

'We are living through change': How theatre is empowering women in the Sunderbans

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A Jana Sanskriti troupe rehearse a play seeking women's

liberation from household work at Digambarpur, Sunderbans, South 24-Parganas in Kolkata . (Subhankar Chakraborty/ Hindustan Times) A girl sits coyly on a chair and endures a scrutiny typically reserved for cattle at a livestock market. Her prospective groom's family inspects her physical traits — the length, lushness and strength of her hair, dimples on her cheeks, and if she has a limp. Manners and etiquette follow next. Is she looking straight into the eyes of the elders? She is not supposed to. The bride-hunt for an arranged marriage in which the couple often doesn't meet before they exchange their vows is part of a play by an all-women satellite team Jana Sanskriti, of the theatre group, at Digambarpur village in the Sunderbans. Midway through the inspection, an actor intervenes and asks the spectators whether they are happy with the prospective bride's response. "No!" shouts a middle-aged woman. She is asked to walk up to the stage and replace the actor playing the wannabe bride. The act resumes but the plot changes, as the new actor lodges her protest spontaneously: "You people cannot look at me like this. Am I an item to be sold in the market? Am I a doll, or cattle?" The audience, mostly women from different age groups, applauds. Now, a male from the audience, a middle-aged farmer, says he would like to play the bride's role. Soon, he is seen arguing against the prevalent culture. Within minutes the play becomes anyone's game. The scriptwriter or the director holds no control.



A team of Jana Sanskriti rehearse a play seeking women's liberation from household work. (Subhankar Chakraborty/ Hindustan Times)

The actors were housewives from farmers' families living in the difficult Sunderbans — a mass of mangrove islands where the Royal Bengal rules, as does a clutch of superstitions. The play's form is called Theatre of the Oppressed, which was created by Brazilian thespian Augusto Boal, and now has West Bengal's Sanjoy Ganguly as among the most prominent global exponents. "At every village, a play is staged thrice within three months. The script remains the same but the unscripted part changes. The solutions the spect-actors come up with usually become more radical with every show," Ganguly said. The participation of local women has worked wonders for their emancipation in three poor community development blocks in South 24-Parganas, a study conducted by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSS), and part-funded by the World Bank has found. "We are living through this change. We performed the play thrice at the neighbouring village of Raipur. The result: several girls refused to go through such humiliating examination in their life. Several local girls put their foot down against dowry," said Shyamali Pramanik, a homemaker, whose husband and 10-year-old daughter also participate in these theatres. The study is co-authored by Jyotsna Jalan, professor of economics at CSSS, and Karla Hoff, lead economist, research department, World Bank.



It was conducted among nearly 4,000 households from 35 villages. Most socio-economic parameters in these villages were more or less equal. But villages where Jana Sanskriti's teams operate have women playing a significantly greater role in family and social lives. Alcoholism among men and instances of domestic violence were less and more parents were looking out for educated brides for their sons. "Evidence gathered by us show that Jana Sanskriti's intervention has led to greater voice for the wife in household decision-making, (effected) changes in opinion over what a prototypical 'good wife' is, (helped) men and women become more vocal about protests against wrongs in the community, (effected) fall in actual incidents of violence at home and increase in trust in wife by the husband and (parents) wanting more educated brides for their sons," the report concluded. According to Jana Sanskriti, 60% of the members of their satellite teams are women. The villages constitute backward regions of South 24 Parganas district that shares a border with Kolkata but has its other end merging with the Bay of Bengal. A vast area of the district is occupied by the Sunderbans and most of these villages fall within it. The primary occupation is agriculture. A number of rivers crisscross the region, raising both the fertility of the soil and the inaccessibility of the area. "Since we have been convinced about the impact of this form of participatory theatre, we would like to extend its reach to more villages where one trained actor will play video recording of the beginning of a play and then invite the audience to carry it forward, while the trained actor plays the role of the oppressor," Jalan said.

Over the past three decades since inception of Jana Sanskriti, their work with the marginalised communities has become subject for thesis and dissertations in more than three dozen universities, including Harvard, Cornell, Chicago, Cambridge, London, Manchester and East Anglia. Ganguly said the spect-actors who found it difficult to defeat the oppressor on the dais return home feeling uneasy and keep thinking about possible solutions. This mental anguish helps in turning the spect-actor into spect-activist. "Providing the audience with a made-easy solution is not on our agenda. The idea is to help them deepen critical understanding of the problem in the context of life's complexities," he said. First published by [Hindustan Times](#)