

# Muktadhara: A Forum Theatre Festival

Organised by Jana Sanskriti

## A Report

### Announcement

In mid-2004, friends and well wishers of Jana Sanskriti received a letter from the organisation saying,

“We have decided to organise a Forum theatre Festival in November 2004 - the first of its kind in India, in Kolkata. All the groups trained in Forum Theatre by Jana Sanskriti in different parts of India will participate in the Festival. In our journey to this position we have taken a lot of criticism - constructive and shattering. Now the time has come to prove that Theatre of the Oppressed is not just an attractive concept. This concept translated into practice is the most democratic way of doing Social action.

We have named the Festival - Muktadhara, a Bengali word which means ‘free-flowing stream’. At the Festival groups from the eastern, northern and western parts of India will come together and engage the people of Kolkata in debate on issues that are local as well as national. At the same time the people of Kolkata, other theatre groups, will see for themselves that theatre is not necessarily propaganda, it is creating space for the oppressed to allow them to think, express, to articulate their thought.

We are happy to invite you to this Festival, which for us is a reaffirmation of our commitment to the Theatre of the Oppressed movement. Your presence will help us to make it a success.”

### Background

In Forum Theatre conceptualised by Augusto Boal, performance is not confined to the stage. In this 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. Passive spectators then become engaged spect-actors. Spect-actors come on stage to enact the solutions they have thought of, debating with trained activists about the feasibility of the solutions suggested. Thus individuals publicly engage in tackling a problem that has thus far provoked the most profound cultural silence and acceptance. This exercise gradually suggests possibilities for liberation from that oppression in real life.

Since 1991, Jana Sanskriti has removed itself far from conventional theatre and spread the practice of Forum Theatre to remote villages of the Sunderbans in Bengal. With 20 theatre teams active in rural Bengal, Jana Sanskriti is today perhaps the state’s largest theatre group. Jana Sanskriti has also taken this theatre pedagogy beyond the boundaries of the state to different parts of the country - to Tripura, Orissa, Jharkhand, Delhi, Maharashtra, uttaranchal, and Gujarat.

Jana Sanskriti has worked with Augusto Boal on a number of occasions, the first time being in 1991. Jana Sanskriti has participated in two international festivals of Theatre of the Oppressed - in Paris and in Rio de Janeiro. This group is also perhaps the only one in the world practising Forum Theatre in rural areas. Jana Sanskriti’s work has become subject for theses and dissertations in Harvard, Cornell, Chicago, Cambridge, London, Manchester and East Anglia Universities.

## Why a Festival?

In our work on Forum Theatre we have dealt with a range of issues which are relevant to different groups in different regions - malpractices in the public distribution system, communalism, exploitation by contractors, undemocratic culture of political parties, corruption in the Panchayat, blind superstitions, domestic violence, insurgency and terrorism.

Our society is comprised of different interest groups - one issue affects the interests of one group, another issue affects the interests of another. Because each group looks at each issue narrowly, or selfishly, it leads to conflict between groups. Theatre of the Oppressed is an ideology and practice, which allows space to all groups to look at issues with a human perspective. In Forum Theatre different interest groups meet on the same ground, get the opportunity to examine all aspects of the issue presented, have the space to agree, to dissent, to go forward, to attempt to solve - and this reduces conflict.

One of the primary reasons we decided to hold this Festival is we wished that more and more people to know about Forum Theatre and the power it holds and disseminates. Over a decade of doing Forum Theatre in rural areas amongst landless agricultural workers has proved to us its power to provide a political space which makes us think, and then act. We believe that this experience and learning must be shared with more and more people in our country - where millions of people, oppressed in different ways - are looking for a way to address their problems. Every citizen needs a space, in which to express himself freely - this space has been shrinking over the years and as a result, participation of people in collective and community affairs has almost become a thing of the past.

Jana Sanskriti's theatre teams have been reaching out to thousands of people every month, with aesthetically refined theatre and hard-hitting questions on the reality around us. Not offering any solution, this theatre attempts to arrive at a solution with the help of spect-actors. Over the years we have seen that the experience of 'spect-acting' has motivated people to be active outside theatre as well. And it this reality that we wished to share with audiences in Kolkata at our Festival.

The second and equally important reason for holding this Festival is that it became a meeting ground for the Forum Theatre teams trained by Jana Sanskriti all over India. Each of these teams is active in their own regions; most of them are also heading organisations engaged in struggles to assert the rights of the marginalised. Though all these teams are linked to each other through their commitment to the Forum Theatre movement, they have had very little opportunity to interact with each other and see each other's work. At this Festival we were able to provide this valuable opportunity. This interaction has no doubt imbued each individual and team with the feeling that they are not alone in this challenging task of establishing dialogue in society.

Theatre of the oppressed practitioners and theorists all over the world have showed great interest in Jana Sanskriti's Forum Theatre. The Festival also served to showcase this work for them, most of whom visited India only to be able to attend this Festival.

## Forum Theatre at this Festival

Usually Forum Theatre is performed before audiences who are also facing the problem portrayed in the play. So the spectators and actors form a homogenous group. At this Festival we tried something new. That is, there were people from all kinds of interest groups in the audience. Different groups see the same issue in different ways. Usually, each person looks at it selfishly, narrowly - because there is no scope for debate or discussion. Forum Theatre allows

for debate and discussion - therefore the audience emerges from the experience with a more human outlook.

This experience, in itself, is an empowering one - a realisation that here is a space, where each person can think, question, suggest solutions in his own way, without feeling exposed or threatened. It is to celebrate this experience of empowerment, of discovering oneself in a political space that Jana Sanskriti decided to have this Festival. We decided on the name 'Muktadhara' because the Festival was all about equality, freedom and progress.

### Programme design

The festival was held at an open air venue in the centre of Kolkata, in a lush green park which seemed very welcoming in the midst of the hurly burly of urban traffic. Every evening at 3 pm we would begin and go on till about 8.30pm. There were other events each morning at the government's cultural centre in the city - on the first three days there was a workshop on Rainbow of Desire (an important component of Theatre of the Oppressed techniques) conducted by Jean Francois Martel from France. On the fourth morning there was a seminar presentation by Canada's Simon Malbogot and Luciano Iogna on their Theatre of the Oppressed work in Turkey and the Ukraine. On the fifth morning there was yet another presentation by Ali Campbell and Jane Plastow, both on the faculty of universities in the U.K. Their piece was about their experience of doing Forum Theatre in Sudan. Before the Festival began, there had been a theatre workshop conducted by Julian Boal of Paris, at the Jana Sanskriti training centre. After the festival there was another workshop conducted by Ali Campbell of London University.

On each day of the Festival, we had performances by Jana Sanskriti teams from different parts of India. All these performances were followed by Forum Theatre.

The programme on each day also featured a performance by a folk team - from remote parts of Birbhum, Purulia and Cooch Behar. Different folk forms were given an important place in this Festival as a tribute from Jana Sanskriti to the folk tradition in Bengal, which actually gave birth to Jana Sanskriti's theatre. Loud resounding drums played by Jiten Badyakar's Dhol team, incredible acrobatics by Raibeshe and Natua, melodious songs and graceful dances from the tea gardens in northern Bengal, and the magnificent masks of the Chhau dancers brightened up the programme on each day.

The final day of the Festival was a Sunday, and there were over a thousand spectators. Augusto Boal was scheduled to attend the Festival but was eventually unable to come. Instead he sent us a reasons video message which we screened on the final day. In his inspiring message he stressed on the importance of having Festivals to spread the Forum Theatre movement and also congratulated Jana Sanskriti for doing good work.

### About the performances

The inaugural show of the Festival was Jana Sanskriti West Bengal's Gayer Panchali. This play was chosen because it is Jana Sanskriti's first play, written in 1988 and has been performed more than 2000 times till now. A collage of different aspects of life in rural Bengal, the play looks at the ways in which villagers' lives are affected by government policies, by corruption of politicians & bureaucrats and how they are deprived of even the very basic health and education facilities. Jana Sanskriti West Bengal performed two more plays at the Festival. Aamra Jekhaney Dariye focused on the relationship between political parties and the common man today - the Forum Theatre interventions that followed were very illuminating and said a lot about the situation in Bengal today. Santras is Jana Sanskriti West Bengal's latest play and talks about the terror unleashed by political parties in rural areas.

Jana Sanskriti's Delhi Forum Theatre team performed two plays at the Festival. One, Laadli Hamaari was about the discrimination faced by a girl in different stages of her life and the other, Baagar Billa highlighted the relationship between a political leader and slum dwellers. Both plays were followed by spirited Forum Theatre sessions in which spect-actors came up one after another to replace the protagonist in a bid to reverse the oppressive situation portrayed. These plays were in Hindi, which is a language understood and spoken by most people in Kolkata - so the Forum Theatre interventions were energetic and lively.

Jana Sanskriti's Tripura team also presented two plays at the Festival. Aatanker Golpo Noy brought out the different ways in which insurgency problem was affecting daily life of the common people in Tripura. In the Forum Theatre session that followed, spect-actors struggled hard to find a way out of the situation portrayed. As this was in Bengali too, we had a wide range of interventions. It is difficult to address a 25 year old problem in the space of a few hours - but the spect-actors were able to use the space for offering well thought out opinions on the issue. The second play by this team Tamasha showed how corruption is seeping into every walk of life.

The Jana Sanskriti Forum Theatre team from Maharashtra comprises Katkari tribals from Raigarh District. These people are landless and have faced deprivation and discrimination for generations. They performed the play Choracha Rajya re Hai which depicted their daily experiences at the ration shop, at the landlord's fields where they go to work, and their interactions with the local political leader. The team started by singing a Bengali song as a way of greeting the Kolkata audiences. Even though their play was in Marathi, there were a large number of interventions from spectators. And interactions in Forum Theatre occurred through double translation - Marathi to Hindi to Bengali and then Bengali to Hindi to Marathi. Perhaps this is another first!

The Jana Sanskriti Forum Theatre Team from Orissa put up two plays at the Festival. Phulmonir Bichar highlighted a year in Phulmoni's life. A tribal girl, Phulmoni works in a brick kiln and is sexually exploited by the labour contractor who takes advantage of the fact that Phulmoni's father owes him money. At the village trial, Phulmoni is judged guilty as the contractor goes scot-free. A flood of interventions followed in the Forum Theatre session. The second play from Orissa, Paharoro Chhai was about blind beliefs and superstitions still followed by people in their villages. It focused on witch-hunting and how it constituted a form of violence against women.

The Forum Theatre team from Gujarat comprised young boys and girls living in Ahmedabad who had witnessed the post-Godhra carnage 3 years ago. Their play Danga was a chilling narration of what actually happened - also, it shows how difficult it is for Muslims to resume their normal life after the carnage. This play was in Hindi and a fiery Forum Theatre session followed.

Performances by Interactive Resource Centre (IRC) of Lahore, Pakistan added an Asian touch to the Festival. Opportunities and spaces for the people of Pakistan and India to meet and interact are few and far between. Therefore Jana Sanskriti was proud as well as honoured to be able to achieve this at the Festival. The IRC put up two plays. The first, Aman Hamare Liye, was a piece on Indo-Pakistan peace which they had presented before the Prime Minister of India a few years ago. Another play by them - Bhatte ki Kahani - depicted the condition of labourers at a brick kiln and the exploitation they have to face on a daily basis. This was followed by a long and interesting Forum Theatre session which had people from all walks of life going up to offer their solutions.

At the end of the fifth day, the Festival was declared closed with an impromptu performance of Kolattam by all the Jana Sanskriti teams together. Over 50 people on the stage, each with

a pair of sticks in their hands, went gracefully through the steps of the dance we learnt from Andhra Pradesh. These 50 people were dancing the Kolattam - a stick dance that requires a great deal of precision - for the first time as a team. But they had no problem in synchronising their steps - it was a picture of harmony and a coming together of committed soldiers of the Forum Theatre movement from all over the country. It wasn't an end - it was a beginning.

#### In conclusion

What has been a revelation for us at Jana Sanskriti as also I am sure for those who were there to witness the Festival is the universality of the language of Forum Theatre. Performances were put up in as many as four languages and in no way was that an obstacle for the spectators in their interventions in Forum Theatre. The spectators ranged from bureaucrats from the Writers Buildings, clerks from private offices and policemen to vendors, hawkers, students and unemployed youth. The ease with which they overcame the language problem reaffirmed for us our belief in the efficacy of Forum Theatre.

We are grateful to the audiences in Kolkata who encouraged us and inspired us all along. There were people who made it a point to come every single day of the Festival and contribute with interventions in all Forum Theatre sessions. On the last day, as we were winding up, the local police and administration, who cooperated with us to an unprecedented extent, came up to us to tell us that Kolkata needed more such events and that we should be back next year.

The Festival proved to us at Jana Sanskriti that we are moving in the right direction. As stated in the beginning itself, Jana Sanskriti's mandate is to work amongst the oppressed people. In Bengal it is landless agricultural workers, in Delhi it is slum dwellers, in Maharashtra it is tribals dispossessed of their land.....On each day of the Festival, the Forum Theatre sessions threw up questions on oppression of various kinds. And members of different Jana Sanskriti teams were able to understand and identify immediately with what was being shown in the arena because they all have the same orientation, the same conviction and the same commitment. On the final day, at the closing of the Festival, when they all seamlessly flowed into the same Kolattam circle, it somehow seemed symbolic of the fact that they are the drummers of the same band. This is evidence enough that the Forum Theatre movement in India has reached a take-off stage.

Lastly but most importantly, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Augusto Boal, Julian Boal, Jean Francois Martel, Ralph Yarrow and Rohit Jain - without whose help it would not have been possible to organise such a mammoth event in the heart of Kolkata.

## LIST OF EVENTS

### Day One

Raibeshe

Gayer Panchali - Jana Sanskriti West Bengal

Laadli Hamaari - Jana Sanskriti Delhi

### Day Two

Jiten Badyakar's Dhol

Phulmonir Bichar - Jana Sanskriti Orissa

Danga - Jana Sanskriti Gujarat

Bahurupee

### Day Three

Natua

Choracha Rajya re Hai - Jana Sanskriti Maharashtra

Aatonker Golpo Noy - Jana Sanskriti Tripura

Aman Hamare Liye - IRC, Lahore

### Day Four

Danga - Jana Sanskriti Gujarat

Song by Jharkhand team

Aamra Jekhaney Dariye - Jana Sanskriti West Bengal

Bagar Billa - Jana Sanskriti Delhi

Chhau from Purulia

### Day Five

Pahararo Chhai - Jana Sanskriti Orissa

Tamasha - Jana Sanskriti Tripura

Santraas - Jana Sanskriti West Bengal

Augusto Boal Video Message

Bhatte ki kahani - IRC Lahore

Dance from North Bengal

Closing Ceremony - Collective Kolattam

## PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

Bengal:	Landless agricultural workers from villages in the Sunderbans
Delhi:	People living in slums and working in the unorganised sector such as domestic servants, delivery boys, fruit sellers etc
Tripura:	From the villages, subsisting on daily wage labour
Maharashtra:	Of the Katkari tribe, landless, subsisting on daily wage labour
Orissa:	Tribals of Dhenkenal district - landless, mostly unemployed
Gujarat:	Youth from Ahmedabad, working in the unorganised sector

## VISITORS' PROFILE

Julian Boal:	Practitioner and theorist of Theatre of the Oppressed, Paris
Jeanne Dosse & Magali Vincent:	Film makers from France
Jean Francois Martel & Marion Martel:	Practitioners of Theatre of the Oppressed, France
Peter Igelmund:	Practitioner of theatre of the Oppressed, Germany
Anke Zimpel:	Interested observer from Germany
Ralph Yarrow:	Faculty, University of East Anglia, UK
Jane Plastow:	Faculty, University of Leeds, UK
Franc Chamberlain:	Faculty, University of East Anglia, UK
Alistair Campbell:	Faculty, University of London, UK
Sandra Campbell:	Practitioner Theatre of the Oppressed, UK
Simon Malbogot:	Director, Mixed Company, Canada
Luciano Malbogot:	Associated with Mixed Company, Canada
Members of Aarohan:	A theatre group from Nepal

Team of teachers from Goa University, led by Isabel Vas  
Team of social activists from Children of the World (India) Trust, Mumbai  
Rohit Jain, Noyona Choudhury & Ishtiaque from SRUTI, Delhi  
Mili and Abhijit Visaria - ICICI Social Initiatives Group, Mumbai

### Media Coverage

Hindustan Times, Kolkata  
The Telegraph  
The Statesman  
Kolkata City Reporter  
The Asian Age, Kolkata  
The Times of India, Kolkata  
Cityinfo, Kolkata  
Frontline  
Dainik Statesman (Bengali)  
Ananda Bazar Patrika (Bengali)  
Sangbad Pratidin (Bengali)  
Aajkaal (Bengali)  
Kaalantar (Bengali)

Jansatta (Hindi)  
Dainik Jagaran (Hindi)

TV - Akaash Bangla, ETV Bangla,