

# Jana Sanskriti: Theatre of the Oppressed



It has, in this span, touched the lives of thousands of people — tribal people, victims of domestic abuse, factory workers - primarily those from economically backward urban and rural backgrounds.

Research scholars, students, theatre performers, artists and others from India and abroad have benefited from its resources. Other than Ganguly, the directors of JSIRRI include Julian Boal, son of Augusto Boal; Ralph Yarrow, Professor of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing at University of East Anglia; and Jale Karabekir, a theatre practitioner and academician based in Istanbul, among others. Jale Karabekir, a pioneer in feminist theatre, said, “I use the theatre of the oppressed as a tool and as a method in order to address issues of domestic violence. The cases of domestic violence have increased in Turkey .” Adrian Jackson, founder of Cardboard Citizens, a theatre company that aims to change the lives of homeless people through the performing arts, said, “Theatre can be a catalyst for change, growth, and learning for participants and audience. We are working to further develop theatre projects in and out of hostels for a wide range of audiences, focused on the lives of homeless and displaced people.”

Jana Sanskriti’s work with marginalised communities has become a subject for theses and dissertations in 42 universities including Harvard, Cornell, Chicago, Cambridge, London, Manchester, and East Anglia University. Evan Hastings who integrates the theatre of the oppressed, drama therapy, and elements of Hip Hop culture into his approach to artistic social healing sums up their work well, “We work on embodied practice for individual and communal change, which is rooted locally, and yet, is globally relevant. That is why Jana Sanskriti is our chosen home. ■

30 years ago, a group of dedicated people got together to try an experiment in using theatre as a means of social change. It was a propaganda theatre group in the beginning where actors were all from remote villages. The idea of democratizing theatre took shape in their minds after their encounter with the work of Augusto Boal, a theatre theorist and practitioner who can be said to be the inventor of the ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’. Since then, Jana Sanskriti has embedded its creative theatre within rural communities across West Bengal and other parts of India. It is now viewed as one of the most important point of references in the global community of the theatre of the oppressed.

Jana Sanskriti’s goal is to create a space in which the oppressed will have enormous scope for introspection and discovery of self, and to facilitate a meeting between the individual and the perfection within himself. For “what is this perfection but the richest resource of human society?” says Sanjoy Ganguly, the founder of Jana Sanskriti. “Augusto Boal referred to this process as ‘humanization of humanity,’” he added. Their Jana Sanskriti International Research and Resource Institute (JSIRRI) is a new milestone in the history of Jana Sanskriti. This aims at the creation of an international centre for the study and practice of the theatre of the oppressed and other forms of theatre and performances for social change. The group, currently headquartered in Kolkata, started its work in low-income areas near the Sunderbans in southern West Bengal three decades ago.