

## JANA SANSKRITI, WEST BENGAL

It is late evening in a remote village in the Sunderbans. Under the harsh light of kerosene gas lamps, a poignant drama unfolds before a transfixed village audience. It is a familiar tale: Amba works hard all day, only to be beaten by her husband when he returns from work. Her in-laws support their son. A neighbour's wife who wants to intervene is restrained by her husband. This scene from the play *Shonar Meye* is brought to an abrupt halt as the Joker<sup>1</sup> claps and calls stop. The actors freeze in different postures to form an image. The Joker calls upon the spectators to respond to the situation. After initial hesitation, many villagers, men and women, come up to replace the protagonist. Each one critically reflects on her/his experience to explore solutions. Each enactment is analyzed and questioned by the spectators and the discussion goes on late into the night as the villagers struggle to reach a consensus.

This is Forum Theatre in action, as practised by Jana Sanskriti – Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed (JS). Drawing on Augusto Boal's work and the rich local folk forms, JS has created a vibrant, indigenously rooted movement, where theatre becomes a platform for dialogue. Spectators are transformed into 'spect-actors', who draw on their inner resources to introspect and question 'normal' everyday practices, within the family and civil society, practices that oppress, marginalize and render them silent. In

the process, as Sanjoy Ganguly, founder of JS, says, "Actors, actresses, spectators, spect-actors, everyone involved in theatre...finds talents hidden within themselves, identifies the oppressor within themselves and also recognizes the human self. They humanize the oppressor within themselves..."<sup>2</sup> The introspection sparks off positive conflicts and the possibility of inner transformation and reflective action. This inspires collective action that democratizes both family and society.

It has been a long creative journey for JS since 1985, when Sanjoy, along with a few urban fellow activists, moved to a village, 70 kilometres from Kolkata, to understand and experience rural realities, in the process of helping people to resist oppression. Sanjoy was struck by the richness of Baul music, Gajan and other folk forms. In his own words:

"Jana Sanskriti grew out of the initiative from 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 to the entire concept of performance and its rich possibilities. Where did this enthusiasm and ability come from?"<sup>3</sup>

Sanjoy plunged into theatre work, involving local people in scripting and acting plays that explored the oppression in their everyday lives. Along the way, he and his group realized the



*Forum Theatre in progress*



*Social awareness through enactment*



*Villagers discuss issues at a Jana Sanskriti meeting*

limitations of propaganda theatre, which is monological, at best, a theatre *for* the oppressed, but not *of* the oppressed. In the early 1990s, as the JS team came into contact with Boal's seminal work, it was able to translate his concepts, using local idioms and forms, into a unique initiative for social change. This was the first attempt ever to interpret Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed within a rural context.

Today, JS is one of the largest theatre groups in India, with 25 theatre teams in West Bengal and two in Tripura. These include seven women's theatre teams. It also has helped create 16 theatre groups in nine other states and has trained a competent group of trainers, based in five states. The members of the JS teams are men and women from agricultural worker families. JS's uniqueness stems from its ability to recognize and build on the wisdom and strength of 'common people', to empower them to form thinking, committed citizens' groups that can analyze and handle their own local issues. The traditional hierarchy between the activists and

the people that one finds in many political parties and NGOs is absent. The theatre work has led to the development of Human Rights Protection Committees at the village level. These committees work with local bodies, including the panchayat. They have tackled issues such as illegal alcohol, ecological protection, education, health, atrocities on women, political participation, corruption and non-payment of minimum wages, among others.

The villages in the Sunderbans have no proper roads or electricity; health and educational facilities are very limited. In 2000, Jana Sanskriti launched a pre-primary learning initiative, Nibedita Shikshayatan, with the idea of inculcating the school-going habit among children and raising community awareness about the need for education. Over the years, it has grown into a vibrant village level institution that provides spaces for learning and dialogue not only for children, but also for their mothers, local teachers and the village community. The community is actively involved in creating and

managing their own pre-school, through Guardians Committees and Mothers' Forums. The initiative has also reached out to forge linkages with the government Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme. There is also a great deal of synergy between the theatre teams, the human rights protection committees and the Nibedita Shikshayatan initiative. Campaigns, melas and other events also serve the purpose of bringing together people to work towards a sustainable, locally-rooted movement for social justice and change. Financial support from the Trust since August 2001<sup>4</sup> has enabled the expansion and consolidation of the Nibedita Shikshayatan initiative and the creation of village-level forums and human rights' committees.

In November 2004, Jana Sanskriti organized *Muktadhara: A Forum Theatre Festival*, the first of its kind in India. For six days, an open-air venue in the heart of Kolkata drew large crowds for performances by Jana Sanskriti teams from all over the country, Forum Theatre and folk

performances. Workshops and seminars were conducted by Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners from France, Canada and the UK. *Muktadhara II* is being planned for October 2006, with the participation of Augusto Boal and other theatre practitioners and academics from Europe, USA and Latin America. *Muktadhara* is an affirmation of the power of Forum Theatre and the universality of its language. It is a visible celebration and extension of the democratic spaces that the work of Jana Sanskriti has opened up, from the local to the global.

<sup>1</sup> *The Joker is a central character in Forum Theatre, who raises questions and facilitates discussion among actors and spectators.*

<sup>2</sup> *S Ganguly, "Theatre – A Space for Empowerment: Celebrating Jana Sanskriti's Experience in India," in Theatre and Empowerment, edited by R Boon and J Plastow, Cambridge University Press, 2006.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Between 2001 and 2004, the Trust supported Jana Sanskriti with a grant of Rs 4.90 million. This support was extended for a further five-year period (2004 to 2009), with a total grant of Rs 7.28 million.*



*Awareness building rally led by Jana Sanskriti*