

Jana Sanskriti - Theatre in Education programs District - South 24 Parganas (Primary education)

VSEC (25 schools directly benefitting 500 students in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal) – An education program for primary school children run by JS is trying to bring about a fundamental and pedagogical improvement to the prescribed syllabus and mainstream education system. When the program started 3 years ago, we were not sure how it would evolve and assumed that we will have to visit other noted education NGOs to see and learn from their work. We did that. We learnt a lot. But now we feel that JS's vision of using art and theatre in education is different– something which is not visible even in the varied existing methodologies of “joy of learning”.

Our program essentially teaches the entire published government syllabus via theatre, art, painting, dance and music. **We are using these methods in a way that both the non-artist teacher and the child (in our case, slow learners) feel comfortable – this is our view of joy of learning which is missing in other existing practices.** We are aware about the absence of this type of practice elsewhere via Dr. Sanjoy Ganguly's experience of acting as a visiting professor in National School of Drama Tripura (Theatre in Education) and his numerous discourses with friends globally about the practices of Theatre in Education in SE Asia. Hence we strongly believe that our work is important and unique in some sense.

We have not limited VSEC program to the classroom alone. **We realized that the genesis of the problems we come across in the classroom often exists outside the classroom, inside the families and in the community.** Hence, involvement of child's family especially the mother is a crucial aspect of this program. **Active mother's forums** have been formed where discussions range from the child's nutrition, performance and overall welfare to several social issues like child marriage, child abuse, illicit liquor, ration cards, ICDS operations, domestic violence and many more – all through theatre.

The unique feature of this program is **introspective theatre** where a rational space is created in the family's mind which cleanses the family units – thus cleansing the community. For example, alcoholism causes domestic violence in the family which in turn affects the psychology of the child. In many cases we have come across cases of both parents engaged in extra-marital affairs and polygamy, especially where migration is a predominant economic feature. These children are left to their grandparents who fail to replace their parents. Children from these families suffer from agony not expressed which at the end makes them slow learners.

Introspective theatre is a space that deals with these desires rationally, helping families especially mothers to rationalize their role in taking care of their children. Hence, we strongly feel that in every circle, the education board should appoint a professional social worker with specialization in child psychology – our database elucidates this claim and will speak for itself.

As a result of these initiatives, the once “slow learners” are gradually turning out to be more capable to join mainstream only to be ahead of other students. We also face regular pressures from the community to admit more students to our existing VSEC centres and increase the number of centres as well. Owing to the visible success of this program in just two and half years, we are **now establishing a relationship with the respective government primary and secondary schools to embed our teaching methodology in their regular activities.** Results of this exchange are promising at the local level.