

31 May 1985

Dear Naresh,

I hope you are well. You have asked me how I am spending my days. I do not know exactly what to say...All kinds of thoughts come to my mind nowadays. I never used to think like this before. I read somewhere that it is not until you reach the top of the hill that you realise yours was not the only path. If only it did not take so long to realise these things. Anyway, let me tell you about some of my thoughts, some of my experiences.

In South Calcutta, near Ballyganj railway station there is a large slum. A number of us meet there on Sundays and holidays. Except for me all the others work for a Ballyganj-based NGO. The people who live in these slums have come from different areas of the 24Parganas<sup>1</sup> that fall under the Sunderban Development Authority. They are not alike. Those who come from the vicinities of the Sunderbans<sup>2</sup> have an intimate relationship with rivers and the jungles that grow on the swamps. Those who come from near the railway tracks have no link with water and marshy land. They are heavily influenced by Kolkata. These diverse people, some from villages near the city, some from remote areas, have come together in this slum, tied together now by a common struggle for daily existence.

In the villages there is not enough work to keep them busy for the whole year. So they are in the city now in search of a living. Some work as domestic labour, some are wage workers on construction sites. A few are hired by pandal<sup>3</sup> decorators, some work in small food shops. From multi-storied buildings to the metro rail - nothing in Kolkata could have been built without their contribution, yet they live in an area of indescribable filth. If one had not seen this slum, it would have been difficult to imagine that even in the twentieth century, human beings could live in such putrid, foul-smelling and unhygienic circumstances.

Pashupati is a well-known figure in the slum. He has easy access to everyone - from the important persons in the ruling party to the leadership of the NGO which is implicitly against the party in power. Because of his intelligence Pashupati is recognised as the most reliable person here. How does one explain the source of his intelligence? This was a million-dollar question. Because Pashupati is illiterate. You know how in our party we used to value those who were good in their studies or those who came from aristocratic families. But this man - Pashupati - has neither a certificate from a school nor the stamp of a well-known family. I suppose you can guess the question that naturally comes to me.

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<sup>1</sup> A district in southern Bengal

<sup>2</sup> A delta forest in southern Bengal

<sup>3</sup> Decorative canopies constructed for festivals

The wide world outside is unknown to me, but I had no idea that in the corners of our own familiar city, there were patches of such intense darkness. I might have known this in the abstract, but the actual experience was traumatic; it unleashed a flood in my mind. I had always known that in the dialectic between insoluble problems on the one hand and the attempt to surmount them on the other lies the key to human development. But what struck me here is the abundant presence of human qualities among people who are struggling for survival every waking moment of their lives. Poverty does not necessarily erode human values - my experience is fast bringing me to this position. All of you who are so involved in economic movements could perhaps think a little about it.

Sixteen years ago we did not know the answer to that million-dollar question. The closer we came to the people who live here, the more insistent the question became. The answer gradually emerged from our contact with a large number of people. The story of my experiences in this slum that goes back sixteen years is not irrelevant, because it contains the pre-history of Jana Sanskriti. I must refer to it as I trace the emergence of Jana Sanskriti as perhaps the largest theatre group in West Bengal today.

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Pashupati's village Dahakanda is about seventy kilometres from Kolkata. By train it takes about one and half-hour to reach a small station called Madhabpur - and then one has to walk for another hour and a half. It is a mud path part of the way, but for the rest one has to trudge across the paddy fields. In summer, inspite of the scorching sun it is easier to cover this distance than in the rainy season when the one and half-hour walk stretches into three hours. The rains do not only make the field muddy, it makes the clayey soil dangerously slippery. There is no electricity in the village and no trained doctors. The lanes inside the village are flanked on both sides by human excrement. Children cannot go very far through the slippery fields so they use the roadside regularly for relieving themselves. When it rains this gets mixed with the mud; walking barefoot along these lanes is an experience I would better not try to describe.

Seven of us stayed in a small room in the mud hut that belonged to Pashupati's family. Among us there was a married couple. In order to allow them some privacy, the rest of us often

slept outside the room. This is how we spent the first few months when we began our work in the village. Of the seven, three returned to the city after some time because they could not cope with the hardship of rural life. Absence of electricity, roads, running water, toilet facility was too much for them. People lived in mud huts with thatched roofs. There were no shops to speak of. Yet the distance from the metropolis is only seventy kilometres.

At that time none of us were involved in theatre. We came from the urban slum to the village to help the people to organise themselves. After spending some time with the people who live in the slum near Ballyganj station we felt the necessity and urgency of going to a village to look at the root of the problem. That is how we were in Pashupati's village Dahakanda.

While narrating our story I constantly feel the need to go back to the source. To lose touch with the source is to me a kind of death. A river, however wide and swift it may be, would begin to dry up as soon as it is disconnected from the source. Yet the source is not the centre; it only pours out the water, it does not control the flow or the direction. Today Jana Sanskriti has spread far and wide, but we hope our link with the source will never be severed.

In our case the source is a concept. In later years the concept has become clearer to us, sometimes its weaknesses have also become apparent, enabling us to think afresh, bring in new ideas and developing them further. It is not possible for any concept to remain unchanged and unaffected by circumstances. In a sense no concept is entirely original and no idea can remain unconnected with other ideas. It is through interaction and dialogue that ideas evolve. This is why I have come to believe that any dogma is essentially anti-idea.

The more we have succeeded in our actual application of the concept of Theatre of the Oppressed in rural areas the more convinced we have become of the truth of this. Our success encourages us to go back to the source and look closely at our strengths and weaknesses in order to develop an inquiring mind. This spirit of inquiry has enabled us to collect the gems of ideas that lay scattered all around us. Later, if I have time, I will tell you about this process of discovery. But for the moment let me return to the pre-history.

At that time, in the mid-eighties the entire world was engaged in a major debate. Was it socialism that existed in the Soviet bloc and the east European countries or was a capitalist force

operating in the name of state enterprise? Our seniors in the party had taught us to look up to these countries as models. Not only I, but many others were under the spell of a dream which made us aspire to the conditions that prevailed in these countries. Even after the ideological ground beneath our feet began to shake, it was difficult to come out of this spell. Disillusionment did not happen easily.

Dogma or debate? This was the question that agitated my mind the most, and I am sure I was not the only person who worried about it in those days. Even more than economic questions the most important issue was to decide whether the windows should remain closed or be opened. "This is the truth because it is scientific" - why did I not realise earlier that such a dogma is actually anti-science?

What is the effect of dogma - I used to ask this question to our seniors in the party. Is it healthy to encourage a plurality of ideas and allow them to interact? If the heterogeneous points of view result in confusion what is the point in talking about dialectical development? We had to wait a long time to get a clear answer. It may not be irrelevant at this point to quote a portion of a letter I wrote to my friend Naresh with whom I always shared my political thinking.

17.8.1987

Dear Naresh,

...Of late I have been frequently meeting people who are like our leaders. They treat us as autocratic parents treat their children. They believe that until the children come of age they should be kept under strict control, and they are confident that they always know what is best. I feel disappointed that they do not allow us any space for discussion. The ability to ask questions would have provided some relief. So far we have been mute spectators; we have merely obeyed the orders of leaders in silent submission. The party system approves of this hierarchy happily. Today it seems to me this denial of debate had a claustrophobic effect on us. Unless the political culture of the party can be freed of this oppressive atmosphere, nothing positive can be achieved. Meanwhile precious human resources are being wasted.

Naresh, I must tell you something. The other day I went to Belur Math<sup>3</sup>. I just felt like going there. Religion is the opium of the people - I do not deny this. As far as institutional religion is concerned, we experience this everyday. This is how a political perspective considers religion. But when a religious perspective looks at politics, Christ is

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<sup>3</sup> The headquarters of Ramakrishna Mission at Kolkata

born, Buddha, Kabir and Vivekananda appear among us. It is time to rethink the truism that religion can only be the ally of reactionary politics. Religion can also be a form of progressive politics and progressive political practice can also be religion. I hope you will not accuse me of abandoning scientific thinking to escape into a safe haven. So much for today. I will write again.

The realisation of the need to have a space for debate that I articulated in my letter to Naresh was an important moment of understanding for me. I realised this much later when I began to have free access to the heart of rural life, and I started interacting with village people. By becoming a part of a theatre movement from the moment of its inception I have had the privilege of sharing my thoughts about theatre and performance not only with the people of Bengal at the grassroots level, but with such people in other parts of India as well. I must thank Jana Sanskriti for that.

It was some time in the mid-nineteen eighties. We had our centre at Pashupati's village Dahakanda. When I stood in the field outside the village, other villages at a distance seemed like clumps of forests, surrounded by tall trees. The landscape was still unfamiliar and created many sensations in me. After sixteen years the newness of the view should have worn off, but I still feel moved by these fields and the sight of the distant villages.

This was the beginning of our effort to work outside party politics. We came to the village on our own in order to help the oppressed people organise themselves. The sudden appearance of a handful of English knowing youth initially created an atmosphere of suspicion in the village. Some thought we were ultra left extremists, some thought we were foreign spies; others wondered if we were Christian missionaries subtly trying to convert them. Some were more curious than suspicious. We were trying very hard to establish the kind of relationship with them that would enable us to be effective interventionists. It was not easy.

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Music was part of the life of the village. From the raised paths criss-crossing the paddy fields one often heard snatches of baul<sup>4</sup> songs. Strains of bhatiali<sup>5</sup> or ujali<sup>6</sup> wafted in the evening air as people returned home from work or from the weekly market. The magic of these folk tunes cast their spell on me, but it also made me think. Growing up in the colonial city of Kolkata only seventy kilometers away, I had never known anything about the richness of our tradition of folk music. This ignorance used to worry me. In later years when I realised that culture is also a weapon of change, I began to see why in the four metropolitan cities developed by the British - Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai and Delhi, folk culture was never valued. [If Chennai in Tamilnadu is something of an exception, there is a major reason for this].

On the one hand we were trying to think of ways to make ourselves acceptable to the village people, on the other hand I was feeling deeply drawn towards the local forms of music. These two processes continued parallel to each other until the time for harvest drew near.

Enacted in every village around March and April, Gajan<sup>7</sup> is the most important folk performance in this region. The rehearsals begin just before harvest in December, and (after a break) continue after harvest. By that time I had made friends with a few young men who had natural singing voices who sang lustily without inhibition. I started visiting them in the evenings to listen to their songs, and through them I also earned my right to be present at the Gajan rehearsals. By that time I had gained some acceptance as a person who enjoys rural music and drama. But I always came back by seven thirty. In the village everyone slept early to save on the cost of kerosene oil. By seven-thirty or eight the entire village was dark and silent.

It is during these Gajan rehearsals that I came close to village people who were artists of some kind or another - singers, players of musical instruments, actors. I came face to face with the artist dormant in me for the first time. It was like a self-discovery - and it made me graduate to another level of understanding. It was an empowerment, but at that time I did not know the implications of this word. Getting to know the full range of my consciousness - perhaps that is what is called introspection. Augusto Boal has said theatre is looking at oneself as a spectator. - I

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<sup>4</sup> A form of folk music in Bengal

<sup>5</sup> A form of folk music in Bengal

<sup>6</sup> A form of folk music in Bengal

<sup>7</sup> A form of folk theatre in Bengal

did not know this definition then. As long as I was with a political party I did not have much scope for introspection. Achieving targets was given the most importance there. I felt rejuvenated by the dedication and sincerity I encountered in these Gajan rehearsal sessions.

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Bimal works at the loom from morning to evening, weaving rough towels for local use. Jagadish has just returned from Chandannagar where he had gone to work for a decorator to set up a pandal for Jagadhatri puja. Jagadish's cousins Jagai and Madhai are expert pandal makers - they have all come back together. Jagadish has joined our group now, and so has Sankirtan who has an incredible capacity for physical work. Apart from working as daily wage labour, he goes to the Bijoyganj market twice a week to sell rice. He packs more than hundred kilograms of rice in two huge sacks and loads them on this bicycle. Then he rolls the bicycle and walks along with it for nearly ten kilometres. I remember standing at the edge of the village and watching him push his cycle away from me. He became smaller and smaller until he disappeared at the horizon. I looked at this vanishing image and wondered at my own weakness. I used to think the habit of hard work strengthened the body of these people, I did not realise that it was not physical power, but an indomitable will that keeps men like Sankirtan alive and active in their struggle for existence. What is the source of this will power? None of these questions disturbed my friends or me too much in the initial period. By this time Bhoju had joined the music group - so had Amar and Sujit - all of whom have wonderful singing voices. None of them have ever had any musical training, but their songs resonate in the minds of the listeners. Jana Sanskriti began its journey with people like them.

Gradually I was able to put together the first play of my theatre life. The actors were oppressed people - so it was called Theatre of the Oppressed - that is as far as we could think at that point. The first play did not have a continuous story line from the beginning to the end. It consisted of many small episodes - not apparently linked with each other, but the episodes were bound implicitly by the experiences of deprivation and exploitation. This was the unifying theme in the collage. This play was performed in many villages. At that time women had not joined our group - men used to enact female roles.

Jana Sanskriti grew out of the initiative of a non-actor like me, who had begun with the intention of becoming a full time political worker. Before this I had never been involved in theatre or acting. But gradually I found myself being attracted by the entire concept of performance and its rich possibilities. Where did this enthusiasm and ability come from? The answer perhaps lies in a line from Rabindranath Tagore -

You lay hidden in my own heart

But I did not recognise you (*in translation*)

Two features marked our play at that stage. Firstly, its form was influenced by the folk performances of Gajan - hence it became a collage of events connected by songs or poems. Secondly there was the stamp of the urban political workers' stereotypical thinking in the selection and presentation of these events. Even then the play ran for many days, and there was a good response from the people.

About two years after the play began I had invited a noted theatre critic from Kolkata to the village. There was a performance that evening. After watching it he said it was clearly written by an urban playwright. "You live in the village. You must be experiencing how people lead their lives here. Why do these actual experiences not get reflected in your play?" I should have then realised that just because the actors belong to the oppressed class the play does not automatically become Theatre of the Oppressed. At that time I had not read Augusto Boal's work. Neither had the theatre critic.

After this incident I started writing my first play *Gayer Panchali* (The Song of the Village) all over again, my friends in the village collaborated with me in this enterprise, enriching the play with their own experience. Thus *Gayer Panchali* was reborn.

It was 1987. Since then *Gayer Panchali* has been performed some 1500 times, and it remains as relevant today as it was then. It raises questions about the one sided relationship between the Panchayat (the committee of local government) and the ordinary people, about the corruption around the poverty alleviation programme, about the absence of health care, about the unavailability of round-the year employment. Various laws have been enacted in recent years to

make the local government more democratic, but where there is a lack of political will, laws do not change anything.

As Jana Sanskriti emerged as a theatre group, all the doors of the village opened for us, literally and metaphorically. We got to know the minds of the people intimately, something that had seemed impossible at the beginning. A group of young actors from the village were with us, who gained confidence from the recognition and appreciation that the village people bestowed on them. They had a new identity now. "I am not a mere daily wage labour, I am not only a farm hand, I am an actor. My performance inspires hundreds of people urging them to do something. My performance disturbs those who had been enjoying power by exploiting us." They were proud of their new role in society. Was that not empowerment? I did not know then. My friends, who had come to the village to organise them politically, gained a group of artists who were also political activists. It is theatre which created a group of young men who had conviction, commitment and whose self-esteem was generated by the acclaim of the community. Through writing scripts, directing plays and opening new branches of Jana Sanskriti I also received my fulfillment as a political worker. Theatre became the medium of our political activity and we became totally involved and busy as the rhythm of work accelerated.

We had performances almost every evening in some village or another. At the end of the play we discussed various issues with the people of the village. Their views on the different aspects of the play encouraged us and gave us new ideas. By this time women had slowly started joining the group. First one woman came, and then her niece - and men no longer had to do the women's roles. Some of the villagers came forward when they saw how the young men from villages like theirs, along with some city people are thinking through theatre about problems that affect rural life. This gave us the opportunity to do organisational work. These enthusiastic people were mobilised to form committees in different villages for protecting the rights of the common people. Theatre made people think, and we discussed in groups the local issues arising out of these plays. The actors in our plays often had a major role in such organisational work because their class solidarity was strengthened by the loyalty to the theatre group.

At this time I was losing touch with my urban friends. I was not very happy about it because I felt I needed to interact with them in order to clarify my own ideas and give them a distinct shape. I cannot resist quoting from a letter I wrote to Naresh at that time. This letter captures some of my thoughts.

12.10.1988

Dear Naresh

I have not been home for a long time. I am becoming a villager now. This is quite a different India - without electricity, without telephone. Some times I feel rather cut off, especially when I return after a play at midnight after walking for miles in the dark. I eat a little before going to sleep and there are people around me again at daybreak. There are no holidays here because there are no offices, no factories, people are not in the habit of living by the clock.

But Naresh, I seem to have discovered myself anew after coming here. There was an artist in me I was not aware of. This artist returns me to my childhood - arousing in me wonder and curiosity of the child and the ability to enjoy the simple things of life. You will be glad to know that the child within me is open and free, without any dogma. You will probably see this is as purification of my consciousness, a process of greater humanisation. But I perceive this as an empowerment. In my self-discovery, I must have been through some introspection, but I cannot deny the role of the specific location and the specific people around me who made this introspection possible. Time and place are important in my self-perception. I have learnt so much that was unknown to me. It would not have been possible but for the people around me.

In my last letter I had told you about the actors in our theatre group. They work from sunrise to sunset. But if you see them joking and laughing in the evening you would not guess how backbreaking their day has been. I quite enjoy their lighthearted banter. I have heard that the famous theatre directors of Kolkata impose strict discipline on their rehearsal sessions. If anyone breaks this army-like discipline they are subjected to harsh words and abuse. Perhaps I am not a big enough director yet, so I do not understand the culture of discipline very well. But this does not mean that my actors do not take their rehearsals seriously.

I sometimes think that I had come to the village to empower the people here. But I find myself getting empowered instead. I also realise it would be presumptuous on my part to think of empowering these people who can retain their humour and cheerfulness despite appalling poverty and hard work, and can think of theatre as the most important space in their lives. I am beginning to recognise my own weaknesses when I compare myself with them. All my pride is slowly dissolving in their company. I do not know

whether you will agree but I find a great deal of generosity and energy in them. In the words of Vivekananda: "They are the source of infinite power. With a fistful of gramflour in the stomach they can turn the world upside down."

Your economism has contributed much to the labour movement in the past. I do not deny the need for that even today. But economics cannot explain why poverty is unable to defeat the spirit of these people. I am continually surprised by the essential generosity of these people, their artistic talents, and their ability to laugh and to create. The politics taught by the party had highlighted their economic condition, but neglected these human qualities. I had a very vague idea about empowerment earlier. I am beginning to think differently now.

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It was a conference organised by a large Chennai-based NGO where the representatives of a number of organisations of southern India came with their theatre groups. At the request of the organisers I was present there as a resource person. Initially, the participants were engaged in a desultory and freewheeling exchange of views until suddenly the discussion found a definite focus. This was when they began talking about their crisis of identity. They were not sure how they would define themselves - as theatre-workers, political workers or social activists. Since neither I nor my colleagues at Jana Sanskriti had ever faced such a crisis the question surprised me. When I was asked to speak I wondered how I could speak on something which I have never experienced. Am I supposed to approach this issue only theoretically? But when I looked back, I found the answer. I remembered that Jana Sanskriti was born out of the efforts of a handful of political workers who had no experience of theatre. We all agree today that Jana Sanskriti grew out of a political need and theatre became one of the means of political action. I first went to the village as an activist wanting to work outside party politics. From there I graduated into being an actor, a playwright and a director. Neither before, nor during nor after this transformation have I ever felt that I am moving away from political work. On the contrary I have experienced a greater political fulfillment. I said to the delegates at the conference: " When a public speech is made by a leader that is considered to be political work, but when the same message is conveyed by reaching people through songs, drama and other artistic means, why should that not be regarded

as political work? What is the logical basis of this distinction?" I raised these questions and after some discussion we went beyond the question of identity.

The problem actually lies elsewhere. Let me mention an incident. Some theatre activists decided to do a play on the problems of sex-workers. They began to collect facts and eventually on the basis of their findings a play was prepared. The issue of rehabilitation of sex-workers of a particular red light area was focussed upon in the play. The group started performing in that red light area. After a few performances, the local people with support from the administration began to actively subject these women to eviction and harassment. When the sex-workers tried to contact the theatre group for help, the latter avoided taking any responsibility. It was as if they had nothing to do with the reaction that their play had generated. Some of them were unable to assuage their conscience. This is the greatest limitation of the Theatre **for** the Oppressed. The actors were not the people who were directly oppressed - they were merely interventionists from outside. Those directly involved with the events being represented in the play remained mere spectators, mute and silent.

Let me go back in time. From the beginning the actors in our theatre group were the hard working rural people, who had been the victims of economic, social and cultural deprivation for a long time. In that sense it could be called Theatre of the Oppressed. But our active presence - at the forefront and behind the scenes - was acting as a barrier in the way of the theatre becoming Theatre of the Oppressed in the true ideological sense. And it took us a few years to understand this.

Usually a performance provokes thoughts in the minds of the audience. The reverse is also true. And this is the reason why it is important to take this eternal relationship between actor and spectator to a higher and more scientific plane. I remember the experience of one particular day, it seems as if it was just the other day.

When our theatre group Jana Sanskriti was six years old, a play called *Sarama* was performed. This was the second play scripted by me. The central character Sarama is an ordinary woman with one quality that sets her apart from the rest. She has unusual courage and independence of spirit. When she becomes the victim of the worst kind of oppression - violation of

her body - a new chapter begins in her life. On the one hand, the man she loved walks out of her life, and on the other the newspaper reporters begin to seek her out. The rapists are part of a well-known anti-social gang nurtured by the ruling party. She becomes the centre of a political struggle between the party in power and the opposition. As a victim of the criminalisation of politics Sarama receives sympathy and support of a number of NGOs, something she badly needs at that moment. Sarama survives these trying times without breaking down. She finds herself pregnant as a result of the rape but, ignoring the social taboos and the strictures about the purity of the female body, she decides to have the child and give it her name.

The entire play was about an ordinary woman who managed to resist all adversity and social oppression by summoning up a strength that lay deep within her. What could be a better story for illustrating empowerment? We were confident about the effectiveness of our play. It received much acclaim from the cognoscenti, the village people saw the play with enthusiasm, the newspapers praised it. What more could we want? At the end of one performance when we were all basking in the glow of general applause, and happily talking to the viewers who came up to give their appreciative comments. Suddenly there was a rude awakening.

"Babu, come here, listen to us", we looked up to find a group of tribal women calling out to us. In this area of Birbhum district there is a substantial population of Santhals<sup>8</sup> whose ancestors came from Chhotanagpur plateau in Bihar. I still remember the name of the most articulate of these women. Phulmani said " Babu, in your play the woman is strong, very strong. People say you are doing good work. But tell me Babu what are we to do when the contractor pays us less than our due and asks us to visit him alone? If we don't go to him he will take away our job. You tell us, shall we give up our work from to-morrow? Tell us Babu, why are you silent?"

I felt that the trees around me were moving and the ground below my feet had suddenly begun to sway. My colleagues realised something was happening, and they gathered around me. Phulmani was still talking and her companions joined her in questioning us. Faced with this tough challenge we were speechless. Indeed *Sarama* in our play was shown to be empowered. But behind her was the continuous support of an NGO, which also provided her economic security. In

reality can organisations like ours really help Phulmani and her companions? Can we say to them confidently, "Do not be afraid of losing your jobs, you must protest."? Can we advise then on the precise nature of the protest? Should it be legal or organisational? These questions troubled our minds. Five years ago when we began our work in the village we had wondered who we were empowering - the village people, or ourselves. I had exactly the same feeling again. Phulmani has to confront a harsh reality everyday. She lives in a situation that would have driven us mad. How can we presume to empower her? Despite the adverse conditions of life they do not seem to lack generosity. If you step into their house they will offer you unstinting hospitality. There appears to be no contradiction between poverty and generosity. I am not sure that those who live in affluence are necessarily more generous.

That was an invited show. We came back to our village with many questions in our minds. It soon became clear to us that if we are touching upon a social problem in our play, it would be a mistake to think that our work is over with the performance. A lot of work remains to be done, or women like Phulmani who have to face oppression will continue to remain helpless. We were lucky Phulmani and her friends realised that in the context of reality our play has a hollow ring, and they pointed it out to us. After this incident I added a new scene to the play where the actors and actresses raise a question and discuss it among themselves: If an NGO had not come forward to help Sarama, would she have been able to show so much courage against a patriarchal social system, against a weak administration and legal delay? In the new version of the play we ended by asking the audience to think about these issues.

This was the beginning of our realisation that theatre movement is a long and arduous journey. It does not end with the performance. We could see that it is our responsibility to not only make the people think but also to mobilise such thoughts towards action. That is why it is sometimes necessary to work in collaboration with other groups who have the same political objective and do not necessarily work through the medium of theatre. We have always tried to collaborate with such groups, and continue to do so today.

A supposedly uneducated tribal woman like Phulmani had strength enough to demolish the entire dramatic enterprise created by a group of so-called educated people, raising in us a basic

doubt about our objective. She made it clear that we need to re-think our entire method and purpose of work. She planted a question in our minds “ Who are we to suggest a solution to the problems that the people face?” What then, was empowerment? It was time for more introspection.

As I have said before we did not have any mental block about re-thinking. We never tried to enact the role of teachers who came from outside. Most of the time we lived in the villages where we performed. We had relatively little contact with our families in the city. For two-thirds of the month, or more, we spent time with the rural people. (Even now, the full time theatre workers in Jana Sanskriti do the same). Theatre work and the resultant contact with people - through these two main assets we wanted to give shape to the political and social aspirations of the community.

At that time, here and there, in an isolated manner, the village people had started getting organised into small groups. But after the Phulmani episode we saw very clearly that our leadership had influenced these small groups so profoundly that if we were to withdraw from the scene, the existence of these groups would become doubtful. We wondered if in such a situation of blind dependence, our presence could actually be seen as helpful or empowering. Despite remaining outside party politics and electoral games, despite staying far away from state machinery, were we not equating ourselves with the power-hungry political parties by making people dependent on us? There is hardly any political culture in the world, which has been able to convince the masses that it is not the people who exist for the party, it is the party that exists for the people. Most political parties exploit people for their profit, as if the relationship is like that between capital and labour - the profit in this case being political power. Yet once in the parliament, the same parties glibly mouth phrases like ' women's empowerment'. Empowerment has suddenly become the buzzword. One wonders where this concern had been earlier.

Anyway, the Phulmani episode however small and isolated it may be, compelled us to look back and introspect, and also to think more deeply about the concept of empowerment. But we were not for a moment troubled by the question of identity. We never wondered whether we should define ourselves as theatre worker or political worker. The artists within us drove us

nearer to our political goal. Through the interaction with Phulmani and her companions now we knew for certain that a theatre worker's responsibility is not over with scripting a play, directing and acting. The journey was longer and direct involvement of the common people was essential.

At this new juncture of Jana Sanskriti's development I remembered Naresh.

23.2.1991

Dear Naresh,

...A new concept enters our thinking and it emerges out of our own accumulated experience. It is new, but not unrelated to what has gone before. It illuminates our existing theories and practice, exposing some of their limitations. It is new because it gives completeness to what was so far incomplete, it frees the old from its limits. I think we cannot recognise the new until we understand the old, and the new cannot exist without the old. I remember Rabindranath Tagore's line " You are old but you are forever new" (in translation)

Is this what he meant? Don't think we are defensive because for five years what we had considered to be new ideas now appears limited. On the other hand we are happy that now it has liberated the old from its limitations. It does not worry me that these new ideas may seem old tomorrow. Because then one will have to deny the dialectical approach towards development of new ideas.

There was a time when, inspite of our self-image as progressives, we hesitated to go beyond the concepts endorsed by the party . We had no fear in accepting changes in physical sciences. Galileo excited our imagination. But we were not so receptive to developments in social sciences. But let that pass.

I am sure you will be glad to see that I have now finally understood the meaning of the word progress. Perhaps I have written to you about Phulmani and with what dexterity she exposed the stagnation in our ideas. Phulmani's insight came from experience, not from any political institution. Experience constantly teaches us new lessons that institutional education cannot match. Whether education should be entirely institutional or not is something that comes under the purview of the educationist. I am now thinking of a new play. I will write later with more news.

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Let me go back to the Chennai conference where the theatre workers raised the question whether they were artists or political activists. From the experience of Jana Sanskriti it becomes clear that the issue is not identity. Such doubts appear when the artist for some reason

finds his or her role in society restricted. Art has its root in politics. Artists are either creators, or they have the ability to give life to someone else's creation. The playwright writes the play, the directors and the actors give it life, turning the play into a performance. Either in creation or in giving life to someone else's creation the artist is motivated by an objective, and this objective is shaped by a socio-political perspective, which in turn is the result of a political philosophy.

In the specific chemistry of creation, political philosophy and social perspective are present as primary elements, and art is created through their mutual reaction. Art is thus a compound in which different elements get inseparably dissolved. If the two elements that combine to make water are separated, it will no longer be water. Similarly in the case of art. So art evolves from politics and therefore the artist cannot be isolated from politics. But usually in a political organization artists are seen as secondary to political workers. The politicians look at art as a tool for their publicity machine. The NGOs, in a slightly more civilized manner, refer to them as 'support service group', but basically both reveal the same attitude. This has had several consequences:

1. Artists are made to operate within a restrictive framework that has been imposed on them and as a result they suffer from a crisis of identity.
2. Art by becoming propaganda loses its aesthetic and human dimensions and fails to move the audience.
3. As the mouthpiece of an ideology the artist becomes part of a cultural monologue. Because the artist himself does not have freedom, the question of empowering the audience becomes irrelevant.

There is a bigger question here. Who is an artist? Anyone who is involved in an artistic enterprise? The answer is not simple. Just as we cannot think of milk without its essential property of whiteness (this imagery has been used by Ramakrishna, the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher), fire cannot be imagined without heat, art and politics have a symbiotic relationship. Sometimes an artist might think his work is outside politics. For example at this moment some Hindu fundamentalists are busy campaigning for the construction of a temple. They are using sculptors and artisans who are mostly illiterate and not politically conscious. Without their being

aware of it the work of these artists is contributing to a political project. On the other hand there are some so-called educated people who deliberately try to keep their artistic work above politics, but in effect they might align themselves with anti-progressive forces. An artist is a person who expresses himself through art - this is true in one sense, in another sense it is the manifestation of a narrow belief. There are billions of people in this world, yet we are always looking for true human beings. Similarly there are many who are associated with art, yet not all of them are artists in the true sense of the term.

Let me return to my narrative. Phulmani's question led us to become questioners ourselves. How do these people whose daily life is surrounded by insurmountable difficulties manage to think and laugh? How can we provide the remedies for every social malady? Will it not be unscientific to assume that ours is the right position in every socio-political issue? Can we empower the dispossessed people if we do not have the humility to acknowledge that we do not know all the answers?

It was around 1990-91 that I chanced to come across the work of Augusto Boal. His thinking opened up a new horizon for us. For me personally this was the taste of a freedom I had never experienced before - a liberation not only from the slavery of propaganda, but a larger liberation. In Jana Sanskriti all the windows began to unlock themselves, so that breeze from different directions could blow in. And we began to rediscover what was already around us.

Earlier we used to reach out to the common people with an unarticulated but inherent assumption of self-importance. We were artists who were thinking of the masses rather than about ourselves and our mission was to give direction to their lives. The arena where we performed the play belonged to us - only to us, the skilled practitioners of this art. Everyone could not possess this skill. However much we might mingle with the common folk, we were the elite, and our arena had exclusivity. "You do not belong here except on conditions of silence and surrender to our way of thinking. We may have descended from the proscenium to the streets, but we have done so only to rescue weak illiterate and backward people like you. You must listen to us and do what you are told - and that is what will take you forward and empower you." This was the message implicit in our activities.

Even though the rural oppressed were participating in this theatre it was not Theatre of the Oppressed in the true political sense. As a result of interaction with Augusto Boal, Jana Sanskriti began to think differently. We were not doing propaganda theatre any more, nor were we the fundamentalist representative of any particular school of thought. We had been able to discard our garb of arrogance and artistic elitism.

I do not know how many times an artist is reborn in a lifetime, but coming in contact with Augusto Boal's thinking was certainly a moment of re-birth for Jana Sanskriti. We could feel that the combined efforts of the local people and those who have come to work for them would help to solve social problems. In 1985, when Jana Sanskriti was born and I had just collected some young men of the village in a group declaration had been prepared for the new artists. I will quote a section from that here:

“..... We will not perform on the stage, because that creates inequality. The actors on the stage are situated higher than the audience sitting below. The players are in the light, the audience is in the dark. They are distant from each other. Now think of some of our indigenous art-forms - the kind of performances you have been familiar with for a long time. Usually the performers and the spectators sit at the same level - both are equally lighted and they are close to each other. The intimacy between the players and the audience is the main feature here....”

In Boal's philosophy of theatre the questions of distance and intimacy, the different levels of location between the players and the audience - these seemed to me the most revolutionary. Not only the performers but the audience was also liberated, because now everybody jointly shared the responsibility of finding answers. Under the influence of Augusto Boal, Jana Sanskriti took the initiative for replacing the earlier monologue by a dialogic process in which the actors and the spectators were collaborators. This was the beginning of Forum Theatre in India.

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I will talk about another play I wrote for Jana Sanskriti called *Shonar Meye* (literally it means golden girl, but in Bengali it is an affectionate term for a girl one likes). Before we prepared the play we had to do a few workshops. It was not an easy task. Because women were involved, we

could not hold full-time residential workshops. At that time Jana Sanskriti did not have so many women's theatre teams. (Jana Sanskriti's organised effort to develop theatre teams with women from rural working class families and involve them in the theatre movement successfully is probably the only one in India). The ratio of women to men in the organisation was not satisfactory at that time, but today, 12 years later, this ratio is a matter of envy to most theatre groups. In spite of the growth of capital, some feudal values still remain in our villages today. The relationship between men and women is a living example of these feudal remnants. There are other reasons too, for the extremely unequal relations men and women in rural families. How patriarchal values coexist with various progressivism in so-called progressive political parties is not the subject of this essay. But unfortunately one does not notice any efforts on the part of feminist NGOs in our country to establish democracy at the family level as a way of fighting patriarchy. About the theatre groups, the less said the better.

Initially these women were wives and relatives of the actors of our core team, but even then there were problems. They could join us only in the evenings, and only about an hour and a half, after housework was done and the children were put to bed. As we would meet for a short while everyday, we had to find a workshop space within the village. Some of these women were middle-aged. Because they were married early quite a few were grandmothers already. Some were younger, newly married women, or mothers of small children. . This period of one and a half-hour in the evening soon became for them a time of freedom and celebration. Even the middle-aged women got into the spirit of the game as if they have traveled back in time. We already knew these women because their families were associated with Jana Sanskriti. Even now they are with us and we stay with their families whenever we go to their village.

Augusto Boal once said, until recently, before his work spread to the rural areas in Brazil , Theatre of the Oppressed was limited to the cities in different countries of the world. Jana Sanskriti was the only exception. It has spread the ideas and practice of the Theatre of the Oppressed to remote villages in Eastern India.

Normally the women in the village, especially those, who are married, do not come outside their homes much. The only occasions when they come out of their enclosed domestic space are

when they visit their parents' house to attend the wedding of some relation or during festivals in the village. But even these outings are not without restrictions. Thus the workshops were something entirely new for them. Initially they found it difficult to concentrate or listen to anyone for a period of time. They are used to physical labour; they do some work or the other every minute of their waking hours. The very idea that they will have to sit and listen and think without doing anything with their hands was unfamiliar. I have noticed the same resistance to using the mind among rural men also, but it is especially noticeable among the women because they never sit still at home and they have no exposure at all to the outside world.

Working with the village people makes me understand the structure of our society in general and our own situation. Yet there is a difference in degree and magnitude between the situation of the urban middle class and the rural people who live by physical labour. The men in the village are so totally the victims of a monologic culture that they have rarely any occasion to use their intelligence. It is more restrictive for the women because no institution is more undemocratic than a rural family. Within the family the relationship between men and women is regulated by feudal values. There is no scope for any dialogue either at home outside, therefore there is no opportunity for using their intelligence. It is as if their role is to passively follow the path laid down by custom. The men at least can look at the blue sky, get a glimpse of the dynamic world teeming with conflicts. That keeps them going, but the women have no such option. Liberation for them, is merely a dream.

It is while preparing the play *Shonar Meye* that we first thought of organising an all-woman group. When we did, we found that in such a group, those who had earlier seemed shy, docile and reticent began to blossom into vibrantly alive persons in just a few days. The workshops radiated with energy unknown before. Some of them turned out to be unusually talented. This was my first workshop with village women and it became a major lesson in understanding the operation of patriarchy at the levels of the family and community in the rural ethos. No feminist could have taught me this lesson. About twenty-two women participated in the workshop. We worked for one and a half-hour regularly for ten evenings. The first few evenings were spent in clarifying the concept of an image. Then each person in the workshop created different images

representing situations in the family. Finally we had a hundred images deftly incorporating different feelings captured in a nuanced manner. The theme of *Shonar Meye* emerged from these images. The play was scripted by me but that was the first time I understood that an individual's consciousness can be the aggregate of the consciousness of a collective of people.

'Culture of silence' is a phrase I have heard often. I have never quite understood what it means. Whatever be the lexical root of the word 'culture', its source is in the dynamism of the human spirit. It is a constantly moving and changing concept. I do not know how it can be associated with silence or stillness. Sometimes human beings are silent because for various reasons they are unable to express themselves. Some seek temporary peace through silence, though sometimes in the long run that can become the cause of a greater unhappiness. Some do not express themselves for fear or for lack of conviction, some remain silent because they do not have the habit of self-statement. But human culture is about statement, it is not about silence. While working with the rural women I never felt that they prefer silence to self-statement. But initially some hurdles seem insurmountable before they gain the confidence to express themselves.

Here I am thankful to Boal because the workshop methodology devised by him can change a non-actor into an actor in a remarkably short time. I had learnt - not through theory, but through experience - that everyone has an innate desire to act - if not on the stage, at least in actual life. Boal's theatre philosophy highlights this basic human urge and brings out this latent quality by breaking the monologic relationship between the actors and the audience.

In 1992 Boal sent me his book *Games for Actors and Non-actors* as soon as it was published. I noticed that in the Introduction my friend Adrian has written: "....fundamental to Boal's work [is the belief] that anyone can act and that theatrical performance should not be solely the province of professionals. The dual meaning of the word 'act' - to perform and to take action - is also at the heart of the work."

A human being's innate desire to act and Forum Theatre - in this context I will tell you about some experiences. But before that I must say something about Forum Theatre. In proscenium theatre the actors' job is to bring alive certain characters on stage, and the

audience's role is to see, to hear and to feel. The relationship between the actors and the audience is monologic. But in Forum Theatre the spectator is also transformed into an actor - 'spect-actor' - to use Augusto Boal's term. In this process the relationship between the artists and their audience undergoes a change - turning the monologue into a dialogue. Boal writes about Forum Theatre: " The performance is an artistic and intellectual game played between actor and spect-actor." (*Boal, Augusto: Games for Actors and Non-Actors, Routledge 1992.*)

In Forum Theatre, members of the theatre team select, construct, and narrate a social problem from their daily life. With artistic direction this play is taken to an audience who must now find a solution to the problem posed in it. Passive spectators then become engaged spect-actors. The spect-actors must replace only the protagonist who is the person facing oppression. Spect-actors come onstage to enact the solutions they offer, debating with trained actors/activists who pose various questions about the solutions suggested. The moderator of the entire process has been named Joker by Boal. The Joker is a vital link in Forum Theatre. Usually this process continues for at least two-three hours. In the past people have constructed many solutions to problems posed onstage. At the same time people have also reached dead ends in the search for a solution. In both cases, individuals have publicly engaged in fighting a problem that has thus far provoked the most profound silence and acceptance. The social conflict instigated onstage suggests possibilities for social conflict offstage.

The play *Shonar Meye* depicts three stages in the lives of women: the period before marriage, the time of marriage and immediately after and finally life after marriage. The first part highlights gender inequality, the second foregrounds dowry-related problems and the girl's lack of choice in her marriage, and the last part focuses on how violence, duplicity and the centralised character of the family become tools of oppression for women.

Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan is also called The Pink City because the palaces and shops in the old part of the city are made of pink sandstone. Invitation to perform in this legendary place was an occasion of great excitement for our artists. After our successful performance at the State government's Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur, we decided to do another performance in a slum adjacent to the city where the majority of the people are Bangla-speaking. This always makes the

job of the mediator or the joker somewhat easier, even though by this time we knew that language does not erect too serious a barrier in communication. A few months ago our core team had traveled to France and Brazil to do some invitation performances. Our unexpected success there had made us confident that in a play body language is as eloquent as the verbal language. Even then, if the spoken language of the audience is different, the Joker faces a tougher challenge. Finding a Bangla-speaking audience in Rajasthan was thus a welcome change.

When we performed the full play, we noticed that the audience was silent and totally still. A few women were wiping their tears with the ends of their saris. Empathy? Why not? It is natural that human beings would empathise with each other. Rationalism cannot ignore the demand of emotion, feeling. At this point the Joker said `Stop. Today's performance is not like other performances. Today we are not going home after the performance ' The audience was quiet.

Joker :                    Are the problems you saw in the play not problems in your own lives also?

People in the audience:    Yes, of course, such problems do exist.

Joker :                    If you do not think about these problems, if you run away from them, will the problems disappear ?

People in the audience: No, they will remain. How can they go away?

Joker :                    Will someone else solve these problems for you ?

Audience:                No, no.

Joker:                     Does everyone think so?

Everyone in a chorus : No

Joker :                    Then, come, let us see how we can find solutions.

The performance began again. This time we started with the third part.

### First Action

Amba, the central character of the play is shown busy with her household chores: sweeping the courtyard, cleaning pots and pans, washing clothes, cooking, looking after the children, fetching water, boiling paddy, roasting puffed rice, watering the vegetable garden, serving

food to the family etc. [A housewife in a village works 14 to 15 hours on an average everyday]

#### Second Action

Enter Amba's husband. He has just returned from the field after a day's work. He wants his food, but Amba has not yet finished cooking. Amba requests him to be patient and wait a little. But there is a simmering anger in him against Amba because even though they have been married for six months, he has not yet received the entire sum of the promised dowry. Using this delay in serving him food as an excuse, he shouts at her and starts beating her.

#### Third Action

Amba's parents-in-law who had gone out, return at this point. They hear Amba's screams and see their son beating her. Amba pleads and begs to be spared from this physical torture. But they pay no heed. On the other hand they encourage their son to throw her out of the house.

#### Fourth Action

A neighbour's wife who has been witness to several such scenes wants to go and protest against this barbaric treatment. But her husband tries to dissuade her. He argues that they have no business getting involved in other people's family affairs. When the re-enactment reached this point the Joker clapped and called 'STOP'. The actors froze in different postures in an image. The Joker now focussed his gaze at the audience. His job was difficult when the audience constituted of men and women. Women in the village are not used to speaking out in front of the men and it would be highly unlikely for them to speak out in public when the issue is the oppression of a woman very much like them. We knew this. But we also knew if the atmosphere is congenial and sympathetic, and if they feel that the people around are supportive, they can speak very cogently and sensibly. But in this case we did not know. We were in an unfamiliar territory. This is Rajasthan, and we have come from West Bengal. We did not know what to expect

The Joker looked at the men in the audience. Quite a few of them seemed ready to come forward, but the first one to enter the arena was a young man of about 22 or 23. At the Joker's suggestion the audience and the actors clapped to welcome this young spect-actor.

The young man said he would like to change the character of the husband. The Joker's forehead creased in a frown. This is against the rules of Forum Theatre. In any case if you change the husband - whether you make him better or worse - it would be altering the reality of the situation. But never mind, the Joker thought. Sometimes we have to ignore the rules, it is more important to break the ice.

The spect-actor completely humanised the tyrannical husband. Instead of beating the wife or being angry with her over the dowry issue, the spect-actor made him sympathetic to her and stood by her supporting her against traditional patriarchal values. The audience was most amused by this new role and seemed to mock this young man as if he is being hypocritical. The Joker noticed this lack of sympathy and I also felt surprised because we had never encountered such an attitude in any of our previous performances. There had been earlier attempts to humanise the husband during our earlier performances of the play, but the audience reaction had never been like this. Normally in our familiar environment we know that such an intervention has two positive effects. It dissolves the barrier between men and women and a congenial atmosphere is created. Sometimes men actually realise what role they could play in their family. Also, women feel freer to speak and participate in this situation.

Anyway, whatever the reason for the strange audience reaction, at least this intervention broke the ice. After thanking the audience the Joker said: "Excellent ! If all men and women wanted equality in real life, how much better our lives would be. But do we find such men in families around us? If we did, the play *Shonar Meye* would not have come into being. *Shonar Meye* is not an imaginary story. It is made from the experience of 22 women from 22 families in a village. We would like to see how you would change this situation. Please come forward. The woman you see in this play - is she a stranger to you? Have you never seen such a woman in your family or among your friends or in your community? In that case why are you quiet? Please do something. Help us to understand your views so that we can help women like Amba, give

them courage, offer counsel.

Gradually some women and a few men came up. In the part where Amba's husband is beating her and the neighbour is preventing his wife from going to Amba's rescue, spect-actors intervened - sometimes to replace the protagonist Amba and sometimes to replace the neighbour's wife. Responses started coming freely after that. The most interesting was another intervention from the first spect-actor who this time wanted to enact the role of the oppressed woman. As the protagonist he began behaving in a very submissive and meek manner. He showed Amba obeying her husband, falling at his feet and telling him how much she loves him. At this point the Joker asked him to stop.

Joker to spect-actor : You are keeping the oppressed woman's role unchanged. If this kind of behaviour improved her condition, would we have seen this as a problem?

Spect-actor : No.

Joker : In that case what were you trying to tell us by enacting Amba's role like this?

The spect-actor was quiet. He stood for a while with his head bent, then looked at the Joker's face and returned to his place. I was watching him from my corner in the audience. He left the place where the performance was being held, and went to a shop nearby. He lighted a cigarette and sat down to smoke.

When the play was over we packed our props and walked for about ten minutes to reach the bus stand. While we were waiting for the bus we suddenly found the young man - our first spect-actor - approaching us, with about fifteen men and women and some children following him. They beckoned us to stop. When we turned towards them, suddenly the young man fell at the feet of Sima, our actress who did the role of Amba, and started crying. He did not say anything. We watched the scene mutely for a while and so did the people who came with him. Then we tried to calm him down. The young man said to Sima "Didi, I will not beat my wife again. I beat her quite often. When you were crying after being beaten by your husband in the play, I remembered my wife. She cries exactly like that when I beat her." The young man burst into tears again. The crowd that came with him confirmed that he was a habitual wife-beater. They were

surprised at him today. They said his behaviour was quite incredible, and hopefully it might mark the beginning of a change. We do not know if he has beaten his wife since then. Two days after that performance we returned to Kolkata.

But that night as we walked back in the bitter cold of the Rajasthan winter we discussed what had just happened. To some of the members of our group the episode seemed a bit too melodramatic. But to me it brought back memories of an incident that had happened some years ago.

I was walking along the Mridangabhanga river that flows near Digambarpur village which is in the Sunderbans. Our Mukta Mancha (Open Stage) at Digambarpur is hardly 300 metres away from the river. Whenever I go there for a rehearsal or a workshop, I feel tempted to go for a walk by the river at night. The edge of the river is silted now - the water has moved further away. On the banks there are keora<sup>9</sup>, aakashmani<sup>10</sup> and sundari<sup>11</sup> trees. A little higher up there is a row of babla<sup>12</sup> trees. On full moon nights the river looks enchanting, but even when there is no moon, the rippling waves sparkle like specks of fire.

It is at this river bank that I found Yudhistir in a very distraught condition. He saw me and moved away. This hurt me a little but also got me worried. Yudhistir is a member of our core group. Why did he avoid me today? Has there been some misunderstanding? I returned to the Mukta Mancha and told those who were still there. After discussing the matter they went to the river bank to talk to Yudhistir while I waited. In a while they came back with Yudhistir, who looked repentant and ashamed. "Dada, how can I do plays with you? I have beaten my wife this morning. I do not know why I lost my patience. My wife said 'You and your *Shonar Meye*, is this what it means to you!' " Yudhistir sounded dejected. Before he joined our theatre group he used to beat his wife now and then. But that was some five or six years ago. We all wondered what happened suddenly after all these years. We talked to a contrite Yudhistir and later we talked to him and his wife together. Next day we all had lunch together at Mukta Mancha. The fish came from Satya's pond, the vegetables from the gardens of Deepak and Bishwaranjan, the cooking

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<sup>9</sup> A kind of tree found in the Sunderbans

<sup>10</sup> A kind of tree found in the Sunderbans

<sup>11</sup> A kind of tree found in the Sunderbans

<sup>12</sup> A kind of tree found in the Sunderbans

was a joint effort. Yudhistir and his wife remain members of our core group to this day. When we performed *Shonar Meyee* near Jaipur, Yudhistir was with us. When the young man fell at Sima's feet at the bus stop I wondered what was going on in Yudhistir's mind.

Is it not clear that men like Yudhistir have been humanised by theatre? If in a fit of anger he had pushed his wife and hurt her in the morning, what does that have to do with his performing in the evening? He understood instinctively and also from his experience in the group something he would not be able to articulate in words. He had seen that the activities of Jana Sanskriti - Forum Theatre, Image Theatre - were a continuous and evolving process, helping the artist not only to develop his artistic potential but also his social consciousness. It extends his role beyond the arena of the theatre, taking the artist close to the people, making him part of the people, of the greater human self. The artist is then not alienated from the people, he and the people are one and the same.

At one time I used to do propaganda theatre. The relationship between the actors and the audience did not lack sincerity there. But in that relationship we, the artists, had an implicit sense of superiority, because we thought we understood rural life without being a part of it and believed that we were helping the village people to improve their lot. Even when our intentions were honest, this saviour-like attitude was a barrier to true artistic self-statement. I come across propaganda theatre groups even now who continue to have this attitude. But in Jana Sanskriti we could respond to the criticism of Phulmani or get re-born through the ideas of Augusto Boal, because we had been able to free ourselves from this mind-set.

Boal's dramaturgy and new pedagogy initiated us to a new relationship between the actor and the spectator. I realised I could easily move from my role as an artist to my role as a spectator. In Forum Theatre during the first performance of a play, I am an artist. When the play is re-enacted with the intervention of the audience I create a character according to the suggestion and preference of the audience. At that time I embody the artist as well as the audience. When the spectator applies his/her mind in solving a social problem or in suggesting freedom from oppression, the artist-I and the spectator-I dissolve into each other. We are both acting - and taking action - towards the same goal.

This entire process does not only empower the actors and the spectators, it also humanises them. The movement between artist-I and spectator-I is actually a humanising process. Here the artist on the stage and the artist in real life cannot be different for too long. This is possible in propaganda theatre. I do not know if the young husband in Rajasthan has actually been humanised. Even if the change was temporary, we know that he was touched for a moment by a different kind of consciousness. If the exposure had been longer he might have been re-born as another Yudhistir. It is such hopes that make us in Jana Sanskriti go on with its attempt to integrate theatre with the real life of the oppressed people.

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Anju and her friends live in a slum in Delhi, the capital city of India. Anju, Bhagwandas, Kailash, Kalyani, Ramesh...they have all been included in the recent census. Some of them are even voters, some will become voters in the near future. But when it comes to survival, their rights as citizen are different - "to survive you must fight or else die, and if you survive give us your vote". The city of Delhi is growing, multi-storeyed buildings are coming up, new roads are being built - this is development, isn't it? Anju and her friends are evicted from their homes every now and then. Sometimes, in the name of resettlement they are sent to live outside the city. As they have to come in to the city to work, their travel expenses go up. Anju and her friends work as domestic servants. They are members of an independent workers' mass organisation. This organisation had invited me to conduct a workshop, that is where I met them.

Anju works as a domestic servant in four different houses. She lives with her parents, brothers and sisters. They are Muslims. If it wasn't for their poverty and desperate need for money, Anju would have been confined within the four walls of her home, not allowed to show her face to any outsider. Her role as a working girl has given her a taste of liberty, but liberation is still a faraway possibility. Anju and her friends have learnt to struggle; they have found within themselves the energy to fight. What other explanation can there be for the way they went about

their hard work in middle class homes and then rushed to attend the workshop with so much enthusiasm and zest?

A Forum Theatre session has begun. The main problem is that the husband of the protagonist has forbidden her from acting in a play organised by a local women's organisation. "Theatre, dance, music - all this is for men. Women must not do these, it does not look nice. People will say all kinds of things."

We have seen similar problems in our villages (in West Bengal) too. Many women members of our theatre teams face violence at home when they return from rehearsal. Some husbands do not let them enter the house if they are late. They then spend the night at a friend's house and return home early in the morning. Since we live in the villages and help out families in crisis situations and we are close friends of the men, it is easier for us deal with problems of this nature. And besides, women have been participating in discussion and debate on various social problems through theatre. This has imparted a certain self-confidence to these women which in turn helps them to assert their status within the family.

Anju was among the spectators watching the forum theatre session. When she raised her hand to say something I stopped the play. Anju replaced the person who was playing the protagonist.

Anju (to her husband): You work hard for a living and so do I. We do not rest all day.

Don't we deserve some entertainment?

Husband: What entertainment for you? I will decide what is good for you.

Anju: Entertainment is a must if one has to survive. And if even that is unnecessary, then why do you go and play cards with your friends at the end of the day?

Husband: That is okay for men. How can women play cards in public?

Anju: But I am not playing cards in public. I am raising awareness among people about certain social evils. I am doing a service to society

Husband: You talk too much, woman! You will not act in the play. My friends will make fun of me if you do.

At this point it was clear to me that the oppressor was imposing his will through inhuman, patriarchal values. In order to provoke more interventions I asked Anju to stop. Anju was irritated - "But sir, I have not finished yet."

"Ok, carry on," I said. The fight for logical victory between the oppressor and the oppressed continued.

Anju (to the husband): Okay, then tell me, why do you go to see Hindi films?

Husband: Why? What has all this got to do with Hindi films?

Anju: If it has nothing to do with films, then I shall go to Hindi films whenever I wish.

Husband: You can go whenever you want, only take my permission before you go. All films are not fit for you.

Anju: That is exactly what I mean. If it is immoral for women to act in plays that highlight social issues, then it is also immoral for men like you to go and watch scantily dressed women dancing in the films.

Husband: Those women don't belong to our families

Anju: If it is immoral for women to act in plays then why don't you protest when those women dance in the films with such few clothes on. Why do you buy such expensive tickets to go and watch those films?

All the spectators began to applaud. For Anju and her friends, struggle is an everyday affair. Their struggle is against poverty, against inferiority, against those who make them feel inferior, against orthodox values. In spite of all that there is so much life, so much enthusiasm and confidence in them. There is a proverb in Bangla which says 'he who endures, survives' This proverb can have a reactionary interpretation - that the ability to endure diminishes the will to change. This used to be my interpretation - until the day I saw Anju performing in Forum Theatre. I was convinced that the usual interpretation of the proverb was very typical of middle class intellectuals, for whom progress means to destroy all that is old, the more you can demolish old beliefs and practices, the more revolutionary you are. But if you do not endure, where will you find the energy to actively participate in the process of change? To endure means to survive, to live the joy of life -

only then can one become an artist. And, to experience the joy of life, you have to endure. He, who does not have the power to endure, cannot think of changing the world as it is. Revolution does not make any sense to him. Frustration and hopelessness become his companions.

Anju and her friends endure, therefore they survive. And how do they survive? Through suffering? No. The strength to endure is transformed into the strength to fight for change. The strength to endure is converted to the energy to change. The mind becomes rational, intelligence develops.

In the play, a young man called Bhagwandas was playing Anju's husband. Also from the working class - he works in a flourmill. He cycles long distances to supply flour to families. People use this flour to make bread, this is the staple diet in the Hindi belt. After the Forum Theatre session I asked Bhagwandas whether he was really convinced by Anju's argument. Bhagwandas admitted he had never thought in this way before. But now he thinks Anju's argument did carry some weight. Anju had escaped the clutches of orthodoxy even though she came from an orthodox family. She had been unable to ignore the urge to change. During the play Bhagwandas had placed himself in the context of his surroundings, therefore the character had become a real character. But when Anju, the spect-actor came up with her irrefutable logic during forum, Bhagwandas found his beliefs crumbling gradually. Now he was his own spectator. He was the spectator of his own reality. "Anju is right", he finally admitted. What a wonderful thing. The spect-actor's point of view and her feelings had flowed into the actor-character and now the character was the spectator of the actor. Boal says at such a moment, the actor is theatre. This is how humanisation occurs in forum theatre. This is where reason and humanism meet, it is a confluence of the two. This gives rise to a consciousness which desires change, which is an expression of empowerment.

The politics I have spoken for so long about is non-party politics. That politics which we use everyday, in our every action. Every human action is a political action. The first political activist of the last millenium was Jesus Christ. Even 500 years before him, there was Gautam Buddha - whose concept of *sangha*, is the origin of socialism in our subcontinent.

When Jesus Christ was confined to the church and when Gautam Buddha was dragged into institutionalised religion, it was the beginning of a new kind of politics. A section of people, through their submission to the church, forgot Jesus Christ. In the same way, through their devotion to Buddhism as an institutionalised religion, a section of people forgot Gautam Buddha. The same thing is happening in party politics. Here too, we see the party becoming larger than the political ideology. The party no more exists for the people, the people seem to exist for the party. So it is only natural that like religion, even party politics is resorting to fundamentalism as a strategy for survival. And fundamentalism leaves no space for tolerance. That is why we see total lack of tolerance even in the case of political parties nowadays. One party splits into many. Like Lakshmi Babu's Jewellery Shop, then the real Lakshmi Babu's Jewellery Shop, then the new Lakshmi Babu's Jewellery Shop and so on. Where are the people?

In-party fighting, even violence, is commonplace amongst party supporters nowadays in our state. For this the party needs violent people - leading inevitably to growing criminalisation within the party. The regular incidents of violence between political parties has brought the underlying truth to light. Not just fundamentalist thinking, this is actually an unholy fight for power.

And this is what my play - *Amra Jekhaney Dariye* - was all about. This play has been enacted many times by our various Jana Sanskriti teams. In a scene in the play one sees signboards of four political parties in the four corners of the arena. With each signboard is an actor facing the centre. They are leaders of four political parties. The signboards say, 'Workers Party', 'The Real Worker's Party', 'The Only Original Workers' Party' and 'The Only Workers Party'. At the centre of the stage is a group of hungry, starving people standing frozen in an image, an image that shows various aspects of impoverished life. From the four corners, the four political leaders are calling out to the poor people in the centre; trying to lure them with false promises. What a strategy to demean the people! The image of the hungry people breaks and they begin running here and there, confused by all the promises flying around, unable to understand which party to join.

We were performing this play at one of our centres far away from the city. Amongst the audience were actors and actresses and representatives of some NGO. There were some local

residents, too. Amongst them were some that come to watch Forum Theatre regularly. With such a heterogeneous audience, the forum session would be challenging.

Many spect-actors were intervening to replace the hungry people in the play. Forum Theatre was beginning to warm up. Spect-actors were facing a challenge. They were bent upon changing the scenario.

As far as I can remember, this is how the first intervention went.

Spect-actor(to the others): See, those four are not people's leaders, they are scoundrels. We must not heed their words.

One of the others: But what else can we do? After all they are the ones who run the country.

Spect-actor: But cant you see, they are corrupt. They are stealing money, they are.....

Another actor: But what is the alternative? (pointing to the 4 leaders) - either it is him, or it is the other or it is the third... We have to choose from amongst them

The spect-actor could not find an answer to this. He kept quiet. The Joker said, 'okay.' The spect-actor went back to his place. The actors began to enact the scene again. Another spect-actor came up. What he said was something like this:

Spect-actor: Those who do corrupt things in the name of politics should be condemned.

Other actor: We know that. But at least they are promising to do good things.

Spect-actor: All those promises are false. For generations these people have been making promises. If they had kept even one tenth of all those promises.....

Another actor: But they do keep some promises. I know each is worse than the other, but who else is there?

Spect-actor: But that does not mean you should blindly follow these dishonest hypocrites. The country will go to the dogs.

The Joker asked them to stop. The actors too raise the question of an alternative before the spectators. The third spect-actor rose from his seat. And this is what he said:

Spect-actor: We must show them that we are not paying them any attention.

(the spect-actor put his fingers in his ears gestured to the others to do the same. Some of the actors followed him. The political leaders felt they had to do something. They came to the people and tried to explain to them patiently. When that did not work, they threatened to use force. This worked. Some of the people began to follow the leaders. The leaders, with smug expressions, returned to their positions)

Suddenly we heard a woman's voice in the audience, loud and clear she shouted "Stop!" in English. The joker, actors, actresses and spect-actor stood still. The woman rose from her place and walked confidently to the arena. She looked hard at the group of hungry people for a few seconds. Then she took out what looked like a small towel from her waistband and went to the centre of the arena and began to wave it like a flag. The actors realised what she was trying to say. They came towards her and sat down in a circle around her, with their fists up in the air. The Joker began to clap and the entire audience followed. Finally, an alternative answer!

Forum Theatre continued for a long time after that. Some one said form a new party, another said the people must be aware, yet another said armed struggle, a fourth said non cooperation. The search for an alternative gave birth to a debate that is relevant in our political context today.

The lady who took out a towel from her waistband and waved it like a flag was called Prabhati. She works hard from dawn to dusk. Tending to the cattle, watering the orchard, sowing paddy seedlings, watering the vegetable garden, cooking for the family..... and so much more work. The men in her family also work at the same pace. But Prabhati is a very important person in their family. She is at the centre. I have spent a lot of time with Prabhati's family. Prabhati's loving and selfless nature have endeared her to everyone around her, she is the main nerve-centre of the family. At the end of the Forum Theatre session that day I thought someone who does so much work everyday, who is so selfless, who can love so much, who can give so much joy is no ordinary person. That is why I was not surprised when she took out the towel and waved it like a flag in a call to throw over the domination of the corrupt political leaders and set up an independent people's organisation. Because those who have scope within the family for

empowerment, will also be able to experience it outside. So which comes first? Family or parliament? Which will give birth to women like Prabhati? We need to answer this question now.

The last time we enacted '*Amra Jekhaney Dariye*' was about two years ago. I hear some Jana Sanskriti teams have begun to rehearse it again. But Prabhati and some other spect-actors' interventions that day really inspired me. Once again I will present here a section from a letter I had written to my friend Naresh. Perhaps this will also be the conclusion of my piece.

13.5.1999

Dear Naresh,

...every moment there is a new realisation deep within me. Theatre has changed my perspective towards people. As a college student I had once participated in a debate. In a desperate bid to win the prize I had memorised a quotation "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man". I did not know then that this was a quotation from Swami Vivekananda. If I had known I would perhaps have dismissed it as reactionary and counter-revolutionary. Now I understand because our theatre imparts an education (in which both the spectators and actors participate equally) which plays an important role in manifesting the perfection within each human being. Theatre is not just a performing art. It is much more. Theatre hides within itself answers to questions such as who am I, what is my strength etc. Theatre is something with the help of which a new revelation takes place every day, every minute. Boal says theatre is a discovery, from which we learn about ourselves.

In your last letter you said feminism in our country is very United Nations-dependent. I do not know why. But I do see a lot of feminist NGOs nowadays, whose leaders have never really been concerned about the lot of women. Ten years ago they did not use the word 'empowerment'. And even today they see 'empowerment' in very narrow terms. In any party or non-party context that person is considered more empowered, who follows orders of the leaders most unquestioningly. Maybe you are right. My work requires me to visit a lot of feminist organisations nowadays. Unfortunately many of these organisations see economic self-reliance as the primary means of empowerment. Economism again! In the present system it is impossible to make each man and woman economically self-reliant. What about those who are deprived of opportunities of economic self-reliance? Will they never be empowered? That is exactly what is happening today on the issue of reservation of seats for women in Parliament.

If economism and parliamentary politics were empowering, generations of parliamentary politics would not have kept the ordinary people so resigned to their fate. There would not have been any need for struggle outside parliament for empowering

them, people would not die of starvation, and illiteracy would not have been such a widely prevalent phenomenon. But if being empowered means acquiring the courage to dominate and oppress others, then we do not need that empowerment. I think electoral politics is not so much linked to empowerment as it is to the material aspirations of some ambitious women leaders.

Now I understand that the most important step to empowerment is a fundamental change within the human being. I have seen how actors, actresses, spectators, spect-actors, every one involved in theatre finds in this process talents hidden within themselves, identifies the oppressor within themselves, and also recognises the human self. They humanise the oppressor within themselves with their own human self. These people are empowered in the true sense. They can give love, they are not selfish.

In my over twenty years of cultural-political activist life, I have understood the limitations of propaganda theatre. Of course, its strengths are not to be denied. But through Theatre of the Oppressed I have seen how the strength of endurance in the oppressed people gets converted to the strength to bring about change, a liberation from passivity and muteness. "Now I will speak, Now I will do. I am no more a slave to your upper class arrogance. My intelligence, my awareness, my empowerment are all linked to each other." This, I say, is empowerment. There are so many things that are integral to this word, 'empowerment' - values, culture, social norms and so much more. Therefore, at every level in society a political space is needed where people can question their social norms, politics, economics, values and culture. And they will question themselves. And the search begins the search for an alternative. The courage to embark upon this search is, to me, empowerment.

Perhaps the highest level of empowerment is to go forward acquiring the ability to win over grief, pain and adversity. This is the level where each oppressed, deprived person in the world needs to reach. To tell you the truth, even today I don't know if I will ever be empowered in that sense.

Write soon.