

## District – South 24 Parganas (Addressing gender issues through theatre)

Every second girl in the high prevalence child marriage districts of West Bengal were married off before they reach 18. In South 24 parganas, it has been an experience that of the total child marriages that take place around 50% of them are trafficked in the name of marriage. In these cases, there are absolutely no contact between the girls and their families once they are married off. Given West Bengal's unique geographical location with as many as 9 border districts which it shares with Bangladesh, the incidences of child marriage can indeed be very threatening to girls.

This initiative proposes to address the patriarchal mind set of the students and the larger community in the Patharpratima block (including distant islands) of South 24 parganas thus reducing cases of early child marriage, retention of girl child in schools which will directly impact child trafficking.



## District - South 24 Parganas (Primary education)

Vivekananda Support Education Centres – A support (primary) education program run by Jana Sanskriti is trying to bring about a fundamental and pedagogical improvement to the prescribed syllabus and mainstream education system. Our program essentially teaches the entire government syllabus via theatre, art, painting, dance and music. We are using these methods in a way that both the non-artist teacher and the child (in our case, slow learners) feel comfortable – this is our view of joy of learning. Our confidence in this program is also supported by feedbacks received from Pratichi trust & Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSS Kolkata) which enunciates the fact that JS's work is new.

We have not limited VSEC program to the classroom alone. We realized that the genesis of the problems we come across in the classroom often exists outside the classroom, inside the families and in the community. Hence, involvement of child's family especially the mother is a crucial aspect of this program. Active mother's forums have been formed where discussions range from the child's nutrition, performance and overall welfare to several social issues like child marriage, child abuse, illicit liquor, ration cards, ICDS operations, domestic violence and many more – all through theatre.

The unique feature of this program is *introspective theatre* where a rational space is created in the family's mind which cleanses the family units – thus cleansing the community. For example, alcoholism causes domestic violence in the family which in turn affects the psychology of the child. In many cases we have come across cases of both parents engaged in extra-marital affairs and polygamy, especially where migration is a predominant economic feature. These children are left to their grandparents who fail to replace their parents. Children from these families suffer from agony not expressed which at the end makes them slow learners. Introspective theatre is a space that deals with these desires rationally, helping families especially mothers to rationalize their role in taking care of their children.

As a result of these initiatives, the once “slow learners” are gradually turning out to be more capable to join mainstream only to be ahead of other students. We also face regular pressures from the community to admit more students to our VSEC centres.

Video: <https://vimeo.com/213207974>

### **District – Purulia (Dealing with Patriarchy through theatre)**

Purulia is one of the most socially excluded districts of West Bengal and has mostly tribal population and scheduled tribes. This experiment started with 12 high schools in Pancha block in 2014. Currently we are working in 30 high schools. We started Theatre in education project in a different way here – dealing with Patriarchy through theatre.

We are addressing children ranging from 14 – 18 years of age. Volunteers/performers are all high school and under graduate level students from government schools and colleges. In areas like these where child marriages are a natural feature, these performances have created a ripple effect. There are strong interventions during forums. Young girls have started voicing out their opinion. It has brought the children and their parents to a rational stage through reflection and is bridging the gap between them. Interventions of the children and parents have been documented (The documentary movie of the project can be shared on request). Thus we are using theatre to humanise the student community.

This initiative has noticeably increased the enrolment of girl child into schools and reduced the cases of dropouts and child marriages. Teachers of these high schools are of the view that, continuous exposures of their students to these plays, where they see their fellow classmates acting, have increased participation in class which in turn is having a positive impact on their academic performance.

After a year now, students associated with this program who are the theatre performers are getting a different identity in their society. Community also perceives them in a different light. Their confidence levels have increased thus impacting their versatility and academic performance.

Video highlights: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vchBZeulQ80>