilitated through various forms of engagement with JS. There is no collective chorus singing a single narrative here. Together, we bear witness to the promise and limits, the fissures and accomplishments, the discrepancies and the strategic communities formed and reformed in the course of Jana Sanskriti's lifetime. This book is neither bereft of pessimism nor devoid of optimism. Sometimes, words and worlds revealed here show that optimism and pessimism can coexist in the very same moment. As such, this book is a testimony to not just Jana Sanskriti's work, but to characteristics of contemporary political struggle itself.

At the Muktheadhara festival in December 2010, JS expects approximately 700 participants from all over India and 23 other countries in the world. This is the fourth festival of its kind and each transnational gathering organised every other year since 2004 has been a momentous occasion. This year's festival is combined with Jana Sanskriti's twenty-five year anniversary. I have known and been involved with JS since 1999, but regretfully university commitments have not enabled me to attend Muktheadhara festivals. Despite the limits of my understanding of these festivals, JS gave me the privilege of being editor of this volume and it is my pleasure to take this historic conjuncture in Jana Sanskriti's lifetime to reflect on the early years of Jana Sanskriti's formation, on other momentous occasions that characterise JS as a living and evolving organism, on the daily battles for survival and recognition that challenge the will to go on, and on the transnational meetings at Muktheadhara festivals and others that brim with hope and optimism. In this introduction, I attempt to highlight what emerges from these essays as Jana Sanskriti's careful and constantly interrupted optimism of the intellect and will as a way to shed light on the challenges facing transnational political struggles today.

Political Coming of Age

Let me begin with Jana Sanskriti's core activists who have been key coordinators of this group since its moment of inception. Sima Ganguly is an exception among these activists, in the sense that she encountered JS in an urban, middle-class environment. As her essay shows, she fell in love with the ideals that initially shaped JS in the process of falling in love with its founder, Sanjoy Ganguly. The other activists who have written for this book encountered JS serendipitously and in their villages in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, India. Renuka Das and Kavita Bera happened to attend an organisational meeting in their village neighbourhood. Pradeep Haldar and Pradeep Sardar were invited to do a 'different' kind of theatre workshop after one of their annual village theatre performances. Chittaranjan Pramanik and Satyaranjan Pal were looking for an organisation that could contribute funds for their local club initiative and Pritilata Mondol's friend happened to tell her about JS. None of them really knew what to expect and none knew the journey that they had serendipitously embarked upon through this encounter.

Yet, the serendipity of falling in love with someone or certain political ideals is never really an accident. In various ways, as the essays show, the life histories of each drew them into the experiment and effort to which they have relentlessly contributed. Sima Ganguly came from a conservative middle-class home where parents and male kin kept a close watch on the movements of young women of the household. Sima *di* had no business falling in love when she was supposed to be laying flat in the health centre recovering from one of the umpteen

surgeries on her leg.¹ She met Sanjoy *da* at the blood donation camp at this health centre. Recover she did, but driven by the energising moment of love, she also cast family objections and rage aside to speed away on Sanjoy *da*'s motorbike and register their marriage. For her part, Renuka's family was reeling under indebtedness, excessive work burdens, and an alcoholic father. Renuka herself worked as an agricultural labourer, but she reached the limits of her tolerance when she worked as a domestic worker in a rich Calcutta home. Accused of stealing and subject to beating, when Renuka attended her first JS meeting where people discussed women's oppression, equal rights, the problems of alcohol and dowry, she could not help being deeply moved. Quite contrary to her prevailing experience at the time, as Renuka puts it, 'They didn't seem to despise me because I was poor and uneducated. In fact they pulled me closer' (Das, this volume).

Renuka faced no hindrance from her family when she resolved to become a part of the organisation. Simadi compares her urban, educated, middle-class family's reaction to women's involvements outside the home with Renuka's experience. Simadi asks, 'which of them is educated? Renuka's father, the farmer, or my father, the Physics teacher?' (Ganguly, this volume). As their narratives show, both women's lives were beset by very different kinds of structured impositions and repressed desires. Simadi and Renuka's experiences are separated by the gulf of class position and the disparate ways of learning how to become a 'woman' in their contexts. For both however, tales of their childhood are marked by a nostalgia adulterated by sadness and anger.

Kavitadi was an abandoned wife raising her infant daughter through daily labour in other people's homes and farms. Her father was poor and her in-law's family reluctantly tolerated Kavitadi's presence in their lives once their son had relinquished his marital commitments. Ultimately, she was on her own when it came to feeding herself and her child. Considering her daily struggle for survival, some might say that Kavitadi had no business joining an organisation that professes to 'do good work'. Kavitadi joined JS with the

¹ The suffix 'di' after a name (eg. Simadi) is used by younger men and women to refer to women older in age than the speaker and marks the person addressed as 'sister'. Similarly, the suffix 'da' after a name is used by younger men and women to refer to men older in age than the speaker and marks the person addressed as 'brother'. I follow this colloquial mode of addressing JS activists who are older than me in this introduction because this is the form of respect in modes of address to which I am habituated. On the other hand, I have retained the mark of respect common to academic writing when it comes to the other authors in the volume by referring to them by their last name in the course of discussing their essays. Again, I am habituated to that form of respect in modes of address in academic contexts. I have chosen to retain different modes of expressing respect rather than applying the norms of one to relationships in the other.

arrangement that her daughter would be educated and raised in the organisational centre while Kavita*di* worked in the villages. Kavita*di*'s account is unabashed in acknowledging that although this organisation's principles matched her own, her need for child support and work resulted in her willingness to join this organisation. The two Pradeep's, *Chotto* (young) and *Buro* (old) as they are affectionately called, combined grueling daily wage work on shrimp farms and landscape construction sites with selling knick-knacks on trains, and remunerated *Gaajan* (folk theatre form) performances to battle their household poverty, hunger, and landlessness. Their families did object, 'Theatre will not feed you' (Halder, this volume). There were stomachs to feed, younger sisters' dowry to pay, and a labouring father to support. For Pradeep Halder, who had already developed a passion for theatre, livelihood struggles became a hindrance in his theatre life. And yet, in his words, 'a rock cannot ultimately stop the momentum of water' (ibid.). A series of white lies to employers and family alike combined with sleepless nights and endless travel enabled Pradeep Halder to find his way back to Jana Sanskriti's theatre. Pradeep Sardar's household also suffered when he took time off to do theatre. This absence invariably meant loss of salary because his labour was sold for six months or even a year at a time to fishery owners. Pradeep believes that theatrical work addresses his mind's hunger. In his words, 'If I worked elsewhere maybe I would expend more physical energy and maybe I would earn more. ... Yes I can earn more but, in life, I am not pursuing money alone. I like this work. I have other hungers than money' (Sardar, this volume)

We ought not to read these stories of transitions from oppressive worlds to organisational membership as romantic accounts of freedom found, material needs displaced, and hunger satiated. Nor was JS the first encounter with theatre or collective action for these activists. Rather, these are stories that speak of the concomitant push of poverty and the pull and promise of learning, opportunities, fun, feeling valued, and gaining self-confidence that JS represents in these lives. But structures of material and representational inequality are resilient. Hunger doesn't disappear because some individuals are determined to value 'other hungers than money' (Sardar, this volume). As Priti*di* points out in her essay, in the course of her involvement in this kind of struggle, she has also found it necessary to accept defeat in the face of human need. Similarly, working in a patriarchal context, Priti*di* shows that JS has projected its work as working with the needs *and* norms of *sansar* (household) in order to advance its fight against patriarchy in and beyond the home. In other words, JS activists have found themselves working within and against the norms of patriarchal households in order to build long-term legitimacy in rural contexts. Moreover, as various essays by JS members point out, party politics has been a significant hindrance in Jana Sanskriti's non-partisan approach to inequality and social

justice. Nor should we see grassroots organisations as bereft of the power relations and inequalities which they try to overcome through their political work. While recognising these structural constraints and strategic negotiations, nonetheless, I view these narratives by JS members as accounts of (class) struggle insofar as it is committed to the idea that the agricultural labourer, in common with anyone in any other social and economic position, has other hungers than money that need nourishment. And, on the way to making this idea a reality, JS constantly confronts the problem of hunger and the limits it places on satiating other hungers.

Despite its principles, the organisation itself is not always flawless in its attentiveness to the class needs of its members. For example, as you will read in Pradeep Sardar's essay, the two Pradeep's once traveled back and forth to Badu without adequate bus fare or food to eat and no one noticed. My point is that JS was and is committed to a cross-class struggle, but it was not born in a classless society. Like any other political struggle, it has no choice but to bear the traces of class division within itself. But, Jana Sanskriti members confront everyday *manifestations* of class-divides and the *failures* to recognise class-based suffering as signs and outcomes of a cross-class commitment to work against oppression. The everyday lived reality and complexity of learning *through* misapprehensions across class divides is not erased from this book, because it is not erased in Jana Sanskriti's practice. Without the traces of 'flaws', 'impurity', and 'failure', could it be struggle?

Chittaranjan Pramanik and Satyaranjan Pal who also have essays in this volume are both from less impoverished households, which is not to say that they have not experienced hunger or laboured in others' homes. While Satyada's family was always inclined towards cultural practices and community work, Chittada's family actively discouraged him. To use Chittada's terms, they asked him to stop 'chasing wild buffalos'—that is, chasing dreams of an unknown place (Pramanik, this volume). And yet, it is dreams of another place that he chased—an oppression-free society and living his life so that words and actions match. Later in his essay he talks about watching others around him acquire property, big bank balances, and motorbikes. Chittada's words reveal the ambivalent desire for riches and a dislike of those who deserted principles to become rich. Chittada speaks also of his sense of the loss of love and time for casual interaction in JS as the organisation has grown in size, resources, and work. These are the subjective dimensions of everyday class struggle: the simultaneous acknowledgement that he too could have been rich, and the realisation that pursuing money might have meant losing out on nurturing his mind. The simultaneous struggle to build a larger 'collective' *and* consequently undermining the familiarity among personnel that constitutes a 'collective'. These expressions speak of an inseparable pessimism and optimism which

marks the daily struggle involved in being part of JS. For twenty-five years, JS members have not only confronted this daily struggle but have also continued to *choose* to work with an organisation that refuses the capitalist foreclosure which dictates that the sole meaning and purpose of work *is* money.

The experience of this struggle is not just at the subjective level. Over and over again, the words of its core activists reveal the fears and desires of living and working in a capitalist society with its many forms of reactionary forces. Renuka's anxiety about her dream palace [JS] staying together, Satyada's account of the market working like a hungry shark while corporations claim to be like 'family', Chittada's fear of authoritarianism in the name of democracy in NGOs, in the West Bengal government, and in India, activists' anxiety about the loss of love and time for casual interaction in JS, Simadi's discussion of media-hungry activists during the Right to Work campaign, Pritidi's twin concerns about villagers' perceptions that JS activists receive a massive salary and on the other hand losing JS activists to those NGOs that thrive in rural West Bengal by giving large salaries—each of these point to the 'objective' conditions within which the integrity and future of this organisation's struggle has to be constructed.

These fears speak of the undeniable desires that threaten Jana Sanskriti's work because in Satyada's words, 'it [the market/the shark] consumes people's desires and draws it into the net of its economy' (Pal, this volume). The question of who will succumb to reactionary forces of 'the shark' at any given moment is the primary structural anxiety in this organisation. No one is more aware of this everyday structural and subjective reality than these activists whose work is forced to be alive to the dynamics of an inordinately challenging moment in West Bengal, and indeed the world at large. Because of these experiences, individual and organisational, JS activists have reason to harbor a deep pessimism of the intellect. *And yet*, for twenty-five years, they have renewed a daily commitment to refuse the capture of their imaginations by money and the market. This is quite far from naïve optimism, but optimism it is. JS activists are not blindly optimistic about themselves and their work. They have to face ordinary and extraordinary problems and reactionary social forces daily. *Even so*, they are optimistic because, as the essays make amply clear these activists feel an extraordinary political and familial love for the organization of which they are a part.

This anxious and constantly interrupted optimism forms the foundation of JS work and performances. Elsewhere I have described Jana Sanskriti's workers as spect-actors of history (Da Costa 2010a). With the term 'spect-actor of history', I sought to qualify Augusto Boal's term 'spect-actor' (for engaged and active spectators) in light of Jana Sanskriti's commitment to make their acting onstage and activism offstage constantly feed each other. With this term, I also wanted to highlight the ways in which consciousness-raising among 'the oppressed'

has to confront the complexities and ambiguities within categories such as 'the oppressed' which are not, in the end, stable and undifferentiated identities or subjectivities. Jana Sanskriti's performances and political action bears the traces of this difficult work of unifying a struggle that cannot count on a unified category of 'the oppressed'.

At the same time, their work has been met with gratifying signs of broad support. For example, *Satyada* describes how villagers in Bagda spontaneously brought lamps to illuminate a JS performance, revealing an unrehearsed eagerness to watch JS plays. Renuka's account of the woman who is initially too shy to attend their performance and with some encouragement becomes the first spect-actor in their performance at Jamshedpur is another example. *Kavitadi* considers the fact that 'married women are able to do theatre and that they are able to explain to their husbands that this is the kind of theatre they do' the 'biggest transformation of all' within JS history (Bera, this volume). As *Chittada* and others recount, such a transformation entailed decades of ongoing criticisms from neighbours and family members. But, the important thing for JS activists was maintaining a 'continuity between the principles of my work and my life' which led to striking personal choices made by those like *Chittada* who married a divorced woman without taking any dowry (Pramanik, this volume).

Perhaps one of the most telling examples of onstage-offstage activism expressing broad audience support for JS appears in Pradeep Haldar's essay. Pradeep speaks of villagers who drew on cues and critiques they learned from the JS play BPL (Below the Poverty Line) to make life hell for government ration-dealers. Despite numerous such examples of offstage audience activism, JS activists don't harbour an inflated sense of their work. Pradeep Haldar's account of the effect of BPL on villagers is followed by this question: 'Now someone might ask, "How do you know it is the result of your play that is making people demand all of this?"' (Haldar, this volume). Pradeep's response to this commonly asked question is simply brilliant and I quote it at length. He says:

Well, that ration-dealer is a man from our village. He comes to us every day and says 'Brother what kind of play have you started? People come to me daily and give me such a hard time.' We asked him in turn, 'How do you know they are coming to you as a result of our play.' He said, 'Well, because nobody asked us these questions before.' After your plays, every day people come and say any number of things. If you're not leading them to this, then you tell me who is?' We asked him, 'Are the questions people are asking valid or not? Are we showing incorrect things in the plays?' He responded, 'Well, you may be showing the correct things in your play, but how can I give a real receipt for the rations when every other dealer scribbles things on a chit of paper. In

any case, who gives the correct amount of rice and wheat to people? And if they don't give less, how would it be sustainable as a shop?' We said, 'Why are you saying all of this to us? Why don't you try to respond in this way to the ones who are coming to you?' When we said this, the dealer's face lost all colour and he left.

This is a spect-actor of history. One who engages in constant critical play on and offstage by upsetting the assumed boundaries between fiction and reality in order to construct social change. This spect-actor of history takes the limits of becoming a spect-actor in performances seriously, not in order to generate apathy in the face of the complexity of real life, but to rejuvenate political struggle itself. Thus, Pradeep places the general skepticism about the real life efficacy of Forum theatre right back into the lap of the offstage oppressor. Pradeep asks the ration-dealer *himself* how he knows that JS plays are causing all this trouble for him. The ration-dealer is unconcerned about the assumed boundaries between fiction and reality when he admits that he was not harassed about accountability, receipts, and his corruption before the JS play. As far he is concerned, the absence of accountability for corruption made being a ration-dealer (an ostensibly state enterprise) a profitable business! And the JS play has created trouble by creating a norm of seeking accountability at the ration-shop. Rather than allow the ration-dealer to have the last word on harassment Pradeep forces recognition of who is harassing whom by asking the ration-dealer to confront the public with the rationale that honesty and accountability will sink his business.

Pritidi's account of the women's theatre team in Basar which strengthened the anti-liquor struggle in her area is similarly instructive. Pritidi acknowledges that there was an extant liquor struggle prior to JS initiatives in the area. For her, theatre adds to this endeavour in a powerful way as apparent from the story of the husband who was persuaded to allow his wife to be part of the theatre team once he watched their rehearsals. Moreover, this husband, who was previously given to excessive drink, now felt compelled to report to Pritidi that he no longer drinks. As Pritidi puts it, 'Maybe he does, or maybe he doesn't, but my point is that he is invested in telling me about his drinking' (Mondol, this volume). Similarly, Satyada speaks of the ways in which village intellectuals now frequently and casually draw on the 'evidence' and 'information' shared during Forum theatre performances as they debate issues on education, public food distribution, and other matters of local governance. These narratives reveal the many everyday ways in which action during performances have gained legitimacy in the social perceptions of the powerful and the vulnerable.

Over time, JS theatre teams and activists have built legitimacy in various contexts through their long-term relationships and involvement in people's

lives. For this, they have relied on family and social networks, and reciprocated their commitment to a larger sense of 'family'. While political parties, NGOs and corporations have relied on the discourse of 'family feeling' and 'service for the community' to extract cheap if not voluntary labour from people, JS has not engaged in this discourse for political economic gain. Family members of JS actors, activists, and members routinely spend time in Badu recovering from surgery at organisational cost, sons and daughters who have to travel on JS workshops or performances have left their parents in the care of other JS members with confidence. Kavitadi's daughter, Munmun's wedding in early 2010 was an organisational affair from start to finish. Apart from falling in love for which Munmun had to take sole responsibility, everything from the finances to discussions with prospective in-laws, right down to wedding accoutrements and invitation cards were produced by collective labour, financial support, and a shared spirit of celebration. Since Kavitadi's daughter was raised through collective labour, it is not surprising that the wedding ceremony bore the mark of her larger family. As Kavitadi describes the whole wedding affair, 'Anyone watching would have thought, "This was everyone's daughter"' (Bera, this volume).

On the strength of their long-term involvement in people's lives and their ongoing commitment and practice of scripting plays and power relations, JS activists have spawned other visible and momentous accomplishments. Take for example their construction of the Mukta Mancha in Digambarpur village. Fighting government disinterest in constructing everyday spaces for cultural practices in villages, JS decided to construct a space for everyday get-togethers and debates. 'But', Satyada asks, 'where's the money for it?' (Pal, this volume). In the end, performances yielded money, actors donated one day of their wages, wives collected straw, rice, and people brought mud from far and wide to construct with donated labour a space at an elevation from the fields surrounding it. The structure was formally inaugurated in 1997 and today 'villagers rehearse their *jatra* [folk theatre form] performances, village adjudication processes take place, children study there, children take singing, dancing, and poetry lessons, theatre workshops take place, and even the feast for a neighborhood wedding ceremony takes place in this space' (Pal, this volume). The Digambarpur Mukta Mancha is a concretisation of collective labour and imaginations. Not surprisingly, national and international visitors must travel there and pause to take in this materialisation of Jana Sanskriti's belief in what is possible.

Their accomplishments in the rural areas constantly seek an audience in urban areas, and this too is part of a larger political struggle that seeks to transform the devaluation of peasant lives and livelihood in the contemporary world. In an era where the logics of progress, development, and Marxism alike

treat the peasantry with disdain and see it as a category of the past, JS commits to publicly staging the unequal relations between rural and urban areas that generates the demarcation of urban and rural as distinct worlds. As the activists recount, the year that Jana Sanskriti turned twelve years old they planned to have twelve JS theatre teams perform the play *Gayer Panchali* (Song of the Village) in twelve different parts of Calcutta at the same time. JS literally marked the geography of Calcutta's urban environment with the performative skills of twelve theatre teams from rural areas performing a play about urban bias, rural deprivation, and migrant villagers exploited and neglected in urban areas. The confident critique of urban bias in the script of the play was accompanied by various degrees of apprehension in the actors themselves—apprehension about performing well enough for the *babus* (the urban, educated rich) and about performing in the presence of Calcutta police. As Pradeep Sardar puts it, 'Even at that time, villagers were terrified of the police' (Sardar, this volume).

Twelve years also marked Jana Sanskriti's separation from the mass organisation with which it had associated in its formative years. While acknowledging their debt to shared resources, JS was compelled to distinguish itself from the mass organisation's ideological impoverishment. In her essay, *Simadi* rejects the display of sacrifice that laced the work of this mass organisation. She views the woman heading this organisation as part of a 'trend where a girl from a rich family sacrifices to do things for others' (Ganguly, this volume). As *Simadi* puts it, 'Sacrifice! What do we mean by sacrifice? Either you do this work out of love, or not at all. ... Today, when she calls for it, four cars will show up at her command, 150 people will come and stand in front of her in obedience. So where exactly is the sacrifice? What is it that she does not have?' (Ganguly, this volume). In light of these kinds of ideological disagreements with the mass organisation, we could say that, in its formative years JS was an incipient organisation *in itself* existing within a larger mass organisation. It took concrete name and shape *as JS working for itself* after twelve years, once its structural contradictions with the mass organisation were no longer defensible.

The principled position that JS took when it turned twelve is one example of many other kinds of principled positions that JS activists take in the course of their work in rural areas. The powerful position that individual activists have earned in their village contexts (as apparent in *Pritidi* and Pradeep Sardar's essays) is connected, in Renuka's essay, to the powerful position that collective struggle itself has acquired in these villages. Renuka expresses her wonder at the accomplishments of the anti-liquor rally in Taranagar. And although liquor production has not entirely stopped, 'they remain in fear of us' (Das, this volume). From the anti-liquor struggles, to the Right to Work campaign, to the demand for potable water in Pathar Pratima block, and to the rally to bring

electricity to the local health centre—Renuka’s essay shows that JS has normalised protest as the means to demand entitlements, resources, and rights from the state. It is not just individual JS protestors that have gained respect, but protest itself which has been rejuvenated and regained respect in these areas.

Normalising collective struggle can have cumulative effects that can sometimes surprise JS activists themselves. On 22 October, 2006, Renuka recounts, ‘We came from our villages in mechanised boats, walked for three-four hours, traveled in crowded trains’ to participate in a spect-actor rally that demanded education and a space for debate (Das, this volume). She adds, ‘This is unthinkable. Till today, no political party has been able to do this even when the call for political action is laced with an offer of fish curry and rice. I could not imagine it myself’ (ibid.). It is not surprising that the international participants at the Muktaadhara festival in 2006 were struck by the unprecedented gathering of approximately 12,000 spect-actors. As Sima*di* puts it, ‘We ourselves did not think that there would be more than 3000 people joining in the spect-actor rally. ... These are not salaried people. They are not being promised any services from us in exchange for this gathering. On what basis did they gather there?’ (Ganguly, this volume). Unless we understand JS history across space and time this visible show of collective strength might seem like an anomalous expression of momentary enthusiasm. The spect-actor rally is a moment that is far from momentary. Years of committed engagement and grassroots struggle by JS made the spect-actor rally in Kolkata a worthwhile journey for villagers, rather than a performed duty they enacted in exchange for a pre-scripted form of political economic gain.

Critical Possibility in the Inter-cultural Moment

From all accounts, Julian Boal tried to prepare his father, Augusto Boal’s heart for the sight of this spect-actor rally in 2006. Julian Boal’s efforts were in vain. This was an unprecedented moment in the history of the ‘theatre of the oppressed’ movement even for Augusto Boal. Augusto Boal’s appreciation for the significance of this rally in TO history seems to deify this accomplishment all the more for JS activists. What Boal had not imagined possible, what had not existed before was there for all to see and experience. International participants shared in the exhilarating moment. They too traveled from far and wide, on planes and trains to get to the JS spect-actor rally. As I read accounts of their experience, I found the ‘pessimism of my intellect’ on high alert based on the skepticism I have learned from JS and other scholars and practitioners of theatre such as Rustom Bharucha. Bharucha, among others, has written about the ways in which inter-cultural practices, festivals, and performances tend to hide from view the wide gulfs of knowledge and power that enable cross-

cultural interactions to occur in the first place (Bharucha 2000). Notwithstanding the celebratory mood, Bharucha urges us to consider who travels where, under what conditions, to learn from whom, exchanging what and on what terms, with what kind of disregard for contextual specificity, and with what privilege and capacity to generalise. These are the issues that inform the pessimism of my intellect when I think of Jana Sanskriti's intercultural encounters.

At the same time, even as I keep in mind my absence from these inter-cultural spaces, I cannot help appreciate the kind of possibility generated in these spaces. Jana Sanskriti's 'optimism of the intellect' equally infects my reading of these moments. Like me, the participants in Muktheadhara who wrote for this volume are moved to different degrees. Agneta Josephson for example, points out that, across the gulf of language barriers at the rally, people shared in the moment by listening, they communicated through the 'exchanging of looks, movement of our bodies, the fan, the pictures on the camera, the laughter and the water, we shared in the heat' (Josephson, this volume). On the other hand, the Muktheadhara festival was also an occasion for her to decipher, recognise, and reflect on the differences among Swedish, Brazilian, and Indian aesthetic styles as they emerge from different 'body languages of daily life' (ibid.). Josephson juxtaposes the silent oppression in a rich, secular country like Sweden and her belief that dialogue across cultures enables us to confront such silences by 'seeing with parts of our eyes and listening with parts of our ears' that have been rendered dormant in one's own contexts (ibid.). Similarly, Birgit Fritz tells us how Jana Sanskriti's community helped her unlearn her socialisation— characterised by what she calls 'post-war traumatic orderliness', the inner poverty of isolation in individualism, and the First World sense of exceptionalism and superiority in Austria (Fritz, this volume). As Fritz views it, Muktheadhara provides a space for an 'embodied experience' that enables each of us to undo the privilege and address the limits of our socialisation and particular place in the world (ibid.).

Another participant and author, Mariana Villani discovers 'new smells, colours, tastes, sounds' as a first time tourist in India. While her senses are overwhelmed, Villani finds that the images and metaphors used in Sanjoy Ganguly's theatre workshops prepares her to understand the performances in Digambarpur village where there are few translation aids to help unpack the symbolism. As Villani puts it, 'One of the most important reasons that I believe helped to break the language barrier, was the richness of allegorical images, music, and metaphors that create the aesthetics of the plays, that we had learned during the workshop' (Villani, this volume). Similarly, Till Baumann's plastic barrel performance and the conversations created during Muktheadhara that combined *tabla* and *dhol* in JS songs and dance, with Samba-Reggae and Afoxé speaks of modes of communication that transcend the verbal to consider the

possibility of other kinds of sonic collaborations. Contrary to inter-cultural performances sponsored by nationalist cultural policy which tend to obscure various dynamics of global, national, and local inequality, grassroots transnational encounters in JS space have the capacity to think with a cross-section of experiences of living and working against inequality and injustice.

As Baumann says in his essay, 'There is a great lack of work and perspectives, but not of empty plastic barrels from former industrial times. We had been playing and experimenting for years with the sound and vision of blue and black plastic barrels' (Baumann, this volume). The varied rhythms and instruments brought together from different contexts reveals percussion as something born out of particular experiences of capitalism, slavery, nation-building, postcolonialism, and socialism. While Muktheadhara does not automatically generate critical recognition of the contextual specificity and common percussion-languages across different uses of percussion, it does create the occasion for such recognition and reflection on the similarities, specificities, and differences of experiments with critical percussion and performance across spaces.

Martha Lee Kemper's comment that 'It wasn't yoga that they [JS members] engaged in to start each day together. It was badminton!', is the kind of small surprise that these inter-cultural encounters can generate (Kemper, this volume). Although she is familiar with ensemble theatre (dedicated to collaborative creation and community activism), she realises that for JS, theatre is a core strategy, rather than one among many tools of value in their trade. She notices that without prior notice and advertisement, JS is able to pull a crowd because of their long-term presence in villages. She is surprised to learn as she puts it, 'that the company may revisit a community several times, performing the same play over and over' moving over the course of subsequent performances from angry reactions to debate, discussion, and dialogue (ibid.). From the involvement of families in JS productions, to engrossed audiences, from the care taken with costumes to the concentration with which activists draft petitions to the government, Kemper concludes 'these experiences have directly impacted my work and life as an actor and theatre teacher living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA' (ibid.). A glimpse of how vital theatre can be in making community convinces Kemper that given the opportunity, students in and around Philadelphia can address 'problems in their neighborhoods—problems of gun violence, alcoholism, and domestic violence ... can manifest the same powerful commitment, intention and creativity that I saw in the village teams' (ibid.). Others like Mariana Villani were similarly inspired to intensify and extend their uses of TO methodology so that Villani built new networks in Barcelona while initiating Relatosur (Latin American network of TO) in 2008.

While Kemper's essay performatively takes us from moment of arrival to

moment of persuasion, Barbara Santos's opening thoughts deny comfort and take us into the core of her experiences of a piercing and pervasive sense of 'difference' as a foreign visitor and practitioner in a new place. As she puts it, the intensity of difference challenged 'our belief in the possibility that we could share a common language' (Santos, this volume). The familiar space of theatre workshops enhances rather than overcomes her encounter with 'difference'. Santos is cognizant of a certain spiritual and mystical imaginary that surrounds international participants' view of JS, which is entirely contrasted with what she perceives to be Jana Sanskriti's real goal of enabling 'concrete actions of real citizens to be effective' (ibid.). She brings the idealised imaginary of sacred India down to earth with references to India's software industry and exported films. Through the interstices of this initial experience of difference in India and encounter with misrepresentations of India, Santos calls for caution so that idealised, spiritualised, and aesthetised perceptions of political activism do not inadvertently engage in the traffic of culturalist and colonialist representations that TO is meant to overcome. She is all too familiar with this kind of aesthetisation of Brazilians in intercultural encounters in Brazil. Her message is unadulterated, 'As representatives of so many societies that were colonisers and many societies that have been colonised, we are still subject to such ideological invasions and we need to combat them' (ibid.).

To this end, Santos proposes to characterise TO methodology at the level of 'essence' rather than 'appearance' so that we look beyond momentary encounters and stereotypical accounts to learn about the differences and similarities in strategies and activism across international TO spaces. This is perhaps best exemplified in her unease with the JS strategy of various theatre teams performing the same play, which she distinguishes from the Boalian method of training activists who are like 'birds who digest the seeds from the tree of TO and then spread these to new communities, building new TO practices in other parts of the world' (ibid.). Santos does not discuss the JS plays scripted by various theatre teams such as *Sarva Shiksha* (Education for All), which may not make it to high-profile events such as Muktaadhara or international festivals. However, as she puzzles over JS strategy she does recognise that one function of performing the same play is to have a JS 'flag' where the aesthetics are recognisable enough to cross borders of intra-cultural and inter-cultural communication. Understanding Santos's unease with Jana Sanskriti's 'multiplication' of performances of the same play and thinking about the historical context in which the JS strategy takes the form that it does, is the kind of task that has the capacity to take Muktaadhara from inter-cultural encounter to critical dialogue.

Brian Brophy's essay juxtaposes what he views as moments of inter-cultural possibility with his own interpretations of JS performances to argue for 'respect

for imperfection' (Brophy, this volume). He grasps for metaphors and symbols that allow him to understand JS performances to argue that, in the end, 'respect for imperfection' in interpreting such performances helps recognise the limits of those who face the inter-cultural encounter with language and cultural barriers. Such respect for imperfection is equally significant for understanding and confronting intracultural divisions that circumscribe the struggle to redistribute the means of representation. Brophy's essay resonates with Fritz's realisation that her exposure to critical political analysis through TO need not mean that she has to respond to and be responsible for social change everywhere. As Birgit Fritz puts it, 'The inner pressure I had put on myself, by wanting to live up to TO, with political activism, multiplying, facilitating and living as a single person was too much' (Fritz, this volume). Part of the wisdom emergent in the inter-cultural encounter among TO practitioners is precisely learning how to let go of thinking of oneself as the sovereign subject who bears the privilege and burden of social change. In her essay, Fritz recalls Sanjoy Ganguly's words—'Who are you to think that you invented the world?'—which helped her temper her need to drive social change through the realisation that she cannot have all the answers (*ibid.*). Fritz expresses a sceptical optimism when she speaks of activism as 'thinking the unthinkable', balancing vision with practicality, neither constrained by the greed that drives desire in capitalist society nor defeated by the unknown. Here she sees JS as a 'movement that is ready for the unknown' (Fritz, this volume).

Apart from being wary of colonialist and culturalist interpretations as Barbara Santos urges us to do, and the need for respecting imperfection as Brian Brophy suggests, inter-cultural encounters also highlight the multiplicity and indeterminacy of symbols circulating in such spaces. For example, Brian Brophy's essay searches for the meaning and purpose of mythological metaphors in JS performances, wondering whether these are projected as effective symbols of social change or whether their power is depicted as inadequate for worldly change. By contrast, Ralph Yarrow notes that Sanjoy Ganguly 'defines the spiritual as the human capacity for relationship' (Ganguly 2010 cited in Yarrow, this volume). This is quite contrary to dominant uses of religion which service majoritarian nationalist projects *and* the selectively articulated secularism of Eurocentric modernity. In Sanjoy Ganguly's theory of social change, there is no hard and fast boundary between tradition and modernity, spirituality and politics, even as he critiques the instrumental politicisation of religion in conventional politics (Ganguly 2004, 2010). It is quite likely that Sanjoy Ganguly's emphasis on spirituality takes its cue from the lived experience of faith among JS members who are not compelled to distinguish religion from politics as dutifully as academics and practitioners trained in a Western episteme of secularism might do. The critical use and

analysis of faith in social struggle bears the mark of commitment to the context of Jana Sanskriti's work, rather than viewing the political commitment to separate religion from politics as *the* only definition of progressive politics.

The various essays in this volume interpret religious symbols in JS performances and 'spirituality' in Sanjoy Ganguly's theory in markedly different ways. In some ways, the hope of collaboration in such transnational gatherings is tempered by the realisation that the attempt to construct dialogue across borders often entails a mutual experience of 'missing the point'. At the same time, thinking with the TO and JS philosophy of seeking several interpretations of the same reality, I take heart in the discrepancies among various views of JS spirituality in these essays. From Barbara Santos who rejects the reading of JS as spiritual and as an outcome of a colonialist-culturalist view of India to Brian Brophy who attempts to decipher the contained and critical use of religious symbols in plays, to Ralph Yarrow's reliance on Sanjoy Ganguly's (2010) recent book for the meaning of spirituality, perhaps all we can conclude is the importance of this subject to JS members and the participants at the Muktaadhara festival. Like the critique of 'family' in JS plays and the simultaneous construction of a JS 'family', Jana Sanskriti's use of religious symbols onstage bears a complicated relationship to the use of spirituality as means of activism offstage. There is no single narrative articulating the meaning of spirituality and religious symbolism, because the relationship between spirituality and 'critical thinking' is not set in stone, and like anything else it must be subject to debate. As such, to use Barbara Santos's terms to different effect, the appearance of 'spirituality' in JS space and performance can neither be assumed to be straightforward signs of the essence of India and JS, nor can the signs of spirituality and religion be discounted as insignificant ingredients of a critical political activism. Rather than dwell in the slippery indeterminacy of such a declaration, the voices in this volume suggest a significant need for further dialogue on this subject.

Inter-cultural encounters with JS have also produced opportunities and occasions for reflecting on other conceptions such as political love, hope, and respect in light of their regard for a remarkable theatrical method and a specific social movement that practices it. As I have just suggested, such encounters also produce many opportunities for 'missing the point' coming as we do from various locations, using different languages, and with various degrees of understanding the historical and cultural context of Jana Sanskriti's work. Despite these slippages, people speak of inspiration and hope, respect and love in these essays. In his essay, Julian Boal wants to stick the facts that inspire his respect and love. He says, that JS 'members' (in the strict sense of the term) has swelled to 600 people in the last 25 years and the number of regular spect-actors engaging in JS work across India amounts to at least 20,000 people.

Moreover, taking into account the 30 odd mass movements in India with which JS has worked regularly over the years, their reach spreads to about 2 million people.

Beyond the numbers, Julian Boal discusses the singularity of JS which has swelled its ranks not in order to form the cultural front of a pre-given political entity. Rather, for Boal, JS is singular because it has swelled its ranks as a result of practicing its principles by seeking democracy everywhere, while shunning spaces, organisations, and entities wherever and whenever the rhetoric of democracy is betrayed in practice. JS is also singular because as a non-partisan entity, it is neither cushioned by political parties and state support, nor has it succumbed to the conditional foreign aid that constrains possibility and struggle. JS has even risked its domestic funding because of their primary commitment to democracy (Da Costa 2010b). They had the courage and integrity to reduce rather than increase the pre-primary schooling component of their programming even though the school program was popular because it created jobs in rural areas while improving the access and quality of village schooling. When JS realised that their schools were becoming substitutes for government schooling rather than enhancing the quality of state-sponsored primary education, they reduced their programming. Ultimately, JS places social transformation above the short-term gains of its popularity.

With its non-partisan politics and a funding structure that refuses the structured dependency of neo-colonial development projects, JS has constructed a network of coordinating members and village theatre teams which pursues the relentless task of spect-acting on and offstage. As such, although, by his own admission, Boal wants to temper his love of JS by sticking to the facts, it is clear from his essay and numerous other essays by JS activists and visitors alike that a certain political love makes JS what it is. Not a naïve, individualistic, bourgeois love, but a political commitment to realising and living democracy. As Simadi phrases her primary aspiration for the future, 'Since aspirations are not taxed, I have a dream that one day dialogue in the way in which forum theatre enables it, will be compulsory before any decision is made, anywhere in the world. ... I want the world to reach the point when it is literally not possible to make a decision without discussion and dialogue.' This kind of statement is the hallmark of Jana Sanskriti's construction of the place of collective democracy in building present political struggles and a progressive future.

But, how do we make dialogue indispensable to political life? How do we ourselves commit to dialogue in multiple spheres and in multiple ways? In the spirit of furthering inter-cultural and transnational dialogue, Jane Plastow's essay points to the importance of rationally articulating an account of *how* and *why* JS activists came to hold the aspirations and goals that they do, *how* such aspirations can become reality, and what its significance might be to other

worlds of activism. She believes it possible and necessary to offer a systematic account of JS history and politics complementing Sanjoy Ganguly's passionate account of the same. Rather than elide the different social and epistemological locations that produces a tension between the poet (Sanjoy Ganguly) and the pedant (Jane Plastow herself), she articulates how this tension can be a productive force. While the poet woos with passion, the academic struggles to decipher in writing about JS some crucial details about 'contextual background, a helpful smattering of dates, a trajectory through the project, some moments of detailed imagery to bring the whole thing alive, and analysis of the significance of the work' (Plastow, this volume). These different styles are an important part of the inter-cultural encounter that deserves attention if it is to go beyond encounter to produce cross-cultural communication.

Plastow compares Sanjoy Ganguly's style of political writing and work to that of Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire, arguing that each is an organic intellectual, passionately committed to living and working with the communities that they write about. While Sanjoy Ganguly might argue for rethinking rationality and rational discourse itself by invoking the promise of spirituality as human relationship, Plastow calls for a certain accountability in Ganguly's text and theory of activism precisely because she finds it 'compelling and deeply hopeful' (ibid.). Plastow's essay points to the need for organised articulation of Jana Sanskriti's history and work to enable a wider world to access and appreciate its rationale, practice, and theories in a systematic way. Not in order to reify the meaning of rationality, but in order to reach, converse with, and learn from broader audiences despite and because of the fact that people work with varied received conceptions of rationality. This pursuit of facts and organised text is also a mark of respect for JS, driven by the wish to see JS able to renew itself and to face new audiences and historical challenges.

I began this essay by asking the reader to recognise the optimism of the intellect and will that marks the JS struggle. This was not a call to neglect pessimism of the will or intellect. JS activists' careful optimism emerged organically in the process of facing the obstacles and challenges of their work. Essays by JS activists offer a grounded view of their experiences with political struggle over the past twenty-five years which captures their reasons for optimism and pessimism. Similarly, while reflecting on the possibilities and limits of the immensely hopeful energy in essays by participants in Muktheadhara, in this section I have highlighted commonly discussed topics that participants highlight as subjects for future critical dialogue at Muktheadhara and beyond. Together, the essays by JS activists and Muktheadhara participants allow readers to discern the possibility and limits of the organic formation of careful optimism in Jana Sanskriti's inter-cultural spaces and transnational dialogues.

Optimism of the Intellect

In his essay, Douglas Paterson argues that the 'practice of asking much from people and much more from themselves is ... a core characteristic of Jana Sanskriti' (Paterson, this volume). JS, he goes on to say, is not only able to create transformation because it is able to imagine something different, it is able to do so while creating 'deep community' through a reliance on 'collective imagination', 'inner strength' of JS activists, and a ferocious but 'quiet resolve' to social justice (ibid.). Militants, is Barbara Santos's preferred term for JS activists. Ralph Yarrow is similarly blunt in commending Sanjoy Ganguly when he says that 'What you have created is vital for local democracy in India ... that testifies to an almost unbelievable commitment, vision, and input' (Yarrow, this volume). In concluding this introduction, I highlight some of the key issues that JS faces in its present and near future as highlighted in this volume.

At this moment in JS history, rather than be satisfied with lavishing praise on JS, Yarrow's letter to Sanjoy Ganguly is an effort to take stock of 'the challenges, the possibilities, the dangers' in terms of both the context of their work and in terms of the theatrical form JS has relied on (ibid.). Yarrow highlights a foundational concern with how JS can continue to gain from and give to the international TO field while strengthening its grassroots work of building democracy in India without dispersing the energies of its actors, activists, and leaders too far. Folded into this primary concern is the need to balance JS strengths in adapting TO aesthetics to the Indian context with a commitment to learning new artistic skills and playing new roles. He also suggests avoiding a guru-mentality vis-à-vis Boal which can channel JS energy into rethinking their exclusionary policing of 'Theatre for Development' and other Applied Theatre practitioners within and beyond India and make them more receptive to other aesthetic training and political collaborations.

As I read Yarrow's concerns, it is important to consider, to what degree Jana Sanskriti's astute wariness towards the dilution of 'the political' in other uses of Forum Theatre within and beyond India is producing a general disregard for concretely understanding what draws marginalised populations to such theatre groups and NGOs and what keeps them there. Put differently, to the extent that there are plenty of marginalised people who work with groups that JS views as sullied in political form and practice, how does this square with the JS 'belief in the intelligence and the rational creative capacity of all people' (ibid.)? Are the marginalised populations that participate in what JS sees as sullied forms of theatre and politics lacking in intelligence and rational creative capacity so that they are simply duped by the elite who manage these organisations? Or, is it worth collaborating with such organisations to enhance critical dialogue, introspection, and ultimately, the optimism for a broader political struggle?

The dilemma of constructing collective democracy is that TO is a method that allows people to express their passions in a context where ‘these very passions ... are increasingly linked to vested political and economic interests (Tata, CPI(M) and so on)’ (ibid.). Yarrow’s question about whether there is a way to network with others, both, international and national, with regard to financial, political, or aesthetic matters is a crucial point of debate. The fact that, for the last twenty five years, JS has not succumbed to a relation of dependency with external funders is a remarkable accomplishment in itself. Yarrow’s question however presses us to think ahead to a time when the desires generated by neoliberal development and consumer capitalism take on greater efficacy in the communities where JS works, making JS membership and work increasingly fragile. In such a future which is not difficult to imagine, JS will be confronted with the need for ‘a more robust safety-net for your workers’ than is currently in place’ (ibid). Can a ‘deep community’ (Paterson, this volume) built from networking and working with other political and theatrical groups in India provide this safety-net of ideas and resources beyond that which JS can currently provide?

In the spirit of inter-cultural learning and careful optimism, I find it useful to juxtapose the challenges JS faces with the experiences of another theatre group, the Sistren Collective, which attempted to construct collective democracy in Jamaica from 1977 through till the early 1990s (Ford-Smith 1997). The group built a significant reputation in Jamaica based on its participatory theatre method for narrating and performing working class women’s lives. Like JS, Sistren is a product of its time. Sistren was constituted during the social democratic government of Michael Manley. Sistren was formed as a result of the School of Drama’s outreach work in working class communities initiated during Manley’s left-leaning government. This government also had a programme aimed at transitioning women into waged-work. Sistren’s working class women members were trained by this state program to become street cleaners and teachers’ aides. While receiving support from the government, Sistren also went beyond the terms of state programmes by enabling working-class women to articulate their problems through an emphasis on cultural production and feminist critiques of productive labour. Finally, Sistren was an unprecedented space for discussing sexuality and reproductive rights of working class women in contrast to the Jamaican feminist movement of the time which dismissed such issues as a Westernised ‘anti-men’ approach.

In 1980, things changed. The new Jamaican government undermined social democratic goals and pursued liberalisation policies instead, subjecting Jamaica to IMF loan conditionalities, shrinking state support, subsidies, and programs that constituted the safety-net for the poorest in Jamaican society. This is similar to the transitions that India has undergone since the 1990s. With state support

for private capital and the retraction of state support for citizen welfare, organisations such as JS have become a proxy safety-net for marginalised populations even though JS has studiously fought the rut of becoming a service-providing NGO. JS has refused the service-providing mission because it is vigilant about the contradictions of 'service' in a liberalised economy. But in privileging its goal of collective democracy, JS sometimes finds itself losing its trained labour to NGOs that do provide services and salaries. As such, over time, JS has had to rethink whether to pay for the theatrical work done by JS teams. As *Satyada's* essay highlights best, the complications, possibilities, and dangers of such a decision is hardly lost on JS activists.

Once Jamaica was liberalised, funding for organisations such as Sistren was tied to external development agencies which, at the time, was tied to ideas about employing women in waged-work or making women income-generators. As Ford-Smith notes, not only did this kind of funding guideline disregard the fact that women were already primary workers in households, fields, and some factories and markets, the rationale of development agencies also ignored feminist insights because funding agencies refused to see particular kinds of work (eg. housework and theatrical work) as productive work. Sistren's dependence on such funders meant dissipating their own energy and workforce to focus on income-generating activities that were more acceptable to the funders than theatrical work alone. Ironically, in the long run it was apparent that theatre earned Sistren income while other income-generating activity failed to do so.

There are obvious differences between JS and Sistren and we can acknowledge with great relief and optimism that JS has not succumbed to the trap of dependency on external funders or been derailed in its work by the requirements of funding conditionalities. Nonetheless, issues of financial sustainability have huge significance for JS today and not surprisingly they receive attention in Ralph Yarrow's letter. The question of where JS focus should lie is central to the question of finance. Should JS spend its energies on enhancing 'deep community' (Paterson, this volume) with other mass organisations in India or should it satiate the needs of the international TO community which sees JS as 'one of the leading advocates of Augusto's legacy' (Yarrow, this volume)? Put differently, is JS structurally dependent on enhancing its international TO reputation in order to finance its work on local collective democracy? Might this pursuit exhaust the pool of available JS energy, skills, and labour so that JS is unable go beyond preemptory policing of problematic uses of theatre for development and occasional theatrical collaborations with mass organisations in India?

In her remarkably honest essay, Sistren's middle-class member and artistic director Honor Ford-Smith has also sought to understand internal dynamics

within the organisation that contributed to problems in Sistren. Rather than place the blame entirely on external constraints of development funding and liberalising policies, Ford-Smith is committed to understanding ‘how power worked both among us and outside of us’ (Ford-Smith 1997, 215). She acknowledges that ‘volunteerism, good intentions, and hard work were not strong enough weapons against the weight of a history of multileveled colonialism’ (ibid.). I dwell on Sistren’s experience at length because I believe that the spirit of such reflexive confrontation as Ford-Smith engages in, is not aimed at generating pessimism of the intellect or will. Rather, Sistren’s experience shows that the cost of silence and denials about internal contradictions are high. For example, Sistren’s work was aimed at *education and democracy* through theatre, and quite like JS, Sistren sought to separate this goal from the question of *employment* through theatre. This effort to see education and theatrical work as distinct from waged-work is of course a laudable and challenging one in a capitalist world, as I have discussed earlier in this introduction. But treating these in absolutely distinct terms also undermined Sistren’s goals in the end.

I wonder about the similar dangers for JS. For example, Pritidi argues that while JS has started to pay some of its women’s theatre team members a small fee for performances when the organisation has such funds available, at the same time, Pritidi is unambivalent when she states that, ‘Jana Sanskriti is not an organisation that shows people the path to a livelihood’ (Mondol, this volume). Pritidi’s conviction comes from the principle of separating education and political work from the corrupting influence of money. This conviction plays a crucial role in JS history, ideology, and integrity. At the same time, juxtaposed with Sistren’s experience, we might ask whether there are other ways of validating the relationship (rather than only enforcing a separation) between education and employment. Ford-Smith bemoans the fact that Sistren did not come up with ways of giving professional validation to the skills that working class women acquired on-the-job at Sistren. As a result, quite contrary to the middle-class women in Sistren whose class, race, and educational qualifications made them marketable in other organisations and therefore independent of Sistren, the working class women who had acquired skills at Sistren had no credentials and qualifications to show for their learning on-the-Sistren-job, outside Sistren. Their education at Sistren did not translate into employability and marketability. As such, Sistren’s insistence on separating education from employment had the unintended result of reproducing working class women’s dependence on and middle-class women’s independence from Sistren. After all, if members could only be salaried, employable, artistically and politically effective in Sistren, then Ford-Smith argues it is questionable whether Sistren had been able to transform the social structures of dependency

and inequality that it set out to transform in the first place.

There are parallels with the JS experience here, not least because these are both theatre groups and the need for securing consistent funding for a group largely led by working class interests and membership is a massive challenge. Essays by JS activists in this volume repeatedly express anxieties about activists' futures and whether the organisation will always be there. *Satyada* argues that activists/actors are increasingly independent of Sanjoy Ganguly's aesthetic direction, while recognising the need for people with other skills to address work in the Badu office. Activists such as Renuka and Priti *di* also express concern about whether the next generation of workers doing grant-writing will do so with the principles and the integrity that built this organisation in the last twenty five years. In this regard, it must be said that as an urban, educated, middle-class woman, I have the privilege, the means, and qualifications to choose to live and work elsewhere while contributing to Jana Sanskriti's work. JS was one landmark in my political coming of age, but I am not a part of Jana Sanskriti's daily office work and struggle. Given this kind of distanced friendship with Jana Sanskriti's middle-class friends and associates, increasingly, the group has been forced to rethink its relationship to professional development workers who might come in as salaried workers to do grant-writing work, with the attendant benefits and disadvantages of such a decision.

The fact that the core coordinating activists' futures and welfare is tied to the welfare of the organisation as *Satyada* notes in his essay, suggests that his aspirations are coincident with those of the organisation. In one sense, of course, this is a remarkable expression of ownership and belonging. And this link between individual and collective welfare is true for many members of JS, not just its most dedicated leaders within the JS coordination committee. Nonetheless, differential class positions, educational qualifications and marketable skills within JS and its associates means that anxiety about individual and organisational futures has unequal implications for the different people connected with JS. And this is true despite the fact that class inequalities, gender divisions, and other such internal dynamics are regularly discussed and faced within JS. For example, middle-class associates play predictable roles in the spectrum of work within JS, but it is equally true that JS actors have now begun to direct their own plays without intervention from middle-class directors. Another example is that while JS members express their regard for *Simadi* and *Sanjoyda* sometimes viewing them as mother and father in and of the organisation, it is equally true that such expressions of paternal and maternal authority and respect are accompanied by playful rejection of *Simadi's* assumed social role of motherly love (as apparent in the Bimal episode during the cycle rally) and frank criticism of Sanjoy's authority in daily organisational daily life (as in *Chittada's* essay). Considering the frequency, frankness, and commitment

characterising internal organisational dialogue, I view JS as a most remarkable and unique organisation.

Ultimately, JS strength and legitimacy is nurtured by the fact that 'JS has not abandoned its primary goal of privileging dialogue which is the primary ingredient of democracy' to use Satyada's words. JS taught me that without optimism and dialogue in the face of reactionary forces, the world cannot have social change. This book is both outcome of and contribution to that commitment to dialogue and collective democracy. I hope readers will find it a rich resource for learning from JS challenges, experiences, and accomplishments in theatre and collective democracy. I also hope this book will be read as a useful document that articulates points for further dialogue on the internal and external contradictions within organisations such as JS, which bear the mark of challenges facing political struggles and collective democracy in our time.

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Either you do this work out of love, or not at all

Sima Ganguly

My childhood was not an ordinary one. My household consisted of father, mother, and my five brothers and sisters. Other than them, our household also consisted of my father's elder brother's children, his elder sisters' children, my father's two widowed elder sisters, his younger brother and wife, and my paternal grandmother. Our home was owned collectively by the men of this household—it was a joint family. My father's elder brother worked at the colliery. And my father and his elder brother used to talk about this issue a lot before the house was built. I had heard them talk frequently about my father's plans to take care of the education of all the children and his brother's plans to cover the costs of building our collective home. Our house was in Belegkata, in Kolkata, right in the centre of town.

In my childhood, I have seen my mother and aunt eating out of the same plate. So they had a great friendship. But on the other hand, somewhere there was something missing. I didn't realize this then, but now I understand that households are full of self-interest. Who is getting what kinds of benefits, who is not, whose children are doing well, who is not—there is a constant competition over these issues. My younger uncle had the kind of personality where he would take benefits from everyone but give nothing in return to anyone. Yet, he would reserve the fiercest criticism for the person from whom he received the most. Everyone was bad in his eyes while he was the best person. He belonged to that species of person. I have heard from elders in the family, that when we bought the land for this house, from that time till the time that the house was constructed, he did not spend a single paisa. Despite this, my father put his name in the registration of the house. Everyone listened to my father because he was highly educated. Everyone respected his word.

My father was very conservative. He did not give the women of the household any freedom. He always kept them on a strict leash—whether you are his sister or his cousins. In our childhood, our father gave his children no time. I now understand this to be a result of the responsibility for such a large household. I think I feared my father more than I loved him. In the morning, my father would leave at dawn to conduct private tuitions and he would return at 10 am. After his bath, he would head out to teach in the higher secondary school near my home. He was a school teacher. He would return from school at 4pm. He would eat something and then leave again for tuitions. He returned home at 11pm. He worked so hard to earn money. Yet, his patriarchy caused me a lot of pain. I have seen my mother suffer a lot. Now I can analyse this. Although I noticed my mother's pain at the time, I had no means of empathizing

in any real way. My mother's simple ways, her naïve and mechanical regard for him, that was painful for me to watch. Today, it is painful for me to stir my memory and look back. My mother had no say on any issue. She had no authority to order anyone. She only obeyed orders—from her youth till today when she is old. I only wonder whether her acceptance of everything was because she didn't have much education. And is it education that made my father's behavior so uneducated?

I am not a researcher so I will not be able to draw conclusions about this observation. But, I think family is quite strange. This is the same father who loved everyone. When he died, I heard people say that the Goddess Lakshmi has left the house. The life he gave to the household while he was there, died with him. It makes me wonder how this is the same man who caused me pain? Even as our father could not give us time, at the same time, I remember clearly that during winter months, he would put his harmonium inside my mosquito net and say, 'Practicing in the winter-time makes for an artist's voice.' I could not understand this dichotomy in my father. On the one hand, he was not able to give us time, this is true. On the other hand, he would work hard to earn money enough to feed twenty five people. And then again, he gave no importance to my mother. In 1978, my younger uncle had to leave his job and he came to stay in my father's house. I remember my younger uncle staying with us year after year because he could not find a job. I saw my father seeking advice and permission from my younger uncle's wife before heading out to do the day's groceries to give them a sense of belonging and esteem in the home. Was he like this because of a patriarchal society? I don't know.

Quite often, I would steal one rupee from my father's pocket to go and eat *phuchka* and *chur-mur*.¹ If I would tell him then he would not let me go out and I would not be able to eat *phuchka* and *chur-mur*. So I would steal the money in secret and go out. These were small ways in which I sought my freedom in my youth. In our home, the third floor terrace was our space of freedom. After all, my father would not let us go out anywhere. But on this terrace I could be alone and enjoy myself. I could see from above how many lovers were walking by. I could not bring this sight into the reality of my life because I had my father in my brain.

When I was very young, I played *hadudu* (kabaddi) and *chor-chor* (police and thieves), and when I became a little older I did yoga. But apart from that, I was unable to do most things because of my health. I had to stop almost all my physical activities quite early. They found a serious problem in my leg. I really wanted to learn dance, but I could not do this because of my leg. I really wanted to sing and I could not do that either. Whenever I thought of starting lessons,

¹ Popular street-food snacks.

my health betrayed me. It hurt me to think that my body was not normal. Moreover, my mind felt pressure because of the state of my health. I could not find mental strength as a result of my body. When I saw girls going by on cycles it made me want to cry.

My leg was operated upon four times. On the last surgery, doctors wondered whether they could even save the leg. I also had severe asthma. I would have to be admitted in the hospital to alleviate it. I remember that one night I had a very severe attack. My younger brother sat next to me all night to help ease the problem. My elder brother did a lot for me. He carried me to the hospital when I was unable to walk. I remember these things these days. I have seen my mother take care of all the housework and take me to so many hospitals so many different times—for that leg of mine. To tell you the truth much of my youth was spent in the hospital. Today, I am 46 years old and I have been admitted to the hospital twenty times. As a result, even when I think back to my youth, it is hard for me to find things that do not pertain to my health.

My school life was also quite interrupted. For every annual exam I was afflicted with something or the other which required me to be hospitalized. In school too, people would say that I had the bad fate of falling ill exactly during exam time. My studies suffered a lot. If someone asks me what year I did my class 10 or class 12 exams, it isn't easy for me to respond promptly because I was not able to do the exams at the right age. This fact of interrupted schooling stings me to this day. I really wanted to be a nurse when I grew up. This is probably because the innumerable times that I was in hospital, I have seen how patients are neglected.

I like the act of nursing people back to health. I understood this inclination in myself at a young age. I was thirteen when I was in hospital once. I could not sleep in the hospital at night. One night, at about two in the morning, I saw a widow standing next to her bed. There was something amiss in her way of standing. On that occasion, I was in hospital because of an appendix surgery. I myself had a hard time standing straight. Still, I went closer to her. I saw that she had a tube running through her arm and she was receiving blood. Yet, she had stood up. I called the sisters but none of them responded. At any rate, there was a bandage lying around. I somehow forced her to get into bed and almost lay on her to get her to conform. I tied her arms to the bed. I could then leave the room to call the sisters' attention. When I went to call the sister and the doctor, I could tell that they had been busy in love-making. When I went to call them, it enraged them. They said, 'Whatever might be going on in the ward, you don't have to worry about it. You stay in bed.' I remember I had screamed in response. We fought about this incident and ultimately, the doctor was changed. There are so many events such as this one. Each time I was admitted in hospital I have seen the neglect of older women. They used to hold

my father's hand and say, 'Will you promise us to put your daughter through a nursing degree?' They would bless me with happiness.

When I was young, I could not protest about anything. Or, one could also say that I had not learned to protest. Or should I say that I had not been raised in an environment of protest? After all, why wouldn't you protest? In this regard, I am reminded of life in the villages. Let's take for example, Renuka. When she first came to JS, she was fourteen years old. She had come through a particular environment of socialization. For example, she came to meetings, she listened, she thought about it, discussed it at home, and joined the work. My question is this: if this was me, would I be able to show this courage? Even as an urban educated girl, my father did not let me sing at a neighborhood club event because there would be young men there. My father is a Physics teacher in a higher secondary school. Renuka's father is a farmer with little class position in his society. Not only did Renuka join the organization, boys and girls acted in plays together, they even stayed together at night when the situation demanded it. Her father didn't raise unnecessary questions about whether Renuka should leave the home at this age and return late at night. My question is this: which of them is educated? Renuka's father, the farmer or my father, the Physics teacher? Renuka's father is not one of a kind in the villages. I can tell you about countless others. I have seen Satya's father accompany his daughter in law to meetings. Questions, questions, and more questions. The questions just swirl in my brain.

My elder sister received a love letter just this one time in her life. She was probably twenty years old then. Since my sister would not get permission to go out on her own, she made the excuse of buying me some ribbons so that she could have a legitimate reason to go out. But, my mother was suspicious and she followed us. She saw my sister talking to a boy. Since my mother was subject to patriarchy herself, to her this kind of freedom should be a rare indulgence, a safe-guarded luxury. When we returned home, there were a lot of questions. Naturally, my sister responded. My mother had thrown an iron rod on my sister's face. My mother would hit us for minor things in our childhood. Her anger towards the family, my father's negligence towards her, the pain of her mother-in-law, she was probably expressing her repressed anger against all of this, by beating us. At any rate, my sister's brief encounter with dreaming of love died quickly. Then the story of arranging my sister's marriage began in full earnest. Families that came to see her would diminish her, 'Your daughter is far too thin.' She would cry in bed and I would also lie in bed next to her and cry. I didn't cry out of understanding, but because they did not like my sister. In the end, my sister did get married. A new journey began for her.

The last surgery during my teenage years was at Students' Health Home. I was admitted there for four months. I also had a year of physiotherapy there. I

knew everyone at that hospital. The day I met Sanjoy, there was a blood donation camp at the Student's Health Home. They needed one more blood donor to fill their quota. When I found out, I volunteered my blood. Sanjoy was in a position in the Managing Committee of the Student's Health Home. I was impressed by his work and involvement with the Student's Health Home. I was attracted by the way in which everyone felt a deep regard for him. Our friendship developed. In time, without a word, we realized that we had fallen in love. Since my treatment was on, my father could not stop me. As I was raised in such a restricted environment, I reveled in the joy of freedom. The bard's lyrics echoed in my mind, 'In the vast sky, lies my freedom, light only light.' No one at home knew about Sanjoy and me. Secrets and lies. My love grew in the midst of this.

My desire for freedom was such that I knew nothing about Sanjoy's family and I enquired nothing about his life. When I was with Sanjoy I experienced for the first time what it means for someone to value you and what you are saying. I had only been restricted in my feelings and words so far. With Sanjoy I could dream and feel freedom. I heard stories of a world where you can get everything. Naturally, my aspiration for more of this freedom was so strong that I didn't think further about his family. My desperation made me fearless. In the end, people found out that I was in love with a young man. My elder brother gave me a good beating. Each and every person criticized me and admonished me as if I had done a terrible thing. I knew that if I had received this beating at any other time then I would probably break down in tears. Amazingly, this time, I did not shed a tear. When Sanjoy heard of this incident, the very next day, he took me on his bike and we got our marriage registered. A new chapter in my life began.

I got involved with JS just by being present in a particular environment. I was involved in its formative years. I hardly had a choice at that time. After all, everyone in the household began this work. I could not remain aloof and apart from it. Slowly, I realized how much I loved this work. There was no money in the organization in those days. I did what I could without any one instructing me. I felt a sense of responsibility. My in-laws' home was also a joint family. Among them, I loved my father-in-law the most. I have no hesitation in saying that he was my friend, philosopher, and guide. My father-in-law appreciated every contribution of mine—whether it was my cooking or my singing, he praised me at every step. I haven't met another human being who refused to find fault in others. To tell you the truth, I think he taught me how to love. Although my mother-in-law was very well-read in Rabindranath and Saratchandra and wanted to be a person with a conscience, the politics of being in a joint family created certain dichotomies in her. She was open and yet not open enough. She had to manage life in a joint family and had to manage relationships in it. She wanted to keep the 'big person' in the family satisfied.

As such, I did not deserve the kind of concern and attention that others in the family deserved.

As I have described earlier, I was born and brought up in a Bengali middle-class family. My generation of women tolerated a lot. My sister-in-law is from a totally different background. She was from a Punjabi background, her father was a brigadier, and her brother was a chartered accountant who had studied in London. She herself had done a Masters in Social Work in Delhi. Among her family members, she had different ideas. I could sense that she was different from her family. After all, she need not have chosen to do a degree in Social Work. Notwithstanding my perception of her socially-oriented attitudes, it is probably my failing that I had an inferiority complex with regard to her. I had an impression that she has sacrificed such a lot. I kept thinking that my contribution is tiny compared to her sacrifice. I thought this because I had no education compared to hers. I had this complex about her superiority, her dynamism, her facility with English and so forth. Now I understand that it was not my responsibility alone to fight this inferiority. Someone educated in MSW should have helped me fight it too. Now I realize that university degrees in Social Work cannot teach you how to change society. If you have no regard for human beings then no amount of studying can help with this goal. Interestingly, she was the leader of a women's organisation. But she never thought about feminism in relation to me. She never encouraged me in the ways that she encouraged other women.

I think she was part of a trend where a girl from a rich family sacrifices to do things for others. Sacrifice! What do we mean by sacrifice? Either you do this work out of love, or not at all. I used to hear the word 'sacrifice' a lot. Everyone was at the same time concerned with her comfort since she came from such an upper-class family. No doubt this affected our family life. But it also affected the shape the organization took in its early years. Today, when she calls for it, four cars will show up at her command, 150 people will come and stand in front of her in obedience. So where exactly is the sacrifice? What is it that she does not have? I am talking about the organisation that used to be headed by my sister-in-law—an organisation of women that used to work in association with Jana Sanskriti.

From that day till today, I have never seen anyone point out her faults. And if someone does point out such a fault, they have not remained with the organization. Rohini (from an equally educated and well-off background) started questioning her after she joined JS. At this time, Rohini was a huge support for me. She gave me a lot of strength by identifying my strengths to me and highlighting that not all that was happening in the organization was worthy of support. She had the strength to stand apart even as she was part of the organization. In 1997, we decided to put an end to our political relationship

with that organisation. I must mention here the role of Rohini: the kind of contribution Rohini has made to JS is incomparable.

Before JS became an independent organization, while we were still a part of the mass organization with which we began our work, there was a festival for Kolkata and the organization was rehearsing a play called 'Kolkata at 300' to celebrate its birth three hundred years ago. At the time we did not think of our plays as distinct. We didn't play up our work distinctly as JS's work. We did it as part of the mass organization work, cultural work, and social struggle. To put it in Boal's terms, if the lock is the mass organization you need a key to open up that work to the world. That key was cultural work. From the start, JS thought culture without politics is a dangerous thing. If there is no culture in politics, that too is dangerous. I have learned Hydrogen + Oxygen = H₂O. Similarly, culture + politics = politics + culture. You cannot have the one without the other. To expect one without the other is dangerous. JS has taught me to view things between intellect and heart. We kept the culture and politics intimately inter-twined. Without the mass organization, JS could not have done what it did at the time. In that regard, as an individual and as a member of JS I am extremely grateful for that foundational support.

A number of women were needed in that 'Kolkata at 300' play. We didn't have that many women from the village even at that time. I could hear everyone talking about the need for another woman in the play. That's when my father-in-law said, 'Why not have Sima perform this role? She doesn't have too much pressure on her housework at this moment. She can do it now.' My brother-in-law had supported this suggestion. That was my first entry into JS theatre. When I performed that play, people recognized a talent for theatre in me. Along with this recognition, came support to ensure that I could become a daily part of this organization's theatre. Slowly I became involved in JS's first play, *Gayer Panchali*. That was in 1988.

As I performed *Gayer Panchali*, I learned to reflect on myself. Those who have seen me perform in the past and those who see me perform now (22 years later), always ask how I am able to maintain the same energy in my performance. They ask how I am able to act out that scene where news comes to Sankirtan's home and wife (played by me in the play) about his death on a Kolkata construction site with the same anger and pain. 'How do you cry every time when you hear that news in each performance?' I should say that *Gayer Panchali* must have been performed at least 10,000 times. I would say that I am lucky that I have interacted with people in the village so much, received so much love from them, taken people to the hospital, been with so many people through so many life experiences. As such, the Sankirtan's scene is a scene I have known through experience. It was a reality I saw. The minute I hear his name Sankirtan onstage, it brings tears to my eyes because I think of the moment when I heard

this news about Sankirtan, the person I knew through my interactions with people.

I am glad that I don't have a degree in Social Work. My tears onstage came from learning how to love and be loved. I felt that intellectualism cannot accomplish things, you need *rasa* for it. Most importantly, if you do things using your head alone and not heart as well, then you cannot feel things in such depth. Now when people talk about the best actresses in JS, they talk about me. I am grateful to all those who bathed me in affection. And it also makes me wonder why I had suffered this inferiority all these years. This recognition of myself was only possible through JS. If I had not entered this world I would have carried the inferiority with myself for the rest of my life. This is how I started my work with JS and this is how 22 years of my involvement in theatre have passed.

In 1989, 13-14 theatre teams of JS, and KMS (Khet Majdoor Samiti) and SMS (Sramajeebi Mahila Samiti) collectively initiated a movement for Right to Work all year round for agricultural workers. For this, we decided to do a cycle rally from Kolkata to Delhi for 55 days performing along the way. A number of mass organizations had joined us along the way. By the time we reached Patna we had 250 cycles. Every day we cycled about 55-60 kilometres. In every place, mass organizations helped us along the way. They arranged for food, accommodation, and a street meeting at each location. At the street meetings, we performed *Gayer Panchali*. That is, in 55 days we performed *Gayer Panchali* 55 times in 55 places. To me, this was an extremely exciting and significant event. I was still very new to this work. I was so inspired by the fact that there were so many people involved in this. I took care of the cyclists along the way, their health, their nourishment with great pride. Of course, I also performed in the play each day.

In some places, the food was arranged in packets. They would leave those packets with me. Now you know how much food people in the village can eat. I used to eat at the very end, because I was worried about the young men who I thought should eat first. At one of these locations, I remember that there was one food packet left. Bimal was a member of the JS's first branch team in Dahakanda (South 24 Parganas). He had gone to have a bath and when he came back he asked for his dinner. I gave him the last packet saying, 'I was wondering why there was one packet extra. You haven't eaten!' I gave him the last one. Later that evening he realized that I had not eaten. He said, 'You will be punished for this! You think I am happy that you didn't eat and I ate, that I am now full. You will be punished for this. I will teach you a lesson you will never forget so that you will never again consider it a virtue to go hungry in order to feed others.'

In the evening, we were performing *Gayer Panchali*. The play was in its

propaganda form at that time. We had an attitude of teachers teaching the public. In the final scene, we held torches of fire in our hands and created a human pyramid. Bimal along with another person had to kneel on the floor so that people could stand on his back to form the human pyramid. I had to stand on Bimal's back. I stood on his back. With the torches in our hands, we delivered a typical propagandist line 'We will continue our struggle for as long as it takes to reach the last person.' Anyway, when we finished delivering our line, Bimal, who had promised to teach me a lesson, let his elbow-support down suddenly. In front of all those people, in my sari, I lost my balance and had a clumsy fall forward. I somehow managed to recuperate the scene. When the play ended, Bimal asked, 'How was the lesson?! I hope you will remember it? Prestige punctured!'

The cycle rally continued. We took the food situation in our own hands because the village boys and girls had a difficult time going without eating rice. So we let the next location know that we would cook ourselves. Everyone would lend a hand with the preparation, and I would do the actual cooking. When we reached the place, we rented big pots and we planned to cook rice, lentils, and a vegetable. After traveling all this way, it felt very good to cook such a giant meal. There is such a pleasure, so much enjoyment in this collective family. I had a certain sense of peace in this experience. I felt that I had received something, accomplished something, and realized its value. I felt like I had understood the value of culture. That collective feeling is extremely memorable and significant to me.

During this cycle rally, we also saw all kinds of mass organizations join in. A number of media organizations followed us around. In what I witnessed, I found the pursuit of name and fame very shallow. The struggle turned into something other than what I had thought mass organizations were about. It didn't quite match what I had assumed mass organizations to be about. Is the work most important or is it the name you get from it most important? I used to wonder about this. I was developing a great dislike for this kind of behavior. It also made me wonder what politics was all about.

There was also a funny experience during our cycle rally in Benaras. We were staying in a government school for blind children. The premises were very poorly maintained. It was all so dirty. Now, I am used to going to the toilet in the morning. I didn't know what to do because the bathrooms were unimaginably filthy. I could see that there was no quiet street outside where I could go. As a town steeped in religious rituals, everyone wakes up quite early in Benaras. This made the usual tactic of women going to the toilet in the morning even more difficult. Some of us women and myself went up to the terrace. On the terrace, I noticed that there was a mound of sand. We all separated the sand, each took a shit, covered it up with sand and went back down.

Between our food and toilet needs and the mockery self-interested individuals made of mass organizations, the cycle rally was a very educative experience for me. There is no doubt that we did not eat or sleep well every day during that rally. But when the law about 100 days guarantee of work was passed we do look back on those days and consider our efforts one part of the chorus of mobilizations at work across the country.

The final event I want to write about is the Muktheadhara festival. The goal was exchange. We wanted to learn from various 'theatre of the oppressed' practitioners from all over the world, and we wanted to perform our plays from across India, and share our experiences. We wanted to exchange ideas and have ideological debates. Our first festival was in 2004. We had representatives from at least 30 different countries. Since 2004, we have this festival every two years. This year will be Muktheadhara 4. The most memorable festival for me is Muktheadhara in 2006. In 2006, Augusto Boal, who to me is a genius, joined the festival. We had organized a spect-actor rally that year. We raised the question: Will only elite intellectuals debate and discuss theatre? Our main goal was to communicate the role of spect-actors in the process of social change.

We ourselves did not think that there would be more than 3000 people joining in the spect-actor rally. That was harvest time, and people simply do not leave their agricultural work at that time. At that time, we had our office phone (land) line and one mobile phone. We had told the people in the villages to borrow or rent mobile phones and we would buy the talk time. We also had one computer. Other than that we depended on people to communicate. Julian reached early for the festival. He was amazed that we were expecting five thousand people. But he wasn't quite sure how we were relying on a couple of phones and one computer to get this done. But Julian sensed an energy here and he communicated his expectation to Augusto Boal. Julian told his father to prepare his heart for the experience to come. Boal arrived. Theatre workshops were conducted. Boal was making fun of Sanjoy and saying that, at the rally, he would do a head count to ensure that it was not even one person short of five thousand at the rally. Boal was preparing for his speech the next day. He admitted that he had never read out a speech before. But when he heard that there were five thousand coming, he decided to prepare his speech.

On the day, Julian let his father know that about six thousand people are expected. An hour later we heard that at least eight thousand were coming. The buses were not enough for how many people were coming. Then Pradeep called Satya to say that they needed more buses because another two thousand people were waiting. In the end, twelve thousand people came. I had taken Boal from the Choudhury guest house to the place where people were gathering for the rally. We were in the car. Boal had a knee problem at that time. We were

caught in traffic for a long time. We realized that the JS spect-actor rally had caused the traffic. There was a long procession of people who were marching that day. I told Boal that 'We are stuck in traffic because our rally has begun.' When he heard this he said, 'We should go!' He got out of the car and tried to find an alternate route to the rally through a by-lane. At that moment, the speed with which he proceeded made me realize that he was eager to see the materialization of his ideas. That made me very happy.

When we finally reached near the rally and I saw his face light up. He asked me to read out all the placards. 'We need the right to cultural debate.' When he heard this, he asked, 'Where is Julian? Where is Sanjoy?' He was eager to share this moment with them. When Julian saw him, he touched Boal's feet. He asked his father, 'Father, what do you think? Is this your dream come true?' Then with Julian on one end, Sanjoy at another, and I was there too, we approached the dais at the head of the rally. This was a huge accomplishment for me. It is practically unbelievable. Political parties are unable to gather such crowds at that time of year. By what strength did 12,000 people gather that day? These are not salaried people. They are not being promised any services from us in exchange for this gathering. On what basis did they gather here? There are so many proscenium theatre teams, the group theatre people, would they have been able to mobilize this many people to a rally. Here, I think there is a role of the forum theatre process. To stay on and discuss things in that social context with people in addition to doing theatre work. This would not be possible either without forum theatre as a theatrical process or without the post-forum theatre social and political engagement in the social context.

Take for example that we are doing continuous work on the alcohol issue across villages over a long period of time. There are forum theatre performances on this issue. From this forum theatre process we get some spect-actors who intervene onstage. After performing forum theatre in sixty villages, I will have about 100 spect-actors emerging from this. With them we conduct our next meeting to discuss what our action to fight alcohol ought to be in the future. Suppose people decide to destroy the liquor production process itself. This is a bold call since people are connected in a series of chains. For example, local liquor dealers, local *panchayat* government authorities, local police, and local mafia are all connected to the liquor production process. Most importantly, we don't leave people to deal with the consequences of protesting this local nexus. We maintain constant vigilance and presence and debate to keep the struggle going. In Che Guevara's language, 'solidarity means running the same risks.' The fruit of that kind of labour is a rally of 12,000 people who gather without the draw of monetary or electoral promises.

Right after this rally, we had a convention with all the branches of theatre teams we developed from many states in India. Representatives from mass

organizations in the twelve states in India with whom we have worked also attended the convention. None of these mass organizations work under the banner of a given political party. At the convention, we established the Federation of Theatre of the Oppressed and Boal inaugurated the first banner for FOTO. Boal kissed that banner and that vision has a very significant place in my heart.

The spread of our work has increased immensely. Our members have become extremely busy. Our national and international connections and supporters have increased immeasurably. Most importantly, as a result of the increase of work, there has been a decrease in the degree to which people interact casually. A number of people are doing research on JS work from renowned universities across the world. Earlier we struggled for the very basics of transportation, space for rehearsal, food and accommodation for everyone involved. Now we have space and transportation of our own which has made life easier. All of this transformation is an outcome of both mind and heart, with the strength of collective feeling and working.

One of the most significant things about JS is that even as we do different types of work the sense of hierarchy is not as visible. I don't know of too many organizations that let its members decide how the money from funding will be used. The General Council decides policies and ratifies decisions taken by Sanjoy, Satya, Himadri and other executive members. The Executive Committee in JS is a formal body. The General Council is composed of members from each satellite team and takes all important decisions, while the Executive Committee implements the decision taken by General Council (Sakha Karmo Samiti).

JS was born before my eyes and I witnessed it being raised from nothing. Now the child is growing. I would say that just as I raised my son, similarly I raised this organization. In that regard, I do not consider this work, I consider it my duty. At the same time, since I live with my husband, he works and he earns something as a result. This is not just my household and it is not just my work that keeps it going or enables me to survive. It is a larger household that is organizational and it is kept alive collectively. Even though I do this work without a salary, this is my livelihood. I don't live in the village and grow my own food and survive in that way. I work and live in the city and this means that this organization is my livelihood. For others such as Biswa who lives in the village, theatre is a matter of mental hunger. It is not a livelihood for them. He has his other carpentry work in the village along with his source of food there. But that does not mean he will stop doing theatre. He needs the theatre work anyway.

Since aspirations are not taxed, I have a dream that one day dialogue in the way in which forum theatre enables it, will be compulsory before any decision is made, anywhere in the world. I have not found a method better than forum

theatre to establish such dialogue. I want there to be a day when those who assume that others don't know and therefore make decisions on their behalf or in their name, I want the world to reach the point when it is literally not possible to make a decision without discussion and dialogue.

I enjoy being the joker in the forum theatre process a lot. I have an aspiration to engage a political party representative in a forum theatre where I am playing the joker. It does not matter what political party it is. Any of them will do. I dream of a situation when political parties will have to dialogue with people through the medium of forum theatre, not just because they want votes, but on a regular basis. I dream of a situation where unless they engage in such discussions in an active way, they will not have the means or ability to make decisions and craft policies. To be a joker mediating such a dialogue is an aspiration of mine. I have realized through my work that our work is about recognizing that the rays of the sun are made up of collective energy.

Since this kind of collective theatre gives me energy, I hope that on the last day of my life, I am rehearsing a play, surrounded by young men and women. I am grey-haired but I am alive to theatre till the very end, my stage presence and ability to do theatre lasts till the final breath of my existence.

My Dream Palace, Will it Stay Together?

Renuka Das

My village is in district South 24 Parganas, West Bengal within the boundaries of what used to be police station Kakdwip and is now Dhola police station, in Uttar Kashiyabad village. Near the village there is a small river called Gobodia. In the monsoons, we used to have to walk through mud till our knees to fetch water. We used to have to go to school through mud-covered paths. On both sides of the road there were trees—*babla*, *neem*, tamarind, mango, *jaam*, guava, *khirish*, *bani*, *keora* forest—it was always green. In the monsoons, all the fields were filled with water. Toads called. We used to go fishing and get mud all over ourselves. We played hide and seek. There was no hospital, the post office was far away, and the high school was far away. All the people in the village were agricultural labourers and farmers. People believed in the caste system and in superstition. Now there is electricity, there are brick roads, and as for the caste system and the belief in superstition, it is much reduced.

In my home, we had my father, mother, maternal grandfather, paternal grandmother, and my father's sister. My father had no brothers. My father's sister was married at seven years of age. My grandfather did not have much land. The whole year he worked as a daily wage-labourer. Although we had a simple mud hut with a straw roof, the household was quite content. We are four sisters. I am the oldest. Since I was the first child in the household, my maternal grandfather loved me a lot. He used to keep me close and not let me out of his sight. I once went to my friend's sister's house with her. My grandfather fought with them and brought me right back. I had gone to listen to *jatra* somewhere. While the performance was on, he yelled out loud looking for me.¹ I would have to return home with him. I would be so angry that I could not watch the *jatra* because of the old guy. I couldn't even chat with my friends. At the same time, when there was a festival in the village, my grandfather would carry two of us on his shoulders for two hours to take us to see the Durga *puja* festival. Whenever people gave him anything in exchange for his work, he would bring it back for us. He used to sell betel-leaf in the market and work on other people's land. My father studied till class 9. He used to work in people's stores and did daily wage-labour. My paternal grandfather did housework and planted chili saplings on people's land, he watered the plants, harvested them, and broke the rice grain from its husk, and sewed blankets. These are the kinds of work he did. My mother used to work through

¹ Jatra is a popular theatrical form in this region.

the midst of this poverty to figure out how to feed us and help us with our studies.

In our home, there was a small school. I used to study in that school. My grandmother used to love me a lot. I used to sleep with her at night. She used to tell me stories—of kings and queens, ghosts and demons, and much more. I am not sure what I did all day, but I do remember taking the cows to the field after returning from school. I used to collect the cow-dung. A few friends and I would play bride-bridgroom, *bou basanti*, *keet-keet*, *ghuron chaki*, *kulo godi*, *luko churi*, *dang kori*, and many other games. I remember that next to our house there was an old lady who used to take her cow to the field. We used to call her 'old mother'. She used to leave the cow to graze in the field, make us gather around her in a circle, and tell us stories. She told us lots of fun stories, sometimes of ghosts and demons and sometimes of kings and queens. Drawn to this addiction, we would go to the field every day after school. The day the storyteller would not come, we used to do our own enactments. When we came back, I used to get a scolding from my mother.

My mother has hit me three times. I remember my mother hitting me because I would get late for school. My father also hit me because I was not able to study history well. I used to help my mother in her housework. I used to fetch water, wash dishes, watch over my sisters, and fetch the grain from the field. This was my work. I was good at studies. I used to come first in class. My teacher, Nikhil Sir, used to like me a lot. I used to take books from my friends in order to be able to study. In the midst of abject poverty, my father started drinking alcohol. It led to fights at home. The little land we had was sold. When there were fights between my father and mother, my mother suffered everything in silence. She wouldn't say a word. I was the oldest. I used to go without food for one meal, wear torn clothes, and made no demands on anyone. My mother would explain to us that my father had anxiety and sadness. We were four daughters after all. He was worried about how to raise us. Sometimes, when they fought, my mother would go to my uncle's house. At these times, all the household responsibilities would fall upon me. Looking back, I now feel that my father started drinking because he could not handle the pressure of running the household. When he was not inebriated then he was a really good man. He never stopped us from studying. But the hindrance came from poverty.

I remember clearly, that we used to eat the kind of rice that is half black and half white and bitter. In the midst of this struggle, my grandfather started demanding preparations for our marriage. He began to insist that there was no need for us to study anymore. At that time, I was in class five or six. But, that too didn't happen because we didn't have money for dowry. Besides, I am dark-skinned, my father drinks, and these sorts of things have their impact on prospective offers. I wanted to continue studying. I got books from my cousin.

My sister from my uncle's home helped me a lot. I borrowed and returned the books three times. In the end, I could not win the battle against my mind. One day, at the crack of dawn, without my cousin noticing, I left the books in their cattle house.

We had a grocery store which my father used to run. But, financially, that didn't save us. My father's addiction increased. That store closed. He used to drink daily and lie unconscious on the street. There have been days when I remained hungry all day and when my father returned home, he started fighting at the end of a long day. I used to support my mother and fight with my father. At night I lay close to my mother because I feared that she might commit suicide. My mother's pain is worthy of immense empathy. It is hard to explain. My mother used to cry. I used to try to console her, tried to reason with my father. I would say, 'We will remain hungry for one meal, but you stop this addiction.'

I started to work in people's homes to get the household back on its feet. I made cow-dung cakes and dried them on people's walls for them. I caught fish and crabs in the river, sowed rice saplings on people's fields, and harvested the rice grain as well. I carried fermented rice (*panta*) and fried chilies for a meal. I dug the ground, watered crops, plant saplings, and picked chilies on other people's land. I remember that once I was carrying a large stash of rice grain on my head on a long distance. I dropped the bundle in the middle of the field. The landowner started abusing me with such language, that it made me burst into tears. The landowner gave me less money because I was young. But still I was happy because the money would make my mother smile. My father would be so inebriated, he would fight with us. But, he never hit us. In fact, in my anger I have often shoved him, made him lose balance, but still he never said a word to me because he loved me. I have never received any nice thing, any good food, nice toy, or good clothes. I don't remember ever having worn something that my father gave me. My first joy was when I earned 80-90 rupees with which I bought two pieces of new clothing. I used to feel very jealous when I saw other girls. They would wander around, sing, and dance. During my playtime, I would be carrying the weight of the household on my shoulders.

Unable to stand the poverty, I came to Kolkata to work in someone's house. My sister dropped her studies in class 4 and came to work as well. I worked at one place and she at another. Ultimately, I could not accept this in my heart. On days that I had not eaten for three days, he made me wash three days worth of dishes and served me food on a broken plate. He gave me two spoons of rice and two slices of bread in the morning. Worried about whether I am a thief or not, he put the dog to watch me. I withstood it all since I was not willing to return home. But the oppression in this home increased. He used to hate me because I was a village girl. He used to get me to polish his shoes and give me less to eat. Once I even took rice from the pot and ate it because two spoons-full

were not enough for me. He would not let me go home. He gave me less than my due in money. One day, the limits of my patience broke. I was washing clothes after I cleaned the house. The owner's wife said, 'You have stolen a watch.' She hit me. I could not stand it and I left. When I returned, I said to my mother that I can work in people's homes in villages, but I will not go to work in the city.

At home, my father's addiction had led to the closure of his grocery store. All the land was mortgaged. I cannot explain the pressures of my situation at that time. Sometimes I felt that there was no point in continuing to live life. This is the time when I got news of Jana Sanskriti's women's union. I was thirteen or fourteen years old when an aunt in the neighbourhood had come to buy things in our store and said to me, 'There is a meeting at Haatpara. Do you want to come?' I went to the meeting in the evening. The agenda of discussion at the meeting was women's oppression, dowry, health-related issues, alcohol, equal rights and other issues which I don't remember. They showed these issues through theatre and song. I enjoyed watching this and listening to them speak. I felt close to some of the people there. They didn't seem to despise me because I was poor and uneducated. In fact they pulled me closer. They showed me a path of light, gave me a reason to live, and made me want to come out from behind the curtain of inferiority. It made me want to do something. I wanted to first and foremost get my father to stop drinking and stop my mother's suffering. That desire made me want to go to the organisation's meetings and rallies.

In 1991, I took my first theatre training workshop in Badu. I liked this work a lot and we had a lot of ideological training at this point. Even though I was young, I was able to absorb things. I had done theatre in school and I enjoyed it. I was able to do theatre when Sanjoyda and Simadi trained me. They saw a talent in me. They continue to train us. They have not stopped supporting us, helping to expose to various things. Their efforts don't seem to stop. When I was very young, I have done theatre for the village club. But that theatre and the theatre I do now are worlds apart. Here, you can give some value, some importance to your own opinion. Here, you have space to work independently. No one is boss here. After coming here, I have seen a different world.

JS created the first theatre team with women from my village. In that play, I acted as an oppressed girl. We didn't get anything at that time. I continued to work in people's homes at this time. I gave the money to my sansar (household). I increased my work with JS over time. Before I knew it, I became a leader. I started protesting against all kinds of injustice. My sense of courage increased. My aspirations were fulfilled when I came to participate in a theatre training workshop. It pleases me to think that I am able to do theatre and sing songs now. When I said things onstage that I was otherwise unable to say, it brought my self-confidence and courage back. An oppressed person, telling their story,

fearing no one, accepting no one's command, depending on no one, refusing to follow like the blind, walking with their head held high, fighting the oppressive classes, refusing to accept injustice, being strong, understanding and addressing their own faults and strengths—I like these principles.

I like thinking about what I used to be and what I am today. My world used to be in the fishermen's neighborhood. People refused to greet me, they would not listen to me, and they would not pay me any attention. Now they listen to me. They give me their attention. I feel the change in my life. In my mind, I can discern the difference between right and wrong. When I first came to the organization, I would think of myself as someone small. Since that time, I have participated in the anti-liquor movement in many neighborhoods including my own and my father has stopped drinking alcohol. In other words, my life started with this organization. I was able to turn the grief and helplessness that afflicted me into protest. The landowner would not give the correct wages, there was caste hierarchy, there was the rule of the party, and big landowners would not consider poor people their servants, not human beings. I found a place to talk about all of this in this organization. If I didn't come here, I would suffer oppression like other women, accept it as my fate, and somehow exist instead of living.

In Purnachandrapur, there was a women's team in 1992-93. From that area, seven-eight women among us had taken training. Among them was a woman who was widowed as a child. She was over 50 years at the time. She loved coming to do theatre. She lived in her father's home. She would say that she found a life again in theatre. I am not sure why I am telling you this, and what this is an example of, but I know that she found such inspiration in doing plays. This capacity to bring out the strength and expression in this woman, I have not seen this before. I feel that theatre enabled this in her.

Another thing happened in this theatre team. There was a woman we called Gauri boudi. She did not tell anyone that she was coming to do theatre. One day we had come to do theatre in a neighboring village called Digambarpur. So we had all gone there to perform. A number of people from our village had also gone to watch the play. They saw her perform. I was also feeling scared that they would accuse her of performing in plays. When we returned, it turned out that her husband had found out, but he didn't say anything to her. In fact he supported her and encouraged to keep going.

When I conducted meetings I used to feel shy. I felt fear. But it also gave rise to a desire in me. Silently, I promised myself that I would work hard so that other girls would not have to suffer as I did. My middle sister Putul had been working in someone's home since her childhood. Later, of course, she got married with the help of the organization. When I came to do this work, my father did not stop me. In fact he would help me. If I had to go somewhere at

night, he would accompany me some distance. My parents disregarded the social sanction against men and women working together, doing theatre together, neighborhood criticism and let me go anyway. For this, I consider my parents great. In different ways, my whole family has helped JS out. For example, my sister works and lives in the centre. My father helps with cooking and attends meeting. They love JS work. The way in which JS loves and has supported them, similarly they have supported JS. It is like one family. My parents don't worry about where their daughters are at any given moment when we are here doing work. They are at peace.

I have not faced too many hindrances in trying to do work with JS. I have had no challenges from my family in doing this work. But I have had to face obstacles in the form of neighbors and from political leaders. For example, there was a pressure on my parents from neighbors who said that such a grown up girl should not work with men at odd hours. She should not roam around and ride a bicycle. People said that since I worked in an organization, I must be a dirty, disgraced girl. Other than this, I have faced political challenges. I would explain to people about the *panchayat* not working properly, about their corruption, about roads not being built and so forth. Political leaders realized that my discussions were raising people's awareness. They were concerned about their faults being publicized and inviting protest. They decided to stop us. As a result, they started making false accusations about me to my father. In the end, they told him to tell his daughter not to go against us. My father paid no heed to them. As a result, they expelled my father from party membership. They refused opportunities that should have been available to us, as economically marginalized people in the village. Wanting change, wanting ideological change, wanting transformation of thinking, maintaining the change in myself, all of this is hard to explain and it does not come easy.

When I first came to JS, there were two or three organizations working together. I was in the theatre organization part of the whole organisation. One could see some trouble and discrepancies in the principles and processes of these three organizations. When JS chose to become independent, their principles became even clearer to me. First, we used to do theatre and we used to show not only the problem but also the solution through our plays. Now we perform our plays but we give importance to people's opinions about the problem. We discuss these issues with people. We have created theatre teams made up entirely of mothers. Young girls and mothers are coming to meetings.

When we became an independent organization, we had nothing: no money, no space, and no home. I remember we rented a small house and stayed there in Barasat town. When there were theatre rehearsals 20-22 people stayed in that small rented room. Sometimes, rehearsals for the central team would take place wherever we were offered space. Once we rehearsed all the way in North

24 Parganas, in a place called Helencha, at the mother and child centre. No one used that house. We cleaned that place and we started workshops there. This is how, painstakingly, from twelve teams we created thirty teams. Theatre teams broke up and we started them again. At any rate, this itinerant existence was not sustainable. Today I am writing my words in Girish Bhaban. Girish Bhaban has a history. How did our centre come to be? One day, there was a news item in the newspapers. The Ministry of Information and Culture was giving money for building infrastructure to groups that were doing theatre. At that time, Rohinidi and Sanjoyda wrote proposals, traveled to Delhi, talked to various officials. The problem was that the organization also had to show that it had matching funds. All the members of Jana Sanskriti came forward, contributed money, love, and sweat to build a space of our own that we called Girish Bhaban.

We bought a piece of land in Badu when the money was sanctioned. The land was like a jungle, full of bamboo trees and one broken home. Our members worked tirelessly to clear the space without hiring any labour. In the end, Girish Bhaban was inaugurated in 2000. At first, it was a one storey building. Now it has two floors, a kitchen, bathrooms, arrangements for drinking water. It is a complete training centre. There are chairs, tables, cupboards, and computers. We have a number of people working here. It was a long process. People who sowed the seeds in the garden, without eating daily, without taking anything in return, with their sweat, their contribution is the greatest. Now anybody can come and pick a flower from our nurtured garden and pick the fruits of our labour.

JS has completed 25 years and there will be a festival to celebrate this. I am not sure how all these years have passed. I have so many memories from these 20 years I wish I had written it all down. There are a number of significant events in JS's work. I have been working here for 18 or 19 years. Through the years we fought various battles—against land owners, against panchayat officials, against injustices of the upper class, the struggle to stand in resistance against these forms of injustice.

I don't remember the year but thousands upon thousands of people were demanding potable water in Pathar Pratima block, Kakdwip, Kulpi, Mandir Bazaar block through street corner meetings, theatre performances, and rallies. One day, all the women took empty water pots and went to the BDO office. And we said that 'If you don't fill these water pots, we will lock up the BDO office.' The BDO was compelled to promise us water. The very next day the material to construct a tube-well reached our village and work began.

Initially, the Digambarpur team only had Kavitadi and myself as women performers. This team took on a lot of performances and worked really hard to perform shows all across the region. Once we went to Srinarayanpur to perform a play. We were returning on cycles from Srinarayanpur. Suddenly, Simadi fell

off Deepakda's cycle. We were scared because she had bad knees. We didn't know what to do. We were massaging her leg. And someone gave her some warm milk from the market. And then we slowly got her back on a cycle and kept going. Similarly when there were cycle punctures, we would all just walk back home together.

We had gone to perform in Sitarampur during *Kalipuja*. This was at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal. We could hear the ocean there. The motor-boat arrived in the morning in order to return. The trawler party said that you perform your play and we will make arrangements for you. They gave us some puffed rice to snack on. But someone said 'Don't feed us snacks, we have yet to eat rice!' Playing along with our humour, they encouraged us to eat the snacks saying that of course you will eat rice for dinner. We performed the play *Gayer Panchali* (Song of the Village) for them. They liked the play so much, they started talking about their problems. They did not know how to respond to us. They fed us *hilsa* fried and *hilsa* curry and fine grained rice. We slept in an abandoned forester's home. The women slept inside the house while the men kept guard outside the house. This relationship is special. The love, friendship, and trust among us, is very significant to me. I have no fear. I have this love. I know that you cannot buy this kind of love. There is a certain humanity that has been developed over time. I feel that I have got everything from this organization: whether you talk about the path of light, my freedom, and every kind of happiness.

One time, we had gone to perform in Meherpur. We didn't have lights or microphones. In the afternoon, Simadi and I conducted meetings with the women. At that time, we used to run self-help groups. They gave us microphones and the neighbors helped find a lantern for us. Now the children surrounded the lantern but in the midst of that, the lantern fell. To keep the performance going, people ran home to get lights from their home to resume the performance. This enthusiasm to see these plays is exemplary. They have seen these plays before. I feel that people are attracted to our work because they see something belonging to themselves in the plays. Some people wonder whether people would respect our plays which come without lights. But as far as I am concerned, this is our test.

In 2002, we had gone to perform in Jamshedpur, in the neighboring state of Bihar, because an organisation had invited us. We were happy to go. We left by train early in the morning. There were thirteen of us and we went there and we had a lot of fun. Someone had come to receive us at the station. We passed through the city and reached our destination after crossing many hills and valleys. There was a small brick building in the distance in the mountains. There was lots of cool breeze. People were cooking outside. There were about 70 people gathered there from various organizations such as SRUTI. There

was no electricity in that village. Two gaslights kept such a big meeting going.

We performed our play *Sonar Meye* (Golden Girl) at the meeting. In the morning we went to a village called Chilikur to perform our play. Most of the people there were *adivasis*.² The houses were far apart. Since we didn't have a microphone, we played our drum to attract people to our performance. We noticed that some of the women were standing far apart from the performance. They said that they didn't want to go closer to the performance area because they felt ashamed. When we insisted that they come closer, they stood huddled together near our performance area. We performed *Sonar Meye* and *Gayer Panchali*. We started the forum theatre process. *Simadi* was the joker and I was the main protagonist. *Simadi* asked 'What would you do in her situation?' The woman who had said that she was too shy to watch the performance, raised her hand to speak. Her name was Moni. When she raised her hand I was ecstatic. She took over the woman's role and intervened with a solution. The girl who did not want to come close to the performance out of her shyness came up to speak after watching our play. She asked for our postal address. She said 'When I feel sad, I will write to you and let you know.' Another young boy asked us to wait after our performance. He went home and brought us some milk from his cow. This kind of love and relationship was created so quickly. This has been possible because of the kind of theatre we do. The next day in the morning another woman came to the centre where we were staying came to get our address so that she could write to us. In my mind, I was convinced that wherever it might be, our plays and forum would always get a response because people have things to say.

In our region, there are a lot of liquor production units. Men drink and beat their wives, children's education suffers, and women worry about going out on the streets. Some people have committed suicide unable to suffer the oppression. Some people have died from drinking. It was the rule of an anti-social force. For this, there was support from political leaders. Liquor business had made people lose their bearing. No one wanted to come forward and protest. Police gave support to liquor businessmen. The police and authorities looked the other way. We mobilized meetings, rallies, writings on walls, posters, deputations at the panchayat and police station, mass signatures, performing plays in every neighborhood and closing some liquor shops. But what's the use of us closing the shops if the party leaders helped open liquor shops?

When we noticed this trend for a few months, we organized an anti-liquor agitation in Taranagar village in Srinarayanpur region. So many people joined us when we called for this action—school children, all the village residents—

² Self-designation term variously translated as indigenous and tribal community.

almost 700 people came for our action. We planned to divide ourselves into groups of 100 to approach different neighborhoods at the same time. Everyone saw our numbers and the businessmen ran from their homes. Some of the businessmen told us which units had the alcohol and even they helped us out. I cannot explain to you how many litres of alcohol we found. We brought all the alcohol out, poured it out in the middle of the field and burned it all. That was an unbelievable event. If the people awaken they can do anything. In this way, we used to break liquor pots in all regions. It can't be said that it has completely stopped. Some production units definitely remain, but that is minimal. They remain in fear of us.

Villagers will not abandon their homes and soil. We are people of the land. We had scripted a play on the Right to Work in villages. We conducted meetings, market meetings, posters, writing on the wall, dharnas at different offices, deputations at offices, and a 55-day cycle rally to Delhi. All the agricultural labourers wrote postcards to V.P. Singh and in the end we started a hunger strike at Sealdah station. This hunger strike continued for eighteen days. Every day one lot of people would arrive from villages and every day one lot of people returned home. We surrounded the Member of Legislative Assembly hostel.

Bengalis have thirteen festivals in twelve months. Among them is the *Charak* festival in April. During this festival, in a number of regions in South 24 Parganas district has *Gaajan* performances. In mid-April there are *Gaajan* performance competitions for five consecutive days. At this time, relatives and friends visit each other's homes and have a good time. In every neighborhood, there is a *Gaajan* performance team, who travel across neighborhoods performing their plays. During one such *Gaajan* season, our JS theatre team was invited to perform in Khirishtala village of Kulpi block. We were quite surprised initially because we wondered who would want us to perform during the *Gaajan* season. At any rate, we quelled our doubts and decided to perform. In three days we performed 30 times. We used to head out after our morning meal and return around 11 pm at night. All day we would walk across fields upon fields in the hot sun. We paid little heed to fatigue but we had fun. At the first temple we went to, we were asked to perform. People were curious because *Gaajan* never has women performing in it. Instead, men perform women's roles. Even the *Gaajan* performers were curious. They wanted to figure out whether we were really women! They started talking to us so that they could judge for themselves. When they realized that we were not a *Gaajan* troupe, they enjoyed our performance anyway. After all, if you take good things to people, they will accept it. They liked our performances and began discussing things with us.

I am not sure there are any theatre groups that put in so much hard work and effort into their performances. At that time our theatre workers did not get paid. Nor were we particularly educated. But we believed in this and we had

love on our side. At one point, a team member, Deepakda, fell very ill and started to vomit. We all poured our efforts into taking care of him. Of course he recovered, but more importantly this kind of experience and the way people respond is the measure of how we have learned to love. You cannot buy this with money. We cannot doubt that Sanjoyda has contributed endlessly to teaching us how to work and love. I am not saying this out of false pride. It is the truth. I am saying it taking into account the totality of my experiences. There are a number of theatre groups that are much more talented than ours. We are much less than them in terms of performance skills. I am not trying to show them disrespect because that's not what we have been taught. We have been taught to rectify our own faults before finding fault with others. Nonetheless I can say with certainty that there are no theatre groups that work under the conditions that we work in and work as hard as we do.

We have performed plays about education, health, and against liquor production to raise awareness among people. People let us know their opinion through the forum theatre process. They showed us how party leaders deprived villagers of their rights. Where there should be a primary health centre for every 30,000 people, there is instead, one primary health centre for every 90,000 people. Even where one does exist it is not open for 24 hours. Doctors are not usually there. There are no beds. There are no medicines and no electricity. In a word, it exists in name but not in work. There are machines but there is no one to run them. The government doctor is typically busy running his practice in a private nursing home.

Education is in a state of total disrepair. There are not enough teachers for the number of students. There aren't enough schools. Not surprisingly, school drop-outs are increasing. People understood that the government is cheating ordinary people. We had to protest this. Accordingly we called for a massive collective action in Kolkata. We came from our villages in mechanized boats, walked for three-four hours, traveled in crowded trains on 22 October 2006. 12,000 people gathered to demand education and a space for debate. This is unthinkable. Till today, no political party has been able to do this even when the call for political action is laced with an offer of fish curry and rice. I could not imagine it myself. From Srinarayanpur village alone 3000 people came, after one invitation, without receiving anything in return.

The Srinarayanpur Mukta Mancha was created exactly in the same way that the Digambarpur Mukta Manch was created. The Mukta Mancha is constructed by agricultural labourers who never have an opportunity for cultural debate, about people for whom neither governments nor intellectuals expend energy. So far there has been an urban bias in the development of cultural spaces. The idea that villagers might want such spaces for intellectual debate, that they would like to create things too, they have not been granted such an aspiration.

With this in mind we decided to create a space for ourselves. In 2005, along with theatre performances, we started fund-raising in villages across the Srinarayanpur region. Theatre team workers would fund-raise in the markets, and collect bamboo, straw, rice, money from households. In the end we found some space near the Srinarayanpur market. The land was donated by Mr. Nakulchandra Majumdar. Now that Mukta Mancha is a centre of cultural activity in the village. Every year there are cultural activities there.

In the context of the market economy which has completely infiltrated village life, where NGOs get people to do social work for money, in this kind of context, our organization is able to command respect and work. People join our work, they introduce themselves to us, and they come to debate and discuss things with us. Our educational movement is a prime example of the degree to which our work commands respect and response. People have taken it in their own hands to hold their teachers accountable, they point out the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) corruption to our workers, and they take the initiative to talk to the *panchayat* leaders about issues surrounding the rural school system. The reason why people participate in our work without regard for receiving money or fame in return is because through our work they get a space for free public discussion, they are able to express themselves freely, they get all kinds of information—political, social, economic and cultural—and they are able to exchange ideas using their logic and reasoning. People find a space to ask questions, they are able to study society and discuss its ills and good qualities without fear, they can introspect about their own actions, they become stronger intellectually, and they find freedom from oppression in these ways. There are no party bosses looking over their shoulders here, they are able to express their inner talents, and they can make decisions for themselves.

JS now has 10,000-12,000 members. Our daily expenses have increased to a point we cannot imagine. And it is equally true that our wants have grown. Still, we have not become a group without principles, like other NGOs. We are not working to the tune of any funding source. We continue to do good work. Today, JS is well-known across the world. University students across the world study about our performances. Our work itself contributes to research and the evidence that people count on. This was not the case before. The biggest transformation is in terms of our thinking. I used to think about a lot of useless things. Now I have much more composure. My daily expenses, wants, my lifestyle – in everything there has been a transformation.

Despite our size and reach, all decisions in JS are made collectively. Where should we accept money from? How much money do we have? What work should we spend this money on? Who will get how much stipend? All of these things are decided through discussion. The writings in Arinabha journal,

Saturday letters, and the handbills are not published in Sanjoyda's name, but rather the organisation's name, or various team members from our theatre teams. We have such a remarkable reputation within India and abroad, all of that is Sanjoyda's contribution. I am proud to say that if JS had not brought us forward I am doubtful about what we could have accomplished on our own. Whenever someone was sad there were people supporting the person, if anyone wanted to leave, we encouraged them back. Pradeep gave a speech in front of Amartya Sen. This would not have been possible without his presence in JS and the JS commitment to give him a space to freely pursue his talents. I have seen a lot of organizations who have used people from the lower classes as workers to fulfill their mandate. What our organization wants is that the more people recognise things, learn things, the more they will understand things. Sanjoyda finds happiness in the recognition we receive. He continues to try to make the HRPC's (Human Rights Protection Committee) become self-sustaining entities so that they are not dependent on donor money. In all my years of work, I have not found a leader who has devoted as much to their organization.

We have had the Muktadhara festival three times already. I have not seen any other theatre group accomplish such a thing. Every year, people come from far and wide to take Sanjoyda's workshops. They invite him to give workshops and teach in their universities all over the world. That's how our group earns its fame and reputation. His writings have been published in books all over the world. This is a person who always speaks about us rather than himself and who is so well-respected by people all over the world. When this man is misunderstood by people in the group, when they mercilessly criticise him, when they rob him of his sleep, it makes me very angry and very sad. I am not asking for the end of criticism. Of course in the process of work there will be mistakes and faults. But that does not mean that I will only criticize and not see the good qualities in someone. The people who have treated us like their own children, the parents will expect some praise from their children. And if the children make mistakes, don't parents have the right to point this out to them? Considering the praise and respect we get from outsiders, why do people inside the group sometimes pretend to not understand what we are up against and what we have accomplished?

Human beings can never satiate their aspirations. I have accomplished things that I never imagined possible in my life-time. I have been able to say some things, I have stood with my held high, and people have listened to what I have had to say, people respond to my call when I mobilize around a political issue. I go for rallies and meetings and I perform onstage. All of this was beyond my imagination. I have spoken earlier, about my great desire to study in my childhood, but my lack of means to do so. That made me sad. In time, I enabled my sisters to study and tried not to let them feel an acute sense of scarcity or

poverty. Despite a thousand difficulties, I was committed to their education. The aspiration that I could not fulfill myself, I fulfilled through their lives.

Sanjoyda, Simadi and Rohinidi encouraged me study because they knew of my desire to study. They enrolled me in the Rabindra Mukta University. I used to feel guilty because I used to lie to people and say that I was a class 10 pass. After two years of studying, I passed my exams in 2003. I would not have passed this exam on my own. For this, I can never forget Simadi's contribution. At this time, Simadi taught me in the midst of all the organizational work. When I was unable to study, she would scold me as her own sister. If I got angry, she would try to console and explain things to me. She loved me. I have not got this kind of love anywhere. Sanjoyda's father also taught me. I am truly indebted to them. They are god for me. They have fulfilled this desire of mine.

My personal aspiration is that I want to be able to do this work for the rest of my life. I hope the principles, love, and relationships that guide this organization, continue till the end. I hope all the workers in the organization continue to live together. I hope our work spreads further across the world. I hope people will research and discuss our work in universities. I want that people will govern their own lives and their own futures. I hope there will be Mukta Manchas all across the countryside. There will be no party political divisions. There would not be divisions of caste and religion. This is difficult. But we can dream. We hope that the people who disregard our work in Kolkata will take account of it. We hope for an end to violence.

My biggest fear is that transformation of what I know to be true in the present into falsehood in the future. Now the way the organization is working in the present, with the principles and processes, what if it does not function in the same way in the future? After all, the times are changing. Slowly, we are aging. New people are joining the group. I just fear that they will not run the organization on the same principles. Will they draw villagers close to themselves? Will they fight together with them? Will they abandon each other? Will the new generation understand the significance of this organisation? My dream palace – will it stay together, walk in step together with everyone.

Other Hungers Than Money

Pradeep Sardar

In 1995-1996, when I was 15-16 years old, a woman from a neighbouring Belpukur village came to our village to meet some of us. She had seen us perform a proscenium play for a Kali puja event a few days preceding that. The name of the play was *Unhealthy Planet*. Fateja Bibi, the woman, came to our village and told us that there is a theatre troupe in Madhyamgram which trains people like us in theatre. If we wanted, our theatre group could get some theatre training. We were all very enthusiastic when we heard about this opportunity. I was particularly thrilled at the thought of going to Kolkata and getting training in theatre. I imagined the fun I could have and this awakened all kinds of aspirations in me. Before this, I had been to Kolkata with my parents to see my uncle at his workplace. I don't remember too much about that experience. Kolkata? And that too, for theatre training!

A few days later, an organization called Khet Majdoor Samiti conducted a meeting in our village. They spoke of their kind of theatre and determined a date for the theatre training as well. There were at least twelve of us who left for Kolkata to receive that training. We went to Lakshmikantapur by bus, to Sealdah by train, and from Sealdah again by bus to Madhyamgram. We walked a bit there and took another bus, and then took a van rickshaw and reached the Badu centre. On our way there, I thought to myself, 'Where on earth are we going? Bus, train, van, walking. We left in the morning and arrived at a totally new place by that evening.' The next day our theatre training began. I had many fears, 'What will it be like? What kind of character will I play? Will I do well?' I had all kinds of anxieties.

I had imagined theatre to mean proscenium theatre. For instance, in villages we follow the script in books and we act those out onstage. There is usually a lot of light, props, music, make-up etc. Not this theatre! For the first few days, all we did was play various types of games. While we played those games sometimes we had fun, sometimes we laughed a lot, and sometimes I felt embarrassed. Somehow in the midst of the fun and games, I began to recall my childhood. The poverty of my household, the pain and suffering in my daily life was fading from my mind. In other words, I felt free to follow my feelings. Sanjoyda would come by and discuss numerous things with us. The things that he used to say, I felt that he was talking about my life. He explained the ways in which society works, through the medium of various theatre games. At that time, I felt that for myself and for society, I have some responsibilities. I should not follow things blindly.

But I have to say, initially I felt bad performing on the floor. I could not

stomach the thought that people in the village would see me perform theatre on the floor. No stage, no light, a few bamboo sticks to demarcate the stage on the ground, and one lone drum. I felt deeply embarrassed. But after I performed *Gayer Panchali* (Song of the Village), I knew that there is no greater truth than this. At that time, I hardly felt that I was performing theatre. I used to feel that I was telling the story of my life to people, my problems, struggles, and the possibility of change. Consequently, I am not sure when my shame faded, but it did. In place of shame, I found the inspiration to do theatre for social change notwithstanding a thousand experiences of poverty. That's how the person inside me changed a thousand times in a thousand ways and so I continue to try to do something good and be part of a collective with Jana Sanskriti.

I have faced some problems in being part of JS. For example, financial need, family problems, societal hindrances, hindrances within the work with JS. Our family is quite large and we are very poor. Sometimes we catch the larvae of Bagda (shrimp) in the river by our village for work. I used to catch Bhayon larvae. I used to sell *alta*¹ and *sindur*² in various neighbourhoods. When I had to stop this for eight-ten days to do plays and workshops with JS, the household suffered. For example, say a fishery owner would buy my labour for about six months to a year. That owner would not want to let me go for my theatre work. If I went despite his objections, he would pay me less in salary. I would get scolded because of this in my household. At the same time, my family wanted me to participate in the theatre work, but my poverty put me in a difficult position over and over again.

There were political hindrances too. That is because our JS theatre team in my village, Shyamnagar, had people with family members who were very active in CPM party politics at the local level. They did not want their family members to participate in this theatre. As a result, the team was in danger of shutting down. When we stopped performing plays, I felt awful. I wondered 'How can we possibly resuscitate it?' In the end, we found some new men and women and started the team again. We worked extremely hard to make sure that the theatre team stayed alive. People could not tolerate the fact that women worked with us. During our plays and our forum performances people would try to disrupt our work. Later we learned that the people disrupting our work were active members of CPM (Communist Party of India [Marxist]).

In my time with JS, there have been numerous remarkable events. I can't possibly recount all of them but I will try to recall the crucial ones. During my

¹ Alta is a red liquid used to paint the feet of brides.

² Sindur is a red vermilion powder which is used on the forehead or hair-parting of a married woman as a mark of her marriage.

first theatre training with JS, I saw a round stage and a kitchen close to that. Everyone stood there with their plates in hand waiting to serve themselves rice. Then people would eat together on the stage and after eating, everyone would wash their own plates. Every day in the morning, people would do work for the centre. This way of doing things collectively, disregarding high and low, living beyond caste restrictions, where everyone is equal. To me, this is a remarkable thing and a very significant aspect of JS. All of us worked together, a number of teams (for eg. Shyamnagar team, Basar team, Bajarberia team) worked together on various theatre games to overcome our stage fright. We built relationships in such a short period of time. For a few days during that theatre workshop, it was possible to forget all our sadness, our fights, and our poverty. What I experienced there was enjoyment, living beyond self-interest, living in a world larger than our households, understanding our reality, and understanding how we are oppressed in our own worlds. For me, these are remarkable things.

In the play, *Gayer Panchali*, I found in every scene a familiar scene from my life. There was one scene in particular that moved me. In that scene, some people are taking a dead body on their shoulders. When people ask how the person died, the audience learns that the boy died of a snake-bite. That happens because in village health-centres there are no medicines for snake-bites. You have to take them to the city. Not surprisingly, on the way there, what had to happen, happened. The last line of that scene is, 'Snakes live in the village, and the antidote lives all the way in the city.' A few years before I performed *Gayer Panchali*, a nephew on my mother's side of the family had been bitten by a snake while he was sleeping at night. He was sleeping on the floor. After being treated by the village *shaman*, he was taken to the village hospital. But since there was no antidote there, he died. At that time, I felt that just like him, so many people are vulnerable to the problem. I had to do something to protest this situation.

When we first did *Gayer Panchali*, it was in Ramtonunagar village. People didn't quite understand what kind of theatre we were about to do. That's because there was no stage, light, make-up, 'What kind of theatre are they going to do?' Many people joked around about it. I felt quite embarrassed. I felt my status and reputation sinking before my eyes! Among us, there was someone called Saktida. He increased my shame by saying, 'Is this the way to do theatre? On the floor, with people making fun of us, with one lame lamp illuminating us?' In any case, there was nothing to be done. Since we had gone, we had to perform. On top of that, Satyada, Simadi, Pareshda had come from Madhyamgram. After a while, when people had gathered, we started to sing. We started our *kathi* dance (wooden staff dance). And after that we performed *Gayer Panchali*. When we finished our play, oh boy! So many people came to talk to us. They said,

‘You performed a very nice play! Initially, we didn’t quite realize how good it would be. If we had realized this earlier, we would have arranged things differently. We would have told many more people. This kind of theatre needs to be performed frequently. The work you’re doing is wonderful work. You must come another day. We will prepare in advance.’

That’s when I understood that in this work there is no question of losing status. Rather, it invariably raises our status. Otherwise, why would so many people say these kinds of things to us? I have done stage plays before. Nobody came to talk to me after the play. At the end of the play, the people disappear, whereas after this play, people came to talk to us. That’s when I understood, there’s no stage, no music, no make-up. But in our plays there is soul. This theatre tells people’s life stories. That’s why I will not be able to give up this kind of theatre and I will not give it up. No matter how hard it might be, I will continue with it.

Sanjoyda used to come to the Kulpi centre near our village. And when he came, we used to all gather to hear various discussions and stories. Regardless of how much work we had, we would drop it to go listen to him because it was so enjoyable to listen to him. I felt valued when I went. Someone was listening to me and giving me respect. When I went there I didn’t feel any sense of inferiority. One day, me (Pradeep) and the other younger Pradeep who is also in the Shyamnagar theatre team went to listen to Sanjoyda. We didn’t have money for the bus fare. At that time, the bus fare was two rupees or two and a half rupees. For both of us the bus fare would cost about five or six rupees. The money we had on us would buy us the bus fare there, but no return fare. But once we got there, we reasoned, they will give us our return fare. We both went with the assurance that we would get reimbursed in the evening. We listened to Sanjoyda’s ideological discussion. Since we were new at the time, we were embarrassed to ask for the bus fare. But since we were so involved in the discussions, no one raised anything about the bus fare. Nor did anyone ask whether we had eaten. When we left the centre, both of us wondered how we would get home. And we were really hungry, but there was nothing we could do. It was getting dark too. In the end, we started walking. On our way back we continued the discussion that Sanjoyda had begun, among ourselves. Despite this kind of experience, the next time there was such a discussion we would acquire money for the bus fare and go to the centre by the sheer pull of an enjoyable discussion.

On JS’s twelfth anniversary it was decided that we would perform *Gayer Panchali* in twelve different places at the same time. Among them, Shyamnagar team was one. In the other teams, there were two or three women. That’s not the case in our team because at that time we had no women in our team. Those roles were performed by men. Our performance location was Hazra Park. When

we reached there, we saw some policemen sitting there. We didn't quite know why they are sitting there. But we were a bit apprehensive about the police scolding us or saying something once they saw our play. I took courage in the fact that we had one guide with us. They would be able to respond to the police. An uncle of mine called Milon Mondol was in our team. He was terrified of the police. From the very start of our play till the end, a total of two hours, he probably had to pee about six or seven times! Even at that time, villagers were terrified of the police. At the very least, we had a certain respect for the police. Today, you cannot see that any more. The annoyance and intolerance for the police today makes me wonder why there is such a transformation in attitude.

Doing JS plays gave me a certain self-confidence regarding my ability to do things. It made me feel that I am able to create something. I wanted to write something. At that time, I worked on other people's shrimp farms. I used to go to buy Bagda shrimp eggs on a motor-boat from Tangra dock to Naya dock which amounts to about six or seven hours of travel. Travelling on the boat I would watch the sunset, feel the warmth of the evening sun, look at the thousands of ducks on the water, the forest nearby, the ebb in the tide that had just started to give in to the flow. That scenery! It's a landscape that inspired me to write. It would make me want to write something. One day, when I went to buy shrimp eggs at Naya dock, it started raining. I ran to sit in the shade of a thatched-roof hut. It was a shrimp farmers' family home. I sat there thinking it would be nice to write something now. I had a pencil and paper and a hum in my head and so I started to write. I tried to give words to that tune. All I could think of was JS, nothing else. I kept thinking about our goal. I finally put two sentences to the tune I was humming: 'Come let's make a promise with a new prayer in our hearts, to build a new Bharat.' I wrote two paragraphs to that song. I added another paragraph later. And on the twelfth JS anniversary, everyone gave me the opportunity to sing this song at the Kulpi convention.

We went to perform a play in the Mistripara neighborhood of Rangaphola village. Seeing our *lathis*, one man made fun of us. He dismissed us out of hand. Before starting our play, I spoke a bit and I said, 'I know that sometimes we make fun of things we do not understand. We are used to this kind of thing. All we ask is that you watch our play intently because that alone will make our efforts worthwhile.' At the end of the play and the forum discussion we had a sense that our play had been quite good. It was a play on BPL. Someone had arranged for us to eat after the performance. When I was eating I noticed the man who was making fun of us standing outside. I thought to myself, maybe he is here because he is attracted to the women in our team. Otherwise, why would this man stay on when everyone else had left? When we finished eating and were preparing to leave, that man held my hand and said, 'Brother, forgive me. I made fun of you but I did not know that you did this kind of work. I had

no idea that you represent people's problems in this way and discuss them with people. I made a mistake.' I tried to console him. I told him, 'This happens. Actually, this is not your fault. This is the fault of our social environment. We have not been brought up to be receptive to good things like this.' He said, 'I will never again presume to judge someone's work before I have seen it.' He almost burst into tears.

In 2000, the Basar women's team came to perform the play *Sonar Meye* in Shyamnagar. The forum theatre was on and some of the women from our village participated in that play. At that time, some of the women in our village were rehearsing a stage-play. In Forum however, they saw a glimpse of their lives. They were not able to express the problems they faced in their lives. But in the forum, they had an opportunity to do so. They expressed their interest in performing theatre. And from that time, we had five women join our team. That was the first time that women participated in plays in Shyamnagar.

In our neighboring region called Belpukur there is a village called Ashottotala. There is a Sitala goddess festival every year in May. This is the largest festival compared to all others in this region. A festival organizing committee member invited us to perform our play in that festival. We arrived to perform at the designated time. After an hour or two, our play was about to begin. At that time, the gentleman who invited us, he came to us and said, 'Brother, I will make a request of you all, I hope you don't mind. If you don't perform today that would be very good.' [The play we were to perform was *Gayer Panchali*.] I learned the reason for his change of mind later. It turns out that two political parties had fought over whether we could perform our play or not. Those who were in power at the local level didn't want us to perform because our play pricked their conscience. He said, 'I know what this play is like. After all, those who are corrupt will be uncomfortable by your play. I ask for your forgiveness.' We were compelled to return without performing our play. We were all disheartened by this experience. That's when Satyada said, 'Why are you disheartened? In fact, you should rejoice that after all these years our theatre has borne fruit. They seem to be afraid of us. There are so many other plays and performances. Have you ever heard of them closing down any one's plays? Remember that the work we are doing is truthful.' One more time, I understood that we were doing good work. The year must have been 2003 or 2004.

Almost five kilometers away from our village is Tangra dock and if you follow the banks of the Hooghly river further upstream you will reach Ghorankati. We performed a play called 'What's in BPL?' It was 10pm when we finished our play. Our host had arranged for us to eat *ghugni-muri* at someone's house after the performance.³ Afterwards, we all started to walk

³ A meal of puffed rice and chick-pea curry.

home at around 11 or 11:30 pm. On our way back, there is a three kilometer stretch of empty fields, and then you go over a second bridge over the Hooghly. There are trees on both sides of that path. We felt the gentle glow of moonlight, the breeze from the southern bay, and the lights were almost out in the villages in the distant. We were aware that, for village-life standards, we were out very late at night. A silence in all directions enveloped us. Since we had the women in our team we all felt a bit insecure. After dark, not too many people traverse this path. We switched off the lamp we were carrying so as to escape the attention of thieves and robbers. This way no one could see us from afar. In great fear, we crossed deserted areas through Krishnachandrapur and each returned home.

Since we had women in our theatre teams, the people in our village criticized us in any number of ways. As if women had no right to perform with men and that this was inadmissible in a 'civilized' society. They argued that the women would not be able to get married. They argued that only spoiled women perform plays. 'If you must have women perform, why don't you rent their performances?' And so on and so forth. Initially, people tried to discourage women using all kinds of methods. One day, we all gathered at Lata's home to rehearse plays and to eat there. Our women members were contemplating giving up theatre. They said, 'We can't step out of our homes without having to hear some criticism. We're the ones doing plays and it is as if it is their honour at stake.' I tried and the other men in the team tried to discuss this with them but they were so discouraged that they decided not to perform plays any more.

Lata's mother was cooking for us. While she was stirring the vegetables on her stove, she heard the word 'discouraged' from the women in the team. She came into the discussion with her cooking spoon in hand. She directed her words at the women, 'What do you mean you won't do theatre, my friends? Consider the work you are doing. Why get discouraged? Say you will be victorious.' Saying this, she started singing and we all joined her in singing, 'We will be victorious to be sure!' I have not forgotten that day till today, nor will I forget it ever. What an inspiration she was, that lady. It was like she had enabled us to hold onto the oar with greater strength in the midst of a storm. I was amazed because compared to other women of her age who had refused to let their daughters engage in these plays, this woman encouraged each of her three daughters to do theatre. She and her husband, Biswajitda, were endlessly helping us out. I will remain forever in debt to them.

We had no determined space for rehearsals. At different times, we rehearsed in the courtyards of our various homes. Taking this into account Biswajitda said, 'Why don't you do everything in our home. You all do such good work. I can easily help you in this minor way.' From that point we began our association with Biswajitda. From rehearsals at their homes to everyday struggles, they

have been with us. I am not sure how to give you a sense of this family. I can try to say a bit about them. Everyone in the family is always welcoming. They can go with the flow under any circumstance. He tries to satiate every taste, take into account every idiosyncrasy, and respond to every objection. When you say anything to Biswajit *da* his first words are always, 'That's no problem at all.' Whether he can do it or not. In other words, he is never negative about anything. When people visit, they give people their beds and rooms to stay while making do with the inconvenience of not having extra rooms for themselves. They prepare the food for everyone without self-interest and with a smile on their faces. The fruits from their trees are always free for all to consume. Not just for the theatre team, but for most people in the village. In any work, they gave us inspiration and lent us a hand. In my life, I have rarely come across people with such a generous heart. Another such family is the Pal family in Digambarpur. In that family, everyone is waiting and ready to do something good for others. These are some of the families that have done a great deal to keep JS afloat. These are people and families who move me in a very special way.

I love this work. It talks about my life. It talks of my hunger and I bring that story to others. I may be able to eat just one meal a day, but at least this theatre work addresses my mind's hunger. If I don't do JS it isn't that my poverty will be addressed. At least, I can understand the reasons for my hunger with JS. If I worked elsewhere maybe I would expend more physical energy and maybe I would earn more. For example, people are going to Bombay, Delhi, and earning more all the time. That's true I don't earn as much. As a whole-timer, what I get enables me to manage my household. And this is enough for me. I know that there are many more people who live on the pavement and are not able to eat. At least I am able to make do. Yes I can earn more but, in life, I am not pursuing money alone. I like this work. I have other hungers than money. I want to do this work in a much greater way. I want it to become the largest umbrella under which people work and live. I want the existing unhealthy cultures to die away. I want to carry this work much further, to create more people who will think of people.

The Needs and Norms of Sansar

Pritilata Mondol

In my childhood, I lived with my father, mother, maternal grandmother and the five of us brothers and sisters. There were two brothers ahead of me in age and two sisters younger than me. Perhaps because of the pressure at both ends, my development has halted. Perhaps that's why everything in my life is quite still and slow. My elder brother really loved me and we had a lot in common. But, there was a constant battle between him and my younger sister. For that reason, I stayed away from home since I was eight or nine years of age. I stayed with *Durgadi* who was the sister of a distant relative. *Durgadi* looked after me like her own daughter. Her two sons were my playmates. I studied there too. I was not very good at my studies. I probably passed exams out of sheer will power.

There was no one watching over me to see if I was faking at studying. My mother was busy with household work and my father was a school teacher and a social worker. Nobody had the time to look after our studies. It was self-rule for us at that time! I gave my mother a helping hand at work. Even if not regularly, I did help her with fetching water from the tube-well, cleaning the house, and doing the evening prayer. There was a girl who came to work in our house. She was my age. I was very close to her. I used to accompany her to graze cows. We used to eat together and play together.

In terms of work, we would separate the rice grain from its stalk. The rice which we ate all year had to be separated from its stalk, manually. All of us, brothers and sisters, parents everyone did this work. We used to fetch water in earthen pots, and sometimes we swabbed the house. I did my work when I returned from school. We did almost none of the morning work.

To tell you the truth, we have had a happy childhood. I have never been scolded by my mother or my father for not doing something. My father used to say sometimes, 'The children have become so used to saying 'No!' when I ask them to do some work, that even when I ask them if they want food, they sometimes say 'No!' out of a reflex action.' Then he had to emphasise to us, 'I am talking about eating dear!' and then we used to jump at the offer, 'Yes! Yes! I want to eat!' Though it wasn't luxurious at home, still we had enough in terms of food, shelter, and basic existence.

So far, I have spoken about myself and my home. But where do I live? Let me tell you about that. I live in a remote village in South 24 Parganas. Earlier, this was a village enveloped in poverty. Now it is a bit improved from that situation. This village is called Basar. At one time, Gandhians used to frequent this village. They have also done a fair amount of work here. They were

volunteers and activists in the anti-colonial movement who came to this region. They set up an ashram, and cotton was sent there, they had *charkhas*¹ there, and the people in Basar were taught how to make thread out of cotton and weave their own clothes. My mother and father used to weave clothes from *charkhas* too. They wove cloth out of this and sold it to the *khadi*² stores in the region and the idea was that it would be an income for people in addition to producing clothes. The evidence of the Gandhians in this region exists to this day in the form of the Gandhi Memorial Committee house. But the house was not used as a Gandhi ashram for long. It ran out of money and was closed almost forty years ago. Then it passed into the hands of a non-governmental organization called *Harijan Sevak Sangha*³ where children used to study. We have also studied there. And then the *Harijan Sevak Sangha*'s money also finished and the space was abandoned once again. In 1993, some of us women in the village went to reclaim that space to be able to use it. We went to numerous government offices and petitioned to use this space and we use that space all the time now.

In my childhood, I also remember that there used to be a collective granary. Here, the rule was that when the new harvest had come, there would be a house-to-house collection and everyone deposited some of their grain in the collective granary. That grain was loaned to people in times of need. The majority population in the village was Scheduled Caste. Even so, the percentage of literate people is very high. In part, I think this is because of the Gandhian ideals in our environment. From what I recall of my childhood till today, the mud roads have remained unchanged and electricity is yet to reach us. My age is past 46 now. What I have seen in terms of transformation in my village relates to people's growing interest in education.

I joined JS in 1995. When I first met JS, I was working at the Satyananda Ashram which was an adult education centre in my village. The job there at the ashram got me a salary of one hundred rupees per month. But, I got paid once in six months, or once every year. It was always unclear when I would get

¹ Charkhas are spinning wheels popularized by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi during the anti-colonial movement as a means of spinning one's own cloth rather than being reliant upon cotton from the mills of Manchester.

² The home-spun cotton that was the symbol of self-sufficiency in the anti-colonial movement.

³ Harijan, which literally means God's children, was Gandhi's name for those formerly known as untouchables in the caste-system. Gandhi's term for them has now been replaced with the self-designation 'Dalit' which literally means down-trodden. The Sevak Sangha is an organization that worked for the welfare of Harijans.

my salary. I supplemented my income by conducting tuitions at home. One of the people who frequently visited the ashram I worked at was Biswamitrada. He was intensely interested in various organizations in our area. He would locate the postal addresses of these organizations and send them letters. He took me along to seminars or for training if he caught wind of one. Biswamitrada brought me news of Jana Sanskriti. Slowly, I became increasingly involved with them.

At some point, I heard that these organizations give training for a type of theatre. I was interested. Some of us in Basar had started a women's theatre group in 1993. We performed one play in a year. Sarama, one of the women in the theatre team, knew how to read but most of the other women learned the script orally. We all showed enthusiasm for the theatre workshop and training even though it was difficult to find people who could drop their work for four or five days to pursue such things. There weren't too many of us: five people from a neighboring village and two people from our village. The young men of Nakkali village (a neighboring village to Basar) used to do JS plays. I had the good fortune of watching their performance of the JS play, *Gayer Panchali*. I was impressed with that play. The *kathi* dance, the form of the play, the content, the acting—all of it seemed marvelous to me. Immediately, I decided to fix a date for the theatre training workshops. That was the beginning of my relationship with JS. With JS, I began something anew. I realized that theatre is a massive force for bringing people together and to build collective strength. That's when I chose theatre as the main medium of my work.

After the first workshop was over, Satyada came to Basar to give training to Sarama, me, and some of the interested men. This men's theatre team broke up quite quickly because the men migrated for seasonal work. They could not make ends meet simply by staying in the village. As a result, the theatre team broke up. While they still existed they were deeply involved. They performed *Gayer Panchali* for about two years. Some of these men are still a peripheral part of JS, but they only do some of the affiliated work. They are not actors in JS.

Even though the men's team broke up, I have an important story from that time. There was one young man in the men's team who beat his wife routinely. At that time, the young men's theatre team was performing regularly and doing very well. One day, he himself started telling us, 'I beat my wife. And I think this is not a good thing. After all, I am telling people good things onstage. And if I go ahead and do the same thing at home, then that's not good. Now it is hard for me to beat her because it hits my conscience.' Now he has left theatre since the men's theatre has broken up. But I did see this kind of change in some people.

As far as the men's team was concerned, I accepted defeat in the face of human need. But, I remained persistent in trying to keep this theatre work

alive in Basar. It turned out that the men were not able to get involved even when they were in Basar. They didn't quite respond to my invitations. They had hoped that *Satyada* and *Sanjoyda* would come to Basar to conduct the workshops. But that did not work out, either because of the rain or for some other reasons. At any rate, the men in Basar did not respond to my call for rehearsals because they no longer believed me when I said that people were coming to give theatre training. Basically, they wanted the training from *Satyada* and *Sanjoyda* and beyond that they were not interested in keeping rehearsals alive.

As for me, I got to understand JS work more and more. I liked their work. I did not give it up. Eventually, I got an opportunity to be part of the central team. I then tried to build a women's theatre team when I realized that while men travel for seasonal work, women remain in the village and could be available for rehearsals. Now there is a women's theatre team which is very active. They perform in Basar and neighboring villages. Of course, some of the women's husbands had a problem with their wives joining a theatre team. But they realized quickly that this work is good and that the women are engaged in it keeping their *sansar* in mind, both in terms of the needs of the *sansar* as well as the norms of the *sansar*.⁴

There was one man who was a massive drunk and he refused to let his wife out for rehearsals for many days. We invited him to come and watch our rehearsals so that he could see it and make an informed decision. We were rehearsing *Sonar Meye* at the time. I was watching him and noticed that he did not say anything immediately after the play. He was in complete silence. Then he said to me, '*Didi*, you're doing such good work. I totally misunderstood you and your work. This is necessary work. I am sorry. You are doing such good work. I want my wife to do this theatre.' Now he comes with us on our performances, carries the props, the bags, and the *lathis*⁵ for us. I asked his wife whether he is drinking as much. She said that he has reduced his drinking a great deal. When he sees me on the street he makes it a point to say to me, '*Didi* you must ask Anjana. I don't drink anymore.' I retort by saying, 'I know you still drink.' Then he says again, 'No, really. I don't drink anymore.' Maybe he does, or maybe he doesn't, but my point is that he is invested in telling me about his drinking.

When I joined JS, I realized that I could mobilize theatre to get rid of liquor

⁴The word *sansar*, in this context, literally means household. In some usages, *sansar* has a broader connotation of universe, meaning the larger household (public household or even the cosmological universe) to which people belong, which both sustains lives and are sustained by norms, duties, and responsibilities.

⁵ Large bamboo rods used to demarcate the stage and used as props onstage.

production from our villages. Liquor production was absolutely pervasive in our village. I cannot communicate to you how serious the problem was. For some reason or the other, the women in my village looked up to me regarding this issue. I am not sure why, but they would come and complain to me. They always came to me and cried and told me about their problems. Women feel very helpless when men drink alcohol and get violent with them. I would feel bad and lose sleep over this and over the fact that I was unable to respond to them even though they were telling me about such an issue. Before JS, the women in our region fought a fearless battle over liquor. But with the help of JS organizational strength and mobilization, with the help of their plays, the efforts of women in my village gathered much more strength. Theatre made us stronger.

We started mobilizing around this issue in our region. One day, a number of JS workers and a huge number of women from our surrounding village '*gheraoed*' the Keoratala *Panchayat*⁶ office. We argued a lot with the *panchayat* head. Our girls were burning with anger at the *pradhan's*⁷ words. I realized that an ugly incident could take place at any moment. That's when we left. A year after that event, in a village called Bhairavinagar with the help of the police we had gone to break liquor pots. Excluding the police there were about 200 of us between villagers and JS people. We destroyed almost all the liquor pots in that village.

Not only has JS brought change in places and among people it has worked with, JS itself has transformed a lot since I joined. I worked with other organizations for many years doing all kinds of work—from advocacy to deputations to mobilizing social movements. In the process, I realized that I liked the theatre part the most. I found it a very effective way of reaching people, much more so than meetings and rallies. There came a time when, JS found itself with no centre and no space of our own. We rented a room where ten or twelve of us lived together. Maybe more. We all stayed there together. When we needed to do rehearsals, we would travel great distances across Bengal to organizations that would rent out their space to us. We went wherever we got an opportunity. Now we have a wonderful space for rehearsals.

In the past, we didn't have as many theatre teams and now the number of theatre teams has increased a lot. More importantly, earlier we didn't have women's theatre teams. Now we have more women's theatre teams than men's. I have already told you about my experience with putting together the Basar women's team. I realized that women are able to give more time to this work

⁶ A panchayat is a local government institution comprised of representatives from about four – five villages.

⁷ Panchayat leader.

because they can attend to it after their household work. Moreover, now they also get a bit of money for their efforts. They rationalize this as good work and work for which they get a bit of money. For this reason, there are more women's theatre teams. Earlier most people did not let their women out for theatre all that easily. But now they are seeing that women are no longer working only in homes. At least, this is true in some families.

In the past, we used to perform plays and discuss our plays with interested audience members. Now, we don't just discuss the play with the audience, we use forum theatre as a medium for incorporating audience views into the play. Now Forum theatre is an inextricable part of our performances. People start screaming and shouting, debating energetically in forum theatre. They sometimes expect that based on what is said in the performances, we will follow up with implementing the solution they offer. We tell them that this is not the case. We want to try to get people to think and discuss things together. We want to break the habit of accepting things as they are. We want people to think about how to address a problem themselves. We are asking them questions like, 'In this environment of pervasive liquor production, is your son likely to be a drunk or have a good future in a good job?' We're asking them to think about and debate questions that simply were not discussed in this way before.

For example, once we were going to perform in a high school nearby our village. The students knew that forum theatre is about getting up on stage and doing things. I couldn't stop the enthusiasm they had to participate in forum theatre! The school teacher was so enthusiastic about the involvement. He admitted that he did not think that the students would come up with the kind of ideas they offered. He reprimanded us for coming with such little time in hand.

Our reach in the communities has increased. As our membership is much larger now, we don't just do theatre. We now do human rights work, run schools, and reach mothers through the schools. These are the many things we do now and JS has changed in many ways in order to address its larger goal. Although, we are not outside party politics since that permeates life here, in our work, we make it a point not to work with any one political party in mind. Everyone is welcome.

This is not easy work. There are difficulties in this kind of work. Two hindrances stand in my experience with JS. First, people's sarcastic comments and the assumptions they made that full-time workers in JS are receiving a massive salary. People think that we were using ordinary people and making money out of that. That's what people think. Second, there are so many service-providing and project-based NGOs that pull people who used to be committed to JS, away from us. Those organizations are sources of money and material benefits and naturally people move towards them.

JS works in this kind of context, in the midst of scarcity and great poverty. Therefore, some people come to work in JS because they think they will get something. When they come here they realize that what they get is not as important as the goal of this work. Some people realize that the goal is also important for their household. They realize that the purpose of this organization is not to get people things. Getting people things isn't the biggest thing in the world. This organization is thinking about their rights. Then again, other people come simply to do this work, not with the hope of getting services or things. JS is not an organization that shows people the path to a livelihood. There is no such relation people have to the organization.

At the same time, the whole-timers are obviously not able to do any 'side' work elsewhere. They have to eat. They need clothing and they have to provide for their children's education. For whole-timers, JS provides as much as might be necessary for these needs. At the same time, it has to be said that whole-timers are not people who have big wants and desires. People with big desires are not likely to be whole-timers with JS. For those who might like this work, but have big needs and desires, they will not be able to give all their time to JS because their needs will require another means of earning.

I like JS work. The people who I am closest to in JS are Sima *boudi*, *chorda* (Sanjoy), *Satyada*, and *Rohinidi*. Their love and intimacy has inspired me to work. I was inspired by all the discussions and the plays. I have heard from *Sanjoyda* that we have to bring inner change. A tube-well will not get rid of poverty. Inner change will bring about the necessary changes to address material needs. Today there are tons of NGOs providing a ton of things and services to people. Yet, somehow all these things have not addressed poverty. I found this to be an important truth. People must be able to understand themselves, their rights, and entitlements. This will enable them to pursue such things themselves. That's why JS is such a significant thing for me. Mainly, I think that inner change is a crucial means to bring about and pursue material needs and other changes.

What I have received from working with JS, I cannot describe in words. I have not been able to advance much in my theatrical skills even though I chose theatre as my weapon for work. But, I can say that if I had not found this work, then perhaps my life would have been lost in the darkness.

My hope is that the work we are all doing will bear good fruit. You might ask, what is good fruit? Say for example, when we say that 'dowry is bad', I think we can expect that there will be some change in people's minds that this is not necessary to take. I can expect this outcome from our work. Or, with another example, people are so inter-twined with party politics today, that when you try to talk to people you will notice that they are speaking as the representative of a political party. They are not talking as human beings. They show less regard for justice or injustice than for the party they represent. I

hope that through our work at least people can learn how to speak against injustice regardless of their affiliation with a particular party. Then, through our plays we also show that villages have no roads, electricity has not reached, or the authoritarianism of party politics, or the poverty that surrounds us. I can hope that some of this gets addressed through our work. If we are working so hard on this, I can certainly hope that it will bear fruit. I understand that these fruits are for future generations to bear. I even say this to people, 'Future generations will bear the fruits of our labour'. At the same time, I still hope that I get to see some of the fruits of this labour.

I hope we all work and stay united as an organisation. I also hope that those who pick up the oar of our *sansar* in the future will continue to be true to the work rather than disregard the history of this organization. After all, if the people who are going to lead this organization aren't right, then they will not be able to attract or hold onto people in the way we have been able to do.

A Rock Cannot Ultimately Stop the Momentum of Water

Pradeep Haldar

The year was probably 1995 or 1996. I was 13 or 14 years old then. Every year, we used to have a Kali puja at which we performed plays. After our play that year, a woman from Belpukur (the neighboring village) approached us. She said, 'I know of a theatre organization in Kolkata that can give you training. If you take this training, then you can do theatre more regularly. But they only train people in Kolkata.' When we heard this, we expressed our enthusiasm to her. I was personally particularly excited about this because I have been interested in music and other cultural activities since my childhood. Without taking too much into consideration, we agreed to go.

I thought to myself, I'll kill two birds with one stone. That is, Kolkata was a dream in our minds for the longest time. Before that point, I had never been to Kolkata. We had a grand idea about Kolkata. I heard from a neighbor that there is a lot to see in Kolkata. For example, Shahid Minar, Magic World, the Zoo and other things. He had also said that there are huge crowds in Kolkata, large buildings, many cars, and you have to cross roads very carefully because there are great dangers.

At any rate, the woman asked to arrange for a meeting to consider who wants to go to Kolkata. We called for a meeting at our club. Satta's brother attended that meeting. He was from an organization called Khet Majdoor Samiti (Agricultural Labourer's Union). We were also involved in that mass organization at the time, although we were not very active members. Satta's brother had given us an idea about how to go to Kolkata, when to go, and all the processes to follow in getting there and being there. Most importantly, he had said, in this kind of theatre there are no costumes and no need for make-up. Moreover you have to perform on the floor. And this is called Street Theatre. We had more or less accepted what he said except for one aspect. 10-12 people among us wanted to go. We had accepted that in order to do this kind of work, you have to volunteer your labour. But after all this, you have to do theatre on the floor? There would be no make-up? This felt odd to us. That is, it was completely at odds with our very idea of theatre. Still, we agreed to go. We decided a date and arrived at the JS stage.

Three or four days of exercise and games passed in a flash. Some of us began to wonder whether we would ever be taught theatre because all that we were doing is exercise. We seemed to be receiving no theatre training. We even felt that if we knew in advance that it would be this way we would not have come. Just as this feeling was beginning to overcome us, Sanjoy *da* arrived and divided our group into three. He gave each of us an issue to think about. For example,

our daily struggles for livelihood. These were problems that we surely thought about constantly. But we had not quite considered the issues in the way he was encouraging us to do. Some issues really moved me. For example, dowry, death from snake-bites. I can talk about why it moved me later. Before that, let me say that, in the end, it was so enjoyable that I count that experience as one of the first times that I had such a good time with so many people.

Apart from us, there were other JS teams too. For example, people from Basar, Jamtala, Nakkali, Ramdebpur, and Kanmari. We came to understand each other in such a short time that we found it very difficult to part at the end of the workshop. Despite myself, a tear came to my eye. People I had not even known a few days ago became so dear to me through the medium of plays. Each time I thought about this it brought tears to my eyes.

When we returned home, we determined a date for rehearsals. With a new energy, under open skies and illuminated by lamp light we began our rehearsals of our play *Gayer Panchali* (Song of the Village). A lot of people from our village would come to watch our rehearsals. When I returned from theatre training, our first show was at Ramtonunagar. I was most embarrassed about performing. This is because there was no stage, music, or lighting. One drum and some *lathis*. I had doubts. But there was nothing to be done. The senior people in this organization had come, so we had to perform the play. I mean *Simadi*, *Satyada* and *Pareshda*. When we arrived in the village a number of children followed us around and asked us a thousand questions. Some asked, 'Have you come to show *lathikhela*?'¹ Others asked, 'Are you snake-charmers?' We had a snake mask after all. When they looked at *Simadi* they said, 'This woman will surely play the character of the *bedini*.'² *Satyada's* beard gave them the idea that he will be the snake-charmer.

At any rate, there were three disparate and seemingly disconnected scenes in our play. When we started our performance, everyone was absolutely silent. We started a great discussion after the play. That's when I realized that there is a different significance to this form of theatre. *Gayer Panchali* is such a play that it touches every person's soul. I don't feel like I am acting at that point. It feels like I am telling people my life story. For example, the play shows a scene of Pari's son having died the night before. When the grandfather was taking his grandson to the funeral pyre, he was asked how the child died. He answers, 'He died of cholera.' During the performance of this scene, an aunt in our neighborhood burst into tears. I learned from my mother later that this aunt

¹ Lathikhela is indigenous cultural practice of this region.

² Bedini is the colloquial term for nomadic women associated with snake-catching and entertainment.

had a son. I had not been born yet. That boy had died of cholera. Our village hospitals have doctors but no medicine, and medicine available when there is no doctor to prescribe them. The woman was compelled to take her son to a quack doctor in Karanjali but her son did not live. I had wondered at the time how wonderful it would be if there was a hospital nearby in Belpukur village. Then that child would not have died.

Another scene in *Gayer Panchali* really stirs my soul. My nephew, who was about a year or two younger than me, was sleeping on the floor in the summer time. In the midst of his sleep he was bitten by a snake. We took him to Kulpi hospital. There was no antidote for the snake-bite there. On the way to Diamond Harbour, he died. We brought him home and called on at least seven shamans to attend to the poison. We kept him lying on the verandah of our home and they started their work on him. Some of them said, he still has life in him and others said, 'The fish are eating on his soul.' A huge crowd gathered to watch the drama. In the end, his body turned blue, he was frothing at the mouth. Our hope was in vain.

Anyway, let me return to my theatre involvement. We often rehearsed till late in the night. The entire neighborhood was quiet, with only the sounds of crickets singing in the night. In the midst of this, our rehearsals would go on strong. Sadly, and despite this initial fervor, our first team broke up for various reasons. Part of the reason is party politics. Some of the people who acted in our plays had fathers who were in high positions in the local CPM unit. Once they saw our plays, they refused to allow their sons to perform in these plays. Their impression was that we are finding fault with CPM. Moreover, for other reasons such as pressures of household work we simply could not keep the team going. We lost a number of our companions from that time to the pressures of livelihood and household. This is a big problem. At any rate, we worked incredibly hard to put together another theatre team.

I joined the central team when the branch team in our village was breaking up. Eventually, I was in the branch team as well as the central team. Whenever I had time, I would go to the central team. When I came to the centre, I enjoyed it so much and experienced a peace of mind. I felt valued and important here. They listened to me. They praised my talent and especially my singing. I often felt inhibited to sing in front of them considering the amazing voices *Simadi* and *Satyada* had. But they removed this sense of inferiority in me. They always encouraged me and brought the talent out from inside me. The kind of love I have received from *Sanjoyda*, *Simadi*, *Rohinidi*, *Satyada*, I simply cannot express it in language.

When I transitioned from adolescence to adult life, the pressure of work enveloped me. I have said earlier that when I started theatre I was about 14 or 15 years old. At this stage, I did stage plays and JS theatre with great gusto and

regularity. By the time I was 16 or 17 years old, a great number of household pressures began to confront me. My parents used to say, 'Theatre will not feed you. Don't you have to work to feed yourself? Don't you have to figure out a source of livelihood? You figure out a way. You choose whether you're going to work or do theatre. And if you do theatre, then you can stay there and eat there. You don't have to come home.' My mother used to say, 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Your father is working like a donkey to feed eight stomachs. There are three sisters ahead of you. Don't we have to get them married? Will it do if you roam around like a wastrel? Won't you think of your household at all?' And truly, at that time, we were really poor. We were a poverty-stricken household. I remember days when there was simply no food to eat. At best, we ate once a day. To raise us, our father went to the river to pick the shrimp larvae. He would leave at 2 am and return late in the evening. To get to the river from our home, it would take almost an hour. And he would walk that distance. Two hours to get there and back.

At any rate, I became an earning member of the household. I was the only earning member at the time. I had talked to a brother in the neighborhood and told him that I wanted to go and work somewhere. He had arranged for some work for me. I packed my bag that night and I went in search of work to Kolkata. That was the second time in my life that I was going to Kolkata. In Kolkata, the work I got involved in was landscaping, that is, cutting rock to make artificial fountains. Just as a waterfall runs with its own momentum till it hits a rock, similarly my livelihood needs turned into a hindrance in my theatre life. It is also true that a rock cannot ultimately stop the momentum of water. It is bound to find its course through another path. Similarly, nobody can stop my path to theatre.

What I am trying to say is that I have found a way to do theatre despite my livelihood needs. Somehow I would use excuses and white lies to negotiate things with my employer and leave for theatre workshops. There have been times when I performed JS theatre at Badu and then traveled six hours to Shyamnagar to perform with a branch team and then, without rest, performed *Gaajan* which is a form of theatre that enables me to earn money from performances. Without sleep, and traveling from pillar to post, I have found that where there is a will there is a way. It is not that I am always able to overcome hindrances. But when I don't make it to a performance, I feel very bad. Eventually, I find a way to get back to theatre. Like water that faces obstacles but eventually finds its path, I too find my path to theatre again.

Once I had to be present at performances in Kolkata. So I requested leave from my employer. My employer said 'You just went home a few days ago. Why are you talking about going home again?' I said, 'I have to go and see girls that have been arranged for my wedding. When I went home earlier, they did

not come because of some problem, but they have assured us that they will come this time.' My actual destination was Barasat, to do theatre.

The tricky thing was that a boy from my village worked in the same place with me. He took leave the following day and went home to our village. When this boy went home he bumped into my mother who asked for news of me. And he answered with surprise, 'But Aunty, Pradeep came home before me.' My mother said, 'He hasn't been home in ages.' This is how I was first caught with my family. My mother asked, 'Are you doing theatre again? Other boys are working 25-26 days per month and you are working 12 days per month? It's alright that you have done this so far, but don't you dare go in that direction again.' I decided to do theatre for most of my time. Exactly at the time that I decided to do more theatre, the employer took another boy in place of me. And that boy would work thirty days a week. At that time, if I had no theatre work I would have to sit around unemployed. I had decided to rejoin landscaping when there was work to be done at a new site.

We faced hindrances within our theatre work as well, not just hindrances to be able to do the theatre in the first place. At the same time, hidden in each of these stories of hindrances we faced are signs of our success and the effects of our work. When we did forum theatre on our plays, party politics would interfere a lot as people would try to disrupt our work. They would pass negative comments. Our team members felt quite discouraged with this. We were also wondering whether to continue with it in the midst of all of this criticism. When we were debating whether or not to continue with this, an older sister in our village who is Lata's (Shyamnagar team member) mother, said, 'We will be victorious.' She had also said that, 'When you want to do good work, a number of people will say a number of things. Instead of heeding to their objections, go ahead with your work.' Truth be told, her words really inspired each of us. After that point, we did about forty shows in a few months.

Once we went to perform theatre at Kashari Square which is quite far from our village. When we arrived, one man was incessantly said discouraging things about us. We performed our play there. At the end of the play, everyone went home except that man who was still hanging around. His face dried up when he watched our play. He was waiting there to ask for forgiveness. His conscience was bothering him. In the end, he was in tears as he apologized to us for saying negative things before he saw our play. 'Brother, I said a number of negative things about you without seeing your play. What I saw today is a reflection of my life story.' After that, we went to perform our BPL [Below the Poverty Line] play in that neighborhood. There is a scene in that play where a husband returns home drunk and is being violent with his wife. After performing that scene the people in that neighborhood made a demand of us 'JS must address the liquor problem in our neighbourhood'. We said, 'JS is a small organization that

primarily focuses on theatre. It isn't possible for them to uproot alcohol from your neighborhood. The problem is not just yours or mine, or of even of JS as an organization. The problem is all of ours. If you're not united then nothing can be done.' At any rate, there was a huge mobilization, meetings, and movement through which they themselves broke the liquor production in their area.

Let me tell you a story about Lata. Lata had been arranged to be married. Still, her in-laws were a bit doubtful about things because they knew that she did theatre with men and they wanted to see what kind of plays these were. One day Lata said to me, 'Uncle, my in-laws are coming to see our plays. Can we perform next to their home?' I said, 'Of course we can.' We performed and after the play her in-laws said, 'I used to have a bad impression of you earlier. This is true. But my impression has changed. I consider myself fortunate that I was able to see this play. I have seen such plays for the first time. Today, nobody thinks of another person, let alone society at large. You are thinking of society when you work. Keep it going brother, keep it going.' It is important to mention that Lata's brother-in-law is a well known artist in Kolkata.

In our village Shyamnagar, Jharna runs her Nibedita Shikshayatan school in the same location as the *anganvaadi*.³ The *anganvaadi* school-teacher was often absent. She cooked *khichuri*⁴ with insect-infested rice. She hardly put *daal*⁵ in the *khichuri* and as for spices she used only turmeric for colour. Villagers were quite angry about all of this since *anganvaadis* are supposed to provide nutritious food. But no one had the courage to say anything about it. Even if they said something, the teacher didn't care. That's because the teacher's sister-in-law was an active member of RSP [a regional political party]. On top of that, she was also the supervisor of the *anganvaadi*. As a result, even with a few people questioning them, there was no effect.

One day, the Basar women's team did a play on *Sarva Shiksha*⁶ (Education for All) in that area. At the end of the play, the forum process began. The forum interventions got quite intense. All the villagers were expressing their annoyance through the forum process. Literally ten or twelve days after the performance, the villagers used their own initiative to call a meeting in their neighborhood. The teacher of the *anganvaadi* was also present at that meeting.

³ An *anganvaadi* is a rural education centre built as part of the Integrated Rural Development Programme of the central Indian government.

⁴ *Khichuri* is a dish made of rice and lentils cooked together.

⁵ Lentils

⁶ Education for All is a global and national policy which is one of the Millennium Development goals. Jana Sanskriti's plays dwell on the local experience of this development mandate.

In her presence, a village committee was established. It was determined that the teacher has to come regularly to the school. If she is absent, she has to submit an explanation for her absence. Third, the resources and food coming to the *anganvaadi* had to be made transparent so that everyone could see how much was arriving for how many children. And moreover they had to improve the quality of the food that was being served to the children. I was also present at that meeting.

Thereafter, the schools were functioning quite well. But then again, the old illness struck the school. If she attended one day, then the school was closed for the five days that followed. If eggs were served one day, then, no more eggs for the next week. People from that neighborhood approached me to suggest another performance and forum discussion. We were playing cricket at that time. But we all gathered to go to that woman's house. When we got there, we found her pretending to be sick. When we asked her to come to the school for a discussion she refused. But after some of us started yelling and screaming at her, she came to the school. We asked her why she had not come to school. If you're sick, why didn't you let the committee know? Why didn't you serve eggs everyday as you are supposed to? When she was asked all of this she replied, 'Since the weather is getting hot, the eggs are rotting, that's why I have not served them'. We refused to listen to all these excuses. 'You are supposed to give these eggs and you will give them'. She said, 'If I serve rotten eggs, the people in the village will get after me. Are you going to come and help me out then?' We said, 'You are supposed to serve the eggs and you will do this. If the people in the village say anything, then you tell the committee and they will handle it from there.' The next day, the teacher started serving the eggs she was supposed to serve in the first place.

We were doing the BPL play quite often at this time. There is not a village in the Belpukur region that has not watched this play. As we approached a village, the kids would recount lines from our play, 'Hey you! What's in BPL?' they asked, quoting from the play. As a result of watching this play endlessly and doing forum on this topic constantly in the Belpukur region, people made life hell for ration-dealers. They demanded actual receipts for the rations they got and transparency about the allotted rations arriving for this region.

Now someone might ask, 'How do you know it is the result of your play that is making people demand all of this? What is the evidence that it is your plays that is making this happen?' Well, that ration-dealer is a man from our village. He comes to us every day and says 'Brother what kind of play have you started? People come to me daily and give me such a hard time.' We asked him in turn, 'How do you know they are coming to you as a result of our play.' He said, 'Well, because nobody asked us these questions before.' After your plays, every day people come and say any number of things. If you're not leading

them to this, then you tell me who is?' We asked him, 'Are the questions people are asking valid or not? Are we showing incorrect things in the plays?' He responded, 'Well, you may be showing the correct things in your play, but how can I give a real receipt for the rations when every other dealer scribbles things on a chit of paper. In any case, who gives the correct amount of rice and wheat to people? And if they don't give less, how would it be sustainable as a shop?' We said, 'Why are you saying all of this to us? Why don't you try to respond in this way to the ones who are coming to you?' When we said this, the dealer's face lost all colour and he left.

Once, we went to perform in the Bapuji region. At the end of the performance, we began our forum process. There were forum interventions during a ration shop scene. Suddenly, an elderly man stood up and held me by the collar. This elderly man used such strength when he attacked me that my shirt tore as I tried to get him to let go of me. He was panting as he yelled at me, 'Compare yourself to before you became a ration-dealer. Consider your poverty then and your wealth now that you are a ration-dealer. Earlier you had a mud house and now you have a mansion-like brick house. Still, your wants have not been satisfied?' The audience members applauded the old man's words and enjoyed his intervention. The old man came back to reality at this point. At the end of it all, he came up to me and said, 'Don't mind my actions son. In my rage, I lost track of the fact that this was just a play.' People like this man, are subject to everyday corruption, but they are not able to express their anger and nor do they know exactly what their entitlements are. In the forum theatre performance, they found a space to express their anger. Specifically, they were able to highlight publicly their anger towards property accumulation by the ration-dealer while denying citizens their rights to food at the ration-shop. People have these experiences all the time and have no space to register their protest and anger. Naturally, when they had a chance to express themselves, the accumulated anger took over and the man lost track of the boundary between fiction and reality.

I want to talk about a dowry scene in our play *Sonar Meye*. But first, let me say a bit about myself. We are four sisters and two brothers. I was born after my three older sisters. I don't remember the marriage of two of my sisters because I was far too young at the time. When my third sister's wedding was being planned, she was arranged to get married to a man who was the only son in his family. They had land and a *paan* (betel-nut leaf) plantation and hence their dowry needs were greater. At that time, his dowry demands were 10,000 rupees which in today's terms would amount to about 50,000 rupees. That was well beyond our means. Along with that, they had asked for gold jewellery for the girl and a number of other things. At first, my parents were not willing. But my aunts, uncles, and neighbors explained that we should not

lose the opportunity of such a groom because it would be hard to find another like him. 'Think well before you refuse this offer,' they said. Even though my parents did not want to go ahead with the arrangement, they heeded the words of their neighbors and agreed to the marriage. They sold the few big, expensive trees they owned absolutely at the lowest price of water. People understand other people's vulnerability and exploit it when they can. This is what I learned from this experience.

Even after selling the trees the costs of the wedding were not met. We were compelled to sell the only *bigha* of land that we owned. Before we sold our land, my mother had suggested breaking the agreement, but my father did not agree to that. My father's opinion was that he was not going to go against his own word even if he was to lose everything in the bargain. After the sale of our land, I watched my mother weeping. It pains to me to think of that time. My mother rightly said, 'For the sake of one person's happiness you are abandoning everyone at sea.' After that, the poverty of our household worsened. I had heard my parents talk about the fact that, in their time, sons used to give money to get married to daughters. I wish this custom would return in our times. At least parents would not have to cry. Women would not have to be sacrificed as a result of dowry. When a woman stays in her father's home too long beyond marriageable age, people gossip. Things get worse if she falls in love. If the boy leaves her without marrying her then she is considered spoiled in the eyes of the community. After all she may have had sexual relationships with the boy. But the boy who left her in this way, we don't stigmatise him as spoiled. Why should we have this rule? These are big questions for me.

In the play *Sonar Meye*, there are scenes which capture the humiliation of the bride-to-be who is inspected from head to toe. The inspection of the girl's physical appearance contributes to the process of determining the dowry amount. While it is taken for granted that girls' families giving dowry is an honourable thing, any physical 'shortcomings'—whether it is her hair that is considered not long enough to dark-skinned complexion—add to the dowry amount. There is total disregard for the financial capabilities of the girl's family and the emotional world of the girl. Our protest in this play is a protest against the idea that giving dowry is a matter of family honour, we protest the debt that families fall into because of dowry, and the exploitation of already poor people that the dowry system rests on.

One day we performed at Sanchita's place. Since there were other programs preceding ours we performed quite late. When we finished performing it was midnight. It takes longer because we ate after our performance. Then we wondered how we would go back home. We are all young men and women and a bit scared about it. The way home was also quite dangerous. It takes over an hour to get to the next village. And the streets are deserted and that road is

known for thieving, rape, robbery and so forth. After about 7 or 8 pm no one traveled that road. Still we continued to move ahead. We switched off our lights and we held each other's hands and gave each other courage. And nobody expressed their own fear. When we reached the next village and turned the lights on, I could see that everyone was drenched in sweat. The funny thing is that we were scared of thieves all along the way and nothing happened. But when we reached the mango orchard next to Lata's house, then we saw some youth jumping off the mango trees. One of them literally shoved us as he ran away. Then one of them was stuck up on the tree since it was too late to run away. When we were washing our feet at Lata's pond and as we were returning to her home, he jumped off the tree and even hurt his foot. But he limped off as we watched. Forget catching the thief, we could not stop laughing.

Once I had gone to conduct the rehearsals for the Basar team. Buro (older Pradeep also in Shyamnagar theatre team) had some other work and I had to take on this responsibility. Otherwise he would have accompanied me. Buro asked me to go on my own. It was the monsoons at the time. There was endless rain pouring down on us. When the rain died down a bit in the evening, I took an umbrella and made my way to Basar. From our village, it takes about 45 minutes to get there. But in the monsoons it takes twice that time. It was evening by the time I reached the *balvaadi*⁷ where the rehearsals were to take place. There was no one there. I assumed that people were taking longer to come because of the rains. After waiting a while, I went to Pritidi's house to check. Pritidi was surprised to see me. 'How could you even make it in the mud and slush through such a long distance?' I said, 'You had a rehearsal date. If I didn't come, then you would be waiting in vain. That's why I came. At any rate, why don't you let everyone know so that we can start the rehearsals.' Pritidi said 'People have not showed up because of the rain. Why don't you stay here tonight and leave tomorrow morning.' After waiting a while, I saw that the rain had totally stopped. But the clouds were heavy in the sky. I wanted to go home but Pritidi refused to let me go. She told me to stay. I somehow explained things to Pritidi and set off to return home.

After walking for a bit, a huge storm and lightening lit up the sky. I couldn't decide which way to go. In the end, I decided to keep going homewards. The more I advanced towards home, the more the storm strengthened its resolve. And the bamboo trees were literally ambushing the village road and then standing up straight again. As I was heading home, I suddenly stopped in my tracks. I could see someone's silhouette in the distance. My fear had no limit at that moment. I started chanting Lord Krishna's name at that moment. For a

⁷ Children's education centre

minute or two I just stood still for a minute or two. When the lightning struck in the sky again I saw a dead date-palm tree in the distance. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at that moment. In any case, I reached home soon after. I remember this experience vividly not only because of the fear I felt, but also because I weathered such a storm to be there to conduct rehearsals for the Basar team.

In the course of our work, people have shown us great regard as well as disregard, we have experienced joy and sadness. Once, with the Right to Information Act backing us, we submitted a letter to the Food Department regarding ration-dealerships. Pradeep Sardar's name was in the letter. When the dealer saw that letter, he himself showed up at our village. First he came to me because he thought I wrote the letter since my name is also Pradeep. He asked me, 'What do you want to know?' I said, 'The letter was not sent by me. It was another Pradeep.' I took him to Pradeep Sardar's house but Pradeep wasn't home. The man left a message there saying that Pradeep should surely meet with him in Karanjali market. A few days later, Pradeep Sardar went to the market. That gentleman hugged Pradeep and talked to him in the most obsequious tone. 'What do you want to know? What is the problem? If you have any needs, just let me know.' I heard him say all kinds of things.

Once, the people in Rangaphola village approached us for a performance. We had asked them to arrange for a lantern. The neighborhood was so poor that they could not pool resources for a lantern, they asked us to perform in the light of some kerosene lamps. But some people in our team did not think we could perform in that light. We were not able to meet their need for a performance. At a later date, we decided to go there to perform. We let them know that we're coming. On the day of the performance, each audience member brought a lamp from their home. They put together enough lamps to create the amount of light a lantern would have created. At the end of our performance, we spread our *gamchas*⁸ to collect donations from the crowd. Some of our boys objected recognizing the poverty in this neighborhood. Surprisingly, we got rice in donations. After seeing our play, they took great care of us. They fed us snacks. They said that if we had let them know earlier, they would have fed us dinner.

I remember one event. I was near Kolkata at the time. I was working in Birati on landscaping. The employer owned the house and would stay there on occasion. When he left, he would take fish and coconuts from his country home. That day, he didn't catch fish, but he did take some coconuts. He also gave us each six coconuts when he was leaving. Everyone went home with these

⁸ Gamchas are light cotton towels used extensively in India.

coconuts. I didn't go home. I thought to myself that we have enough coconut trees at home. Why don't I take these coconuts to Sanjoyda? He likes coconut. Besides I had not seen him in a while, it would be good to see him. I got off at Hridaypur station. At that time, Sanjoyda and others were staying in a rented house in Barasat.

Sadly, I found the gate closed. But, I noticed that the place was locked from the inside. I realized that this meant someone was inside. So, I called out Sanjoyda and Simadi's name. A lady came outside. That was neither Simadi nor Rohinidi. I wondered what had happened. I wondered whether they had shifted house. The woman asked 'Who are you? Who do you want to see? Where have you come from?' I explained everything. She said, 'They live here but they are away at the moment. It will be evening before they return.' I was quite sad on the way home. Not because she didn't let me enter the home. But because I did not get to see the people I came all the way to see. I wished that I could have seen them because that would have cut the grief of my encounter. God has his connections. I walked two minutes and I saw them walking towards me. I was so happy I hugged Bhaiya⁹. I am not sure if Bhaiya remembers that moment. After that, Sanjoyda and Simadi took me inside. We all ate together. In the morning, I returned to work. In truth, it is nice to recall how many of us have stayed together, lived together, done theatre workshops together in that tiny rented house. Those days were full of joy and fun.

Today, despite how much we have grown, that joy seems to be losing its momentum. It isn't that it is lost, but it is losing its momentum. If someone argues that this is because work has increased, people have increased, and we have more performances, I would not agree. It isn't just work pressure. In my opinion, it is also that there was not such a huge entitlement to receiving and consuming in the past. Today, this sense of entitlement and hunger for things has increased at a huge rate. Humanitarianism is linked to becoming self-centred. If I have said something wrong, please forgive me.

⁹ Nickname for Shujoy Ganguly, Sanjoy and Sima Ganguly's son.

This Was Everyone's Daughter

Kavita Bera

I am from Kailashpur village, Mathurapur Police Station, and District South 24 Parganas. My childhood passed quite happily. I would wake up and go to school. When I returned from school, I would eat and then go and play. I would play *Bou Basanti* and *Boji*. Often, I took the sheep out to graze near the river banks. There too I would start playing. I would play marbles. When I passed the class four exams, I was very happy. I had a dream of studying in a big school. But what's the point of saying this? We were poor and my father said he would not be able to educate me further. I had cried a lot at the time. We are seven brothers and sisters. We were very poor. We did not get to eat three meals a day. With our father, mother, and paternal grandmother, our household had ten people in it.

My father would go to dig soil out of the earth [for various construction projects on other people's land] and my mother did the housework. My maternal grandfather would weave fishing nets and cut the jute harvest. My elder and middle sisters worked in Kolkata in rich people's homes. Only my brother was educated because he would take care of my parents' future. Even he could not study past class six. There is a place called Kamininagar and my brother started to work in a store there. Meanwhile, my elder and middle sisters got married. Now, my father sent me off to work in Kolkata in people's homes. The three sisters after me did study. But, even they did not study past class two or three. I worked all day. I did all the work in a rich man's home [as a domestic worker]. But my heart would be at home. I constantly wondered when my father would come to take me home so that could see everyone again. This was my childhood.

Breaking the husk from the rice grain, fishing, sweeping the courtyard, grinding spices—if I didn't do all this work, my mother would get very angry. She would say that 'I will not feed you. Get out of the house! When you are at home, you have to work. Go out and see... we'll see who feeds you.'

The first time I came across Jana Sanskriti was when there was a meeting held across the canal near my home. Six women from my village had gone to that meeting. I heard about it and asked them where they were going. They said, 'Some people have come here an organization and they are holding a meeting.' I also went to the meeting. I heard what they had to say. I realized that their work concerns us. I expressed my interest and asked them whether I could work with them. 'We do good work. For example, we go to schools and see whether teachers are doing their jobs well. We agitate for bringing tube-wells to neighborhoods that don't have one. We agitate against liquor production when it increases too much in any neighborhood. We go to the *panchayat* to

demand closure of liquor production, or then take it further to the BDO [Block Development Officer]. We also believe that you all have to come together. And you are not alone in that problem. We are with you.' I agreed with these principles and types of work. When I started working, I realized that this is not just about meetings. There are plays performed here too. And in this theatre, it is not just plays, but they use the things that happen in our lives to construct plays. I enjoyed watching these plays a great deal. At the end of the plays, there is a collective effort to construct a solution and spectators come onstage to suggest solutions.

Despite the fact that I liked the principles of this work, the reader might ask, 'Why did I join JS?' I am a woman abandoned by her husband. Exactly after a year of marriage, my husband left me. At that time, I had a three-day old daughter. From that time onwards, I worked in other people's homes to run my household. So much work! I had to obey their orders: cutting the rice harvest, planting the rice saplings, separating the rice grain from the stalks (*dhaan jhara*), separating the husk from the rice. Chili cultivation is widespread here so I watered the chili plants. And I did all kinds of other work to run my household. At this time, the people in the organization asked me whether I would work with them. I had no one by my side. My father was poor. And in the midst of that, I had a three-day old girl. Then I felt that at least I would be able to do some good work. After all, for a woman to survive alone is a huge problem. I was immediately willing. And they said to me, 'Your daughter will stay with us in our office, and you will work in the villages. Don't worry. Your daughter will get to study there.' Today my daughter has passed her higher secondary exams and has a job in the nursing sector. I will not be able to explain in words what this means to me or how this has benefited me.

The JS central team has fifteen people and all of us had gone to Bombay to perform at the Prithvi Theatre. We did everything there, the play was over. There was a lot of discussion and debate after the play. However, a funny thing happened on our way back from there. We got onto the train. The ticket-collector came to check our ticket and we realized that we had a ticket for the trip from Kolkata to Bombay but we did not have the ticket from Bombay to Kolkata. After that, we tried to explain this to the ticket collector. Why should he listen? He made us get off the train. We were so stunned and unsure of what to do because we had already passed two or three stations. We did not have a phone number to let people in Bombay know. At the railway station we were at, the Tata Sumo was asking for a hefty sum to take us back to Bombay. In any case, we bargained with them and asked the Tata Sumo to take us to Prithvi theatre. From that day, I learned that everyone has to take responsibility. It is no good for one person to take responsibility alone.

The central theatre team of JS had gone to Nadia district for a performance.

At that time, we had a big issue to mobilize around for which it was very important for us to collect donations. I remember we would perform in the afternoon sun in the month of May. And for food we ate *panta*¹ and green chilies. I still remember Sushilda who was seventy years old. That gentleman had so much enthusiasm that he took us to village after village all day. He helped us do the collections and then in the afternoon he was there to help us in our performances, and he stayed with us. Even today I think about him and feel inspired to continue this work.

We had another telling experience when we went to Sitarampur to perform. We were supposed to return the following day, but we were a little late and the 3pm motor-boat had left. We could not return. We stayed on the banks of the river that night. There was a forestry office and a store with the store-keeper nearby. When the people there saw our drum and *lathis*² they asked us what we do. We said, 'We are a theatre team. We do theatre. But we're in trouble. We don't know how we are going to return.' At that time, the store-keeper said, 'Don't worry. You show us your play here for us and we will arrange for your food and stay here tonight.' We performed. Everyone really enjoyed it too. The food they gave us was great. Fried Hilsa fish and Hilsa curry too. We slept that night in the forest rest house, with the sari over my body to protect myself from the mosquitoes.

In my opinion, the work we do as an organization, showing our problems through theatre, I don't think there is more important work than this. At the same time, and maybe because of this kind of work, there have been a number of hindrances. Among them, I am a woman abandoned by her husband, and yet I stay on land my in-laws gave me. I go to work for the organization while living on this land. Even my daughter is not with me but with the organization. My brother-in-law had said to me 'Don't you feel shame! Your husband left you and is it right for you to go work for an organization?' My neighbors often said with sarcasm, 'Oh she's going to change the country with her theatre!' My brothers-in-law quipped, 'Those who don't have husbands, they are the ones who engage in this kind of work.' They said this because the wife in their household had stepped out of the home to do work. That's why they said this.

I used to stay with my husband on a parcel of land within the compound of my in-laws' property. When my husband left me, my in-laws did not chase me away. They understood that their son had an affair with another woman and it was not my fault. At the same time, they were not worried about how I would

¹ A common dish eaten in rural Bengal made up of fermented rice soaked overnight in water.

² Long bamboo sticks used in JS plays to demarcate the stage and as props.

eat. Although they cultivated rice they did not give me a share of that. When I came to JS, the organization advised me to keep my house under lock and key. JS instructed me to go home at least twice in a week. They said I should go home, clean the house, stay there, and then return to the organization, after locking it up once again. The aim was to ensure that my in-laws knew that I was living there so that I did not lose the house to them. In the end, that old house broke down. All the JS workers and the organization helped me with donations of bamboo, straw, money, tile, and labour to help me build a new home. I did not have to hire labour to do this. The organization's workers did everything. The organization also encouraged me to put pressure on my in laws to give me a piece of land for me to cultivate and have a source of food. After all, I could not expect JS to endlessly support me, nor give me an adequate salary to help me survive. At the same time, I didn't want another woman to be in a situation like mine and so I continued to work with JS. Ultimately, my brother in law gave me ten *kathas* of land for cultivation. I could eat from that. I would sell half of the produce because I often ate with the organization. This meant that I was also able to have an income from that land.

I believe my aspirations have been fulfilled. I have a place in the world. I have been able to educate my daughter. And she is even working now. I just have one more wish. I want my daughter to be happy and to live in peace with her husband. I hope they have a beautiful little home. That will make me happy enough to smile for the rest of my life. I was a wife in a village home. I was a woman whose husband had left her and I had a young daughter with me. What would happen to me and how I would survive was a big worry for me? But since I came into JS, gradually I learned how to read and write. And I learned how to speak to people. I go to various places in my country and abroad. I did not dream of going abroad. I have seen so many places abroad. I remember going to see an aquarium in France. Water behind glass and big fish in there! I loved that. But all of that has happened because of Jana Sanskriti. I have grown so much and that's because of Jana Sanskriti.

JS has changed over the course of its existence. First, we used to perform plays and leave. Now we perform plays and stay on to discuss issues shown in the plays with the audience. We chat with them. After all, those problems are their problems. The value in this is that they then ask for a meeting to figure out how to fight the problem. We contact them and we conduct meetings with them, discuss things with them. Now I think that the things that people are able to express onstage today. To me, that is a huge transformation. The biggest transformation of all is that married women are able to do theatre and that they are able to explain to their husbands that this is the kind of theatre they do and the purpose of their theatre.

I am afraid that I will not be able to do the work I am able to do in the

present when I am older. The organization is big. There are a lot of new people in it. Will I depend on them? In the meanwhile, I also wonder who will look after me now that my daughter is married. Perhaps my daughter will want to, but my son-in-law is someone else's son. Will he want to look after his mother-in-law?

My daughter was brought up in JS and has studied through them. She has been employed in nursing with their help. My daughter chose her partner and JS friends helped get her married. Satyada asked all our friends for help with the wedding. Satyada and *Chotoboudi* (Sima) had gone to my daughter's prospective in-laws' home to fix a date. The mother-in-law was not happy about this union. This is because my daughter is dark complexioned. She was also unhappy that her son had chosen this person. Third, no dowry was to be given. When I said there was to be no dowry, the mother-in-law-to-be asked 'How there would be an event at their home in that case?' *Chotoboudi* said in response, 'I guess without money there will have to be no event at your place.' We had the conviction that the wedding would happen since the girl and boy loved each other.

Chotoboudi and Satyada kept explaining, 'We were only concerned that the families should be happy with the marriage. That's why we came to talk about all of this. You have seen Kavita's house. A mud home and thatched roof. Do you think she can cough up 50000 rupees in dowry? If this organization was not by her side then she and her daughter would be washed away in all of these years. No doubt we will not bring you dowry, but we have brought her up in such a way that every month she will give you four thousand rupees. That will stay in your household. Most importantly, all of us friends will take the responsibility of her wedding as her friends. But, in principle, we don't give or take dowry.' They discussed all of this. When it came to fixing the date, they had to take into account the busy JS schedule. My daughters' sisters-in-law sarcastically commented on why it would take this long to arrange a wedding that came with no dowry. At any rate, we fixed the date.

The day after that our central team workshop began. At the end of the workshop, *chotoboudi* held a meeting with everyone. There were members of the Human Rights committee as well. All of our friends helped and my daughter got married at Girish Bhaban. The wedding sari is a special sari. From the saris to the *shakha* and the *pola* each person donated according to their ability.³ JS as an organization helped in addition to individual members' donations. The office computer was used to design a card and the menu for the feast in the evening.

³ Shakha and pola are white and red bracelets respectively that are worn by Hindu women in Bengal as markers of marriage

The entire thing was a collective affair. We did our best to balance doing enough for my daughter so that she could go to her new home with her head held high and doing too much just to conform to every societal expectation. There was a video cassette made of her wedding. I wanted for nothing. I had no grief about anything that day. Everyone was around helping. Anyone watching would have thought, 'This was everyone's daughter'.

Chasing Wild Buffalos

Chittaranjan Pramanik

When I was a child, I lived in a joint family. Everyone lived and ate in the same large house with a roof made of straw and a covered porch all around. In front of the house, there was a large stash of paddy stalks. The porch had a tile-roof. On one side, there were cows meant for ploughing the field and on the other side there were cows for milk. We had some goats as well. In a word, ours was a dairy house. My paternal grandfather, Late Pitambar Pramanik, was originally from Jukhia Bazaar in Medinipur district of West Bengal. I have heard that he went to jail for Gandhi's movement. He was a very simple, truthful man. My grandfather and his brothers were very poor. They used to work as labourers for a landowner. When they came to South 24 Parganas, they cut the forest and worked as sharecroppers. My grandfather worked so well that the impressed landowner gave my grandfather a plot of land to live on. My grandfather was a great carpenter. He constructed the structure of homes, made furniture, and performed in *jatra* plays in the evening.¹ At that time, *jatra* was the principle manifestation of culture.

My grandfather took care of and mentored a number of people. Apart from sacrificing and donating to people, he fed the hungry and gave a home to the homeless. Wage workers like Sakhi Das and Bolai Das who worked on others' land, he gave them a place to stay. My father believed in Hare Krishna. He was a very simple man who did not like confrontation or interfering in other people's lives. I have seen him help others. I have seen him help pay the dowry for other people's daughters. At the same time, he would not spend money when he thought it was unnecessary. He would have numerous arguments with my mother on this front. He played football really well and like my grandfather, my father was a great carpenter. On occasion he did *jatra* plays. Our home felt like a marketplace full of people. Quite often, my grandfather and then later my father would read Ramayana and Mahabharata and would tell us stories from these books. My mother is Molina Pramanik. She would spend most of her time cooking. After all she was cooking for about 20-25 people. During the agricultural season, there were even more people in our house.

Our grandparents and parents really loved us a lot. On one occasion, after the floods, we were not able to grow rice. I remember that year to be one of great hardship. My parents fed us bulgar and broken bits of rice. In my

¹ *Jatra* is a popular theatrical form from this region.

childhood, my mother had a great enthusiasm for watching *jatras*. In our village, there is a type of game called *hapu*. In this game, you use a stick to beat yourself while improvising a rhyme about various issues. The rhyme was part of the entertainment. People came to our house to show us how to play *hapu*. My mother learned how to perform that game so perfectly, she performed it for us. We would be rolling on the floor with laughter.

There were mango trees, tamarind trees, *jaam* trees all around our house. Coconut trees surrounded the pond in our compound. South of our compound was the primary school. I remember that one day I was playing before going to school. My grandfather gave me a tight slap and dragged me to school. From that day onwards I never skipped a day of school. My roll number was between 1 and 4. I did a good job in plays for school functions. In the play, *Jamuna Boti's Wedding*, I was called upon to play the role of a Brahman and Biswa, my neighbor and fellow JS member, played the role of the barber. The play was about the conflict that arose based on what payments were due to the Brahmin priest who presided over the ceremony and the village barber who got the groom ready. Wherever we went, people would praise me for my performance. I used to enjoy that praise a lot. Inspired by my school teacher, I started writing poems. I have written a number of poems and folk songs. In the annual school event, I had performed some of these songs and poems and people enjoyed my creations. I was taken to the block-level event and participated in the dance drama there. I have also won a lot of prizes. I always enjoyed playing, poems, and theatre. I studied at the village school in the morning and afternoons and had a whole lot of fun playing various games in the evening: games like *Godi, kho-kho*, flowers-fruits, hide and seek, *bou basanti*. On occasion, my friends and I would construct a *jatra* stage for fun. How did we make this? We pretended that coconut shells were microphones. We used to make the spine of a banana leaf the wires. Clay pots would serve as chairs. And then we began the *jatra* in one part of our courtyard. My house is in Digambarpur village, Pathar Pratima block, presently in Dhola Police Station, South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal, India.

On holidays I would take the cows out to graze. I used to play on the fields as well. One day, I was swayed by a friend to make a cigarette out of *babla* leaves. On some days I would go fish in the river. Not that I managed to fish anything out, only destroyed the fishing net. I would go from house to house collecting flower saplings and sow those in our garden. I was very fond of flower gardens. When my father worked on the fields, I would take food for my father. When I got older, during the agricultural season I sowed the saplings in the ploughed field. I have exchanged labour with friends to do farming.

When I was 17 or 18 years old, I had just about passed the class 10 exams. It was about June or July in 1988. A number of young men in the village decided

to attend a theatre training workshop in Narendrapur because they wanted to start a club in the village. When people returned from there and discussed the meeting, they agreed that they want to do this kind of work because it seemed to be good work. This was work for a mass movement. The organization performed plays with various social problems as themes. Everyone in the locality joined the mass organization. I remember their slogans, 'Not donation or welfare handouts, we want the laws that give us work'. We don't want dependence on our politicians, we won't take dowry nor give dowry, etc. I did not absorb political talk in my brain at that time. I was against alcohol and I was for better health care in rural areas. I used to perform theatre when I was young and I enjoyed that a lot. I went for JS's Kailashpur theatre workshop. When I came back to the village I became completely involved in theatre work. Although they didn't do forum theatre at that time, I joined the theatre group. My father used to say, 'You're eating at home and yet you're chasing wild buffalos [dreams of an unknown country/place]. When you grow up you will realize the folly of what you are doing.' My mother never stopped me. She made it easy for me to enter this work.

I remember on a cold winter evening under the open sky, we started rehearsals for the play *Gayer Panchali* under the direction of Kalu-da (that is, Swapan Das). That was when I began my work with JS. If you do good work, you can be good. My mother believed that, 'If you stay with the organization, the future will be good.' I enjoyed theatre and believed I could do good things for the country—that's why I joined this organization. Rather than donation or welfare, we demanded the guarantee of work all year round in the villages. A mass organization and JS made this demand collectively working relentlessly without salary for twelve years. Thereafter, economic needs and the worry about the future pushed me to take training in homeopathy even in the midst of all this other work. I started a homeopathy practice of my own in the village. I kept my theatre and social work alive right through this. I never thought about whether this would bring me financial benefit. I remained with the theatre without hesitation.

I have been to countless places for performances—sometimes on cycles and at other times on foot, from Digambarpur to Ramganga, from Raidighi to Srinarayanpur and Nadia. Sometimes, our Digambarpur branch performed theatre in the neighboring Indian province of Bihar. In every place, people loved our performances. I cannot express the thrill this gives me in words. When we were returning from the performance at Taranagar once, it was well past midnight. The boatman had left the river bank after a day's hard work. We called him endlessly. We were at the river bank all night, singing and chatting with each other. At dawn, we caught the first boat across to get home. Those among us who worked in people's homes, it inconvenienced them. Everyone

was a soldier of social change. The inner pull and the pull of theatre meant that the difficulties of going right back to work in the morning did not seem insurmountable.

I am not sure where we found the resolve to do this kind of work. Once we were returning from Sitarampur village in G-plot of South 24 Parganas after a performance. When we came to the river bank to catch the motor boat, again, we found that the last boat had left. We had no way of returning home. Since there were many of us, many residents of that area asked us where our homes were and what we do. When they heard that we do theatre, they were very happy. They had never seen street theatre you see. They said, 'Can you perform here? Will you perform here? We want to see your plays.' We said, 'There's no light here, how will you see anything here?' Immediately they arranged for lights. By the flowing river on the river bank, we started our performance for a handful of fishermen and some of the resident villagers.

After the performance, they arranged for puffed rice for us to eat. The play and the *kaathi* dance with which we start our shows, made them very happy. The owner of the trawler and the village residents then brought us huge pieces of *hilsa* fish. They cooked the *hilsa*: fried hilsa, curried hilsa, and steaming rice. We enjoyed the meal immensely. They cooked the meal right there by the river bank. We ate on the boat. Eating is not the big part of this story. Rather the love and hospitality of these villagers taught us anew how to love human beings. When at dawn, the boat service began again, we returned home. The people at home would suffer the consequences of all this. Among us, some of our friends also got scolded for this kind of thing. I have learned the ability to accept things in my home. Earlier, there was a certain spontaneity among JS workers. I don't know if it is because of the amount of work we have, to some extent, now there is a lack of energy in our work. I often feel that we are working like machines. Actually, this organization was small initially. I hope that god will surround us with love again.

In terms of the movement, we protested against corruption in the healthcare sector. The doctor implicated in our struggle was quite angry with us. A number of people praised us and a number of people claimed that we had chased away the doctor. Actually, the doctor had been transferred. Together with men, women, and children of the region we have broken liquor production in this region. We have lit liquor pots on fire. Even today, we can smell the terrible fumes of the liquor. With the demand for work right through the year, we have participated in a relay fasting for eighteen days. On that stage, I first sang a song that I wrote myself. I was amazed with the sights of night-life in Kolkata. I saw the depths to which poverty takes people. The problems in the village and in cities were disparate, but equally intense. I did not have this impression earlier but I realized this when I saw the night life in Kolkata. We also worked

on women's oppression and dowry which annoyed me a great deal I married a divorcee, tortured, lower-caste woman without dowry. Even today, my parents have not accepted her in the family. Many friends console me by saying that at least my work will not be vain.

It is because I came into JS work, that I had the courage to marry a divorced woman without taking dowry. The neighbors said extremely hurtful things when I did this. On top of everything, I was the eldest son of the household, the first child of the household. My conviction was that my work is only true when there is continuity between the principles of my work and my life. If your words and your action don't match, then the future does not forgive you. A number of people have been able to give their daughters in marriage without dowry as a result of watching our plays. Many of our male theatre actors have got married without taking dowries. When there is an opportunity, human beings change, they become bigger, they are able to protest, and there are able to demand their rights. Those who were unable to stand and speak in public, they come to the stage to voice their opinions. For example, they discuss things with the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) teacher about mid-day meals and education. When they saw the anti-liquor play, people wanted to debate the liquor issue. Through forum theatre people have realized the fact that debate can enable us to solve problems.

I can see that a lot of friends around me have built brick homes, big bank balances, have worked as LIC agents (Life Insurance Company), they have motorbikes, and they have accumulated property. Perhaps if I didn't come into this work, I too would have accumulated property in this way. But, in the process of doing theatre, having heard the pain of so many people, I feel pain thinking of their pain. I can't tear myself apart from the love and familial feeling I have received from this organization. Perhaps if I was rich, my lifestyle would have taken a different turn. On the other hand, I would have lost out on nurturing my mind in this way.

In terms of developing JS work, electoral vote and party politics are the first hindrances. A consumerist society, media, different types of wants and greed appear as huge hindrances in our work. Doing JS work becomes an economic problem for our workers and we cannot rely on as many people as we need. I will not say that all my aspirations have been fulfilled. We have acceptance from people, they are coming to the organization out of love. In many cases, we can see that it is extremely difficult to hold on to them.

My neighbors would often make fun of me for doing this kind of work. In particular, people criticised the fact that we worked with women. In that regard, I used to have a bad feeling about our theatre. It was through the medium of our work that I ceased to worry about this criticism. Gradually, I made a place for myself in JS's central team. We used to often have to come to Kolkata for

training. I remember entering the office at one point when I was relatively new and when JS was part of the mass organization. One of our mass organization activists had said to me, 'Don't come in at any time you feel like. It is inconvenient for us.' I had felt quite insulted by this comment. Now I think about the fact that I have hardly thought about myself when I was doing this work. For twelve years I did not take any salary. I considered the organization so dear to me.

There were some in the executive leadership in the mass organization who did not want to consider us as one. For argument's sake, if I accept that even an organization with principles of collectivity can legitimately ask people to leave, I still cannot accept that they show no ability to recognise its most committed members. Since my youth, I have had a tendency to pick up on nuances and be a perfectionist. I continuously questioned the correctness of my work and ask whether it was truthful. This capacity for minute critique meant that I have had problems with my colleagues occasionally. It did not last—after all we are friends for many years. I know that my work is in sync with the principles of this organization. I tell myself that if my goals are correct then hindrances don't remain hindrances.

Initially in JS, we did propaganda theatre. People used to see our solution to their problems, praise us, and leave. Later, we came across Brazilian theatre-person Augusto Boal and his theatre methods. That's when we started Forum Theatre. We are the first in India to start Forum Theatre. The whole idea of discussing a problem after showing the play animated our work much more. People learned to find the path to their solutions. The theatre movement gave people a great deal of strength. The death of the forum theatre inventor, Augusto Boal, has given me great grief. If Boal was alive, perhaps we would have created other things for the history of Forum Theatre.

I have been abroad four times to perform theatre. We wanted to convey our ideology and to earn money for our organization to survive financially. I have seen some of the most significant sights outside India. Paris city in France and its Eiffel tower, English channel, Germany's Berlin wall and prison, the international court in Holland, the short nights in Sweden, the mountains and beautiful landscape in Austria, and Sweden's rivers. It made me realize that I am hardly alone in this struggle. We have so many companions in our country and outside it. I have been able to see this thanks to my participation in JS's work and efforts. And Sanjoyda's endless creativity made this possibility, a reality for us. Sanjoyda is a man of great measure. I was quite surprised when he scolded a team member in a particularly harsh manner. Later, Sanjoyda was full of regret about this incident and expressed this to the team member. He used to keep his eyes on every aspect, and he made a good point, but perhaps because of his pressures, he said it in a particularly harsh way. I love Satya's

simple, dedicated, loving person whose words and actions match each other. For him, everyone is equal.

The biggest fear I have is the establishment of authoritarianism in the name of democracy, whether in this state, in our country, or what we see in other NGOs. The government of West Bengal has misruled for 32 years. The opposition has criticized them and has now raised the issue of a change of government through the movements in Singur and Nandigram. Yet the people in the opposition who have won the Lok Sabha elections are terrorizing people and killing innocent civilians. This kind of political terrorism amazes me. I am amazed at the inhuman actions towards ordinary citizens in Lalgarh by the joint forces of central and state police. History will not forgive this. The sin of Lalgarh is that adivasis had demanded work, education, and water for their survival. Instead of making these arrangements for them, they are being accused of being Maoists, thereby repressing their language of resistance. This is the strange structure of rule. You come to power through the strength of people and you want to kill off those very people. Are they friends of people or enemies for life? There seems to a constant struggle for 'I' and people dying for praise even among the non- party activist movement. People will not forgive them.

My main aspiration for the future is oppression-free people, oppression-free society, and to sing songs of freedom through the medium of theatre. Earlier our economic ability was much less and the organization was small. Yet, it was full of love and unity. Now the organization is large, the financial resources and human resources are greater. It is well-known the world over. Yet somehow, sometimes, I feel nostalgic about the past. The influence of modern market is much higher, television has invaded the village, we don't find the youth by our side in the way we used to get them in the past. This is what makes us worried.

I also worry about who will carry the oar for JS in the future. In the villages, there is no problem. There is an entire second line of workers prepared to take this work forward. But I can't see a second line in the Badu office. It is difficult to understand from outside how difficult it is to develop a Sanjoy Ganguly, particularly when 99% of the members are from marginalized rural family who struggle for their existence. They actually find it hard to manage time for performances. These are people without higher education. Should we then hire managers at our office? Is that a sound solution? So many years of hard work, so many people coming together, so many friendships, so much familial feeling, so much labour, and so much hope. Will it all be wasted? This cannot be. I am calling for someone, somewhere in this wide world, a loving friend who will take on the reigns in the future.

A moment with Jana Sanskriti and the world changes from one day to the next¹

Agneta Josephson

Translated from Swedish by Lars Josephson

To live is to be present now—dependent on what we have inherited from the past and on our way to what we will create for the future. The last year of mine has been filled by writing. To write is to try out thoughts. Life is moving, as is the world. To write is to try to capture what always moves; the wish to fix the present for a moment. When a text reaches a reader the present the writer tried to capture has moved on. When a text reaches a reader, the reader becomes the creator through dialogue with the text.

This year I have been writing a report of a research project on how Theatre of the Oppressed-inspired work can be used with healthcare staff, mainly midwives, nurses, obstetrics and gynecologists in women's clinics, to work against the oppression of patients. I have also written about TO in a book concerning how we can be more attentive to the power of norms by using anti-oppressive pedagogy; inspired by queer-, gender-, postcolonial- as well as crip-theories.² The two texts are of different genres—the first one academic, the second one more of a political/pedagogical text derived from my experience with TO. Now I have the great pleasure of writing a third text in a third genre. In this text, I try to capture and reflect some of my moments together with Jana Sanskriti through my lenses. My lenses are on one hand inherited from what I was born into and on the other evoked from living in the various positions I live in, as do all of us.

There were thousands upon thousands of us walking through the streets of Kolkata. The streets were filled with traffic and masses of people sporting an explosion of colours. We had come to express our support for the use of Theatre of the Oppressed. About fifty of us had arrived from various parts of the world. From villages and cities across India, thousands had travelled in order to join the parade. Many had walked, taken a bus, or come by boat from distant places. In some cases, their travel times exceeded my own flight between Stockholm

¹ Agneta Josephson wishes to thank her son, Lars Josephson for help with translating this text from Swedish and for big help from the editor Dia Da Costa.

² Post structural theories linked to constructions of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and disability.

in Sweden and Kolkata in India. What was it that made us want to gather in order to do this march together? We wanted to acclaim the great struggle against oppression and the establishment of dialogue that Jana Sanskriti had constructed and continues to construct through Forum Theatre. We chanted: 'Long Live Jana Sanskriti - Long Live Forum Theatre'!

I walked for a while together with Augusto Boal, who was ecstatic by the experience. He said that although his son Julian had said to him, 'Father prepare your heart', he had not expected this—so many people expressing their belief that theatre could be such a central part of change. We walked through the city in a tremendous procession swarming with people, passing idols and being passed by yellow taxis and richly-coloured trucks packed with people or grass baskets. The 30°C air was filled with smells, both nice ones and less pleasing ones—the smells of spices, flowers, sweat, perfume, filth, soap.

Two years later Jana Sanskriti visited us in Sweden working in a red barn by a lake in a green forest at Konnsjögården. The only ones to listen to our dialogue, except for us TO-practitioners, at that time were the birds and the wind. The members of Jana Sanskriti, Julian Boal and the Swedish workshop participants were concentrated on our common work as we made images, as we played games, and as we cooked together in the big kitchen. Years earlier Augusto had visited us there working with us in the same barn.

There are moments when we can feel the wing beats of time and a shared existence. When dialoguing through methods born in Latin America with persons from India in a forest in Sweden, we experience the world as shared. We also experienced the world as shared when meeting and marching with thousands of men and women in a park in Kolkata:

The march finally arrived at a large park where all of us gathered. There was a lot of noise. Women blew on large seashells, producing a sound similar to foghorns. People were celebrating the glory of the moment. Sanjoy Ganguly, the main face of Jana Sanskriti, gave a speech, accompanied by Augusto Boal. Boal was praised by the participants when he said:

We are here ten thousand of us, who represent millions who want to discover by learning with one another how to transform this society from what it is into another one capable of giving happiness to all, bringing us the freedom to invent and to create, transforming the world into a place with happiness for all rather than for a few. Theatre of the Oppressed gives everyone the democratic right to speak aloud what they think, what they feel and learn from one another to consider how we can change together. To change the world however is not a gift given by the skies, we have to fight for it. We believe in you because you believe in you, and what you say you are going to do is what you have already done. A deed and it's

a deed of Jana Sanskriti. Jana Sanskriti started this work in a small village grew up in small villages and it today exists all over this enormous country. (Transcribed from a tape recording of the speech of Augusto Boals in Kolkata 2006-10-06)

By listening collectively we shared this moment. We were sitting together, but also divided. One side was mainly occupied by men and the other primarily by women. I enjoyed meeting the women. I had brought a folding fan and a camera. Someone borrowed my fan. She used it to move the air. Plenty of women wanted to see and use the fan, so it was passed around amongst us. I made eye contact with each woman who used the fan to refresh herself. Those of us who sat together could not communicate through words. My language was Swedish, others spoke Bengali, and still others spoke Hindi. Others spoke languages I could not name. Yet, we managed to communicate in other ways. Notwithstanding the lack of common languages, what we were doing was indeed engaging in dialogue. We dialogued through the exchanging of looks, movement of our bodies, the fan, the pictures on the camera, the laughter and the water, we shared in the heat. Through photographing I have captured a moment, a past of which I can share with others in my present. I also capture this moment through this text. Did the women I met also create pictures and stories of the movement we were in? How do they share such pictures and stories with others in their present? Who am I in their mind?

In India I learned a lot. Freire says we learn when we

...engage in experience of assuming [our]selves as social, historical, thinking communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias, capable of being angry because of a capacity to love. Capable of assuming [our]selves as 'subject' because of the capacity to recognize [our]selves as 'objects.' (Freire 1998, 45-46)

Even though the country I live in, Sweden, is a rich, secular, country with lots of anti-discrimination laws, as in many countries, there is a lot of oppression. Violent oppression like rape, hate crime and so on. And even though it is not true that Sweden has the highest suicide rate, it is still true that there is a lot of silent oppression.

We have had a social democracy for a long time that slowly became more and more right-wing and at the moment when I write this text we have a bourgeois government. We must be aware not to be the frogs that Augusto Boal used to talk about: 'Do you know how to boil frogs?' he asked, and then he told the story about how to boil frogs: 'If you increase the temperature at once the frogs will realize the danger and jump out of the pot. If you slowly step by step increase the temperature the frogs will understand the danger of the temperature too late. They understand it when their muscles already are boiled and they can no longer jump from the pot.' We can help each other to be aware of the silent but insidious encroachment of dangers surrounding us. Working as

a TO-practitioner is to open spaces for us all to speak about what is unspoken and to realize that we need to always work on dialogue among people.

Nietzsche wrote about how we inherit our language from those who lived before us and that the languages are built upon metaphors always hiding some of the truth from us. When meeting across cultures I would say we have a great possibility of seeing with parts of our eyes and listening with parts of our ears that we have, but are usually dormant. I believe that by dialoguing with persons born in other languages we can learn to see what in our own language was impossible to see. We can listen to what we could not hear before. The dialogue of our bodies and glances help us to reach truths only reachable through these means. Every individual has her own language and the language is also created differently in every situation. Within groups we are inspired by each other, our bodies and glances learn to speak a similar dialect. Is the body language I have developed by living in my parts of the Swedish contexts serious, quiet, and whispery? Maybe in many contexts, glances and laughter are more open than our body language in Sweden? When I talked with body language in the park Kolkata I felt I related with the women I met.

It was during October-November 2007 that Jana Sanskriti invited people from all over the world to India. We came there to:

- Participate in a workshop led by Sanjoy Ganguly, Jana Sanskriti's main spokesperson
- Travel in a group to a village in order to, amongst other things, participate in a Forum Theatre performance.
- Participate in a march through the streets of Kolkata in order to show our support for Forum Theatre as a tool in developing democracy and its use in the struggle for human dialogue.
- Experience 'Muktadhara', a Forum Theatre festival with groups from different parts of India and other parts of the world.
- Take part in a conference about Theatre of the Oppressed.
- Witness the creation of the Federation of Theatre of the Oppressed in India.

Visit to the village

All participants of the workshop went for six hours by bus to the countryside. When the motor road ended we used bicycle trainers. When we came to the end of all roads, we walked. In the village we were greeted with a blessing chanted by our hosts and all of us visitors got a beige dot on the forehead when passing through a gate of flowers that had been created in order to honour us.

We were invited to sit in the large hut used for gatherings and were fed with tasty spicy Indian food that they had made for us to eat. We ate sitting on the ground, as is customary in West Bengal. Villagers of all ages gathered around

us. The powerful colours of their clothes were indescribable. The village had neither running water nor electricity, but they did have a stage, an open place where amplifiers and fluorescent lights had been put up, powered by a gas powered electricity generator.

The groups of Jana Sanskriti do a magnificent job, reaching thousands of people every month. The members of the groups write acts covering social problems, especially women's oppression but also of other social problems that occur daily. They perform these plays in their own villages, in neighboring villages and far away. Persons from the audience intervene and play their ideas of how to break oppression. Forum theatre brings dialogue discussing previously committed oppression that had not been publicly discussed. What is created in the theatrical interventions leads to social action and change. That was how the forum theatre was performed the day we visited the village. Jana Sanskriti began performing using colourful costumes, dancing, singing, drumming, rituals, and statues. Bamboo sticks were used within the dance and to depict huts and ropes were used as symbols of oppression.

I wrote earlier in the text about our body languages of daily life. Do theatrical languages of groups coming from different contexts vary? I think so. I would say that the aesthetic languages of the Swedish theatre I come to see—as in film, for example Ingmar Bergman—often are 'in low voices', often rather restrained and symbolic. When CTO Rio performed, later in the festival, I learned that the differences of theatre languages amongst us in the world of TO are even bigger than the differences between the theatrical languages of Jana Sanskriti and Forumteatergruppen Breyta (the group I work with). CTO Rio use big symbols, big gestures and often a burlesque colorful style.

The abundance of styles in the world is a source to scoop from and to be inspired by. At the same time I find it important to realize that to keep and develop different styles when coming from different contexts is important. Augusto Boal understood the importance of these different dialects—he understood them all as right, but right in their differences. I suppose he learnt from them all. By visiting contexts with different styles he found new questions to put. He became brilliant at investigating new questions and he brought them along for us to expand our dialogues.

Apart from differences there are also similarities between Jana Sanskriti's style and Breytas (and other similarities with CTO Rio but as this text is about my moment in India I will concentrate on Jana Sanskriti's work) for instant the use of Brechtian elements. Jana Sanskriti uses a narrator and the actors use ways of stepping into and out of the roles. As I see it, these elements show the spectators that this is theatre of reality, that is, what happens in the theatrical moment is like reality but now it is played. In Breyta, we also use Brechtian elements. We often put together short scenes of different oppressions so that the web of oppression can be seen, we try not to hide what we do: the actors change clothes and roles openly in front of the audience, the joker onstage switches on the tape recorder with the recorded voices we use, and it is done

openly for all spect-actors to see. We don't hide that this is theatre. TO uses the real moment of theatre to rehearse actions to be used not only in the theatrical moment, but strategies to use in society.

After Jana Sanskriti's performance in the village the international participants of the workshop—with participants from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Palestine Portugal, Spain, UK, and USA—performed their incomplete forum theatre scenes. The joker was performed by the skilled Sima Ganguly. The audience was very active. Women, men, young and old, they all interacted with the performances. Examples of scenes that were played were television watching, a family prohibiting their daughter from attending political demonstrations, an immigrant that was prevented from sitting in the subway, the boss that ridiculed his servant in front of the diners and so on. The villagers intervened and struggled against the oppressions that were shown to us, even though many of the scenes had western/northern settings. Jana Sanskriti gives us solidarity in all directions due to the fact that oppression is something that breaks only when it is done as a joint effort.

The finale of this wonderful evening was a dance hand in hand in a long row through the village accompanied by Brazilian music and in the light of the many paraffin lamps that were lit. The fireflies looked like they were moving stars, next to the ones that stood still in the sky.

Forum theatre performances in a park in Kolkata

There were arguably a thousand people attending every one of the four consecutive days that we attended forum theatre performances in the park. We sat on tarpaulins placed on the ground, tightly packed together. Merchants walked around selling hot Indian tea and sweet candy as it became night. About a quarter of the audience consisted of different Indian forum theatre groups who all performed at least once during these days. Ashtar, a Palestinian group, performed as well as CTO Rio from Brazil and TO Vienna from Austria. A group from Bangladesh was also invited but could not attend due to the troubles that had broken out in Bangladesh.

People from the audience intervened in every single performance in order to find ways to break the oppression shown to us. From what I gathered, the people who intervened in the Forum Theatre performances were of different genders, ages, and social classes. There were, as I understood it, mainly Indians intervening, but a few foreigners also tried. All of the performances had been created with mainly adult audiences in mind, many focused on the position of females. This included several Indian performances, the Brazilian one, the Austrian and the Palestinian one.

To organize and create space of dialogue

During the festival days, mornings were used for delegates from different parts of India as well as delegates from other parts of the world practicing TO, to discuss our experiences. Augusto Boal spoke of how Forum Theatre was born. The conference ended with the creation of the Federation of Theatre of the Oppressed in India. One hope, looking through the lenses of mine, is that in the future the committee of the Federation would have as many men as women. India now has one of the largest national Theatre of the Oppressed organisations in the world. After many speeches each of which were translated into three languages (Hindi, Bengali and English) we were all invited onto the stage in order to dance and celebrate the newborn organization.

Jana Sanskriti has (as also other TO groups of the world) started a large and important movement through dialogue. Jana Sanskriti invites us to share this dialogue. When we meet we can, as in the park, dialogue with our languages, share our pictures, share the water we have borrowed from our common planet and start to move the air around us.

A precondition to be able to create dialogue is to have differences; if we were all the same there would be no dialogue and no potential of transformation. A precondition of dialogue is to be willing to give and take space. In situations of genuine dialogue we change a little bit from what we were to what we become. When we take this dialogue to social action we change the world a little bit from what it was to what it becomes. Jana Sanskriti brings about space to share: as we danced we represented 'millions who want to discover by learning with one and another how to transform this society from what it is into another one capable to give happiness to all, bringing us the freedom to invent and to create...' (Transcribed from a tape recording of the speech of Augusto Boals in Kolkata 2006-10-06)

Freire, Paulo, 1998. *Pedagogy of freedom: ethics, democracy, and civic courage*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.