

From Alienation to Healthy Culture: The particularity of Jana Sanskriti's use of "theatre of the oppressed" in rural Bengal, India

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Theatre is not enough.

Biswaranjan Pramanik, landless member of Jana Sanskriti's theatre movement
in India

We have learnt from people in villages, and from talking to people in the development world, that while there have been interventions in the rural areas, there has not been the kind of sustained involvement that we believe in.

Sanjoy Ganguly, founder and artistic director of Jana Sanskriti

When you have collaborated to produce something that has brought people happiness it is not so easy for politicians to incite you into violence against each other. You will think twice about stabbing someone who has become your friend. And this is the power of culture.

Satyanarjan Pal, leader of Janasanskriti from lower-middle class agricultural household

Two surprises remain in the foreground of my memory from the summer of 1999 when I first met members of the cultural organization, Jana Sanskriti (People's Culture), and was introduced to their admirable work. First, frequently narrated stories attested to the fact that landless, agricultural and wage labourers of rural Bengal, who could scarcely afford the lack of sleep and the depleted energy, would attend rehearsals sometimes till 1 in the morning after a full day of work in fields and homes. In time, I had the opportunity to see in the hearts and bodies of many, demonstrations of this level of commitment and passion for Jana Sanskriti's work. Imprisoned by my middle-class thinking, it puzzled me to find a group of people dedicated to creative cultural work when they scarcely had enough time or energy to ensure their daily survival. The second surprise was from the realization that Jana Sanskriti's plays which I found melodramatic when I first watched them, began to strike a deep chord in me over time. The scenes that used to make me uncomfortable moved me immensely towards the end of my stay. Like earlier socialization into appreciating the abstractions and complex histories behind genres of art exhibited in the many famous museums of the world, I was learning to see the power and meaning of Jana Sanskriti's aesthetics.

In this essay, I describe my understanding of what makes up the substance of Jana Sanskriti's aesthetic power. Understanding my surprise requires appreciating the particularity

of Jana Sanskriti's work. Unravelling my surprise also requires understanding how my view of their art changed during 1999-2001, and what this transformation means. I will show that the particularity of Jana Sanskriti's work is that the redistribution of means of representation is not temporally bound to single Forum Theatre performances, for instance. The means of representation are redistributed over time, landless labourers build their own theatre teams. Most engagements in Forum Theatre involve not just playing scripts, but also scripting plays. Jana Sanskriti's particularity is that the commitment to scripting plays onstage extends to scripting power in daily life. Jana Sanskriti's theatre is situated in immediate and relevant social relations. Even as theatre is the core tool of their politics, as Biswaranjan succinctly put it, "theatre is not enough". At the same time, Jana Sanskriti's theatre is also celebrated for its aesthetic appeal. Augusto Boal's son, Julian Boal's words run contrary to expectations that people's participation inevitably drains art of its aesthetic appeal:

JB: It was during an International Festival of Forum Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed International Festival and there were several groups from many parts of the world. By that time, I thought and I still think that Jana Sanskriti was one of the best, one of the three best, one of two best.

DM: *Aesthetically?*

JB: Aesthetically yes. Aesthetically. But I don't know, I feel like aesthetics is not only putting a flower in a vase, and a nice light in it. If it is aesthetic it is because it is strong and there is something behind it.

Others too would agree that, Jana Sanskriti's unique and deeply committed engagement of landless labourers in the practice of "theatre of the oppressed" contributes to its aesthetic power. I claim that Jana Sanskriti's theatre is politically, pedagogically, and aesthetically powerful because it fights alienation. In retrospect, it is not a surprise that for people like me, Jana Sanskriti's aesthetic, *at first exposure*, seemed overstated. After all, I do not experience the daily violence of divisive party politics or the exploitation of market relations. Nor do I face extreme and consistent marginalization within processes of governance and citizenship. In short, I escape the most extreme forms of alienation in relations of production and representation. During fieldwork, I was made aware of this world of alienating experiences, a reality too many, that lay just beyond the depictions onstage in the daily lives and stories around me. Jana Sanskriti enabled me to see the daily world of alienation, not just onstage, but offstage too because their work insists on commitment to onstage *and* offstage processes of representation. Although I was frequently moved my people's representations of their world, tracing Jana Sanskriti's work offstage really helped me appreciate why theatre was not enough, the strength behind Jana Sanskriti's stage-work, and what makes the drama far from overstated.

There is an enormous grain of truth in Augusto Boal's version of the Marxist view that theatre is political because all action is political (1979). Beyond this view however, how do we understand what exactly makes action political, what makes a social movement, social, and what makes power, legitimate? Jana Sanskriti's particular use of "theatre of the oppressed"

allows me to theorize on these questions. I attempt this task below and I begin with a brief discussion of the context in which Jana Sanskriti works. Next, I outline the specifics of Jana Sanskriti's membership and practice. In the next section, I identify three features which I believe give Jana Sanskriti its particularity. In the final section of this essay I bring in ethnographic detail to show how people negotiate alienation and what drives members to commit to Jana Sanskriti's construction of a "healthy culture."

"Theatre of the oppressed" under a Communist Regime

Jana Sanskriti was founded by Sanjoy Ganguly in 1985. 1985 was the seventh year of a democratically elected left front government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal. CPM continues to be elected to lead the West Bengal today, completing 25 years of rule. Although the CPM has quite commendably implemented land reform and a system of local self-government in rural areas, it is equally true that they are perceived to have compromised their agenda constrained as they are by the fact of being a ruling party in a parliamentary democracy. *Bhadralok* have historically been the leaders of CPM.¹ Some have argued that despite this class bias in composition, the party has shown considerable ideological discipline in addressing class inequalities and encouraged the expropriation of land from rural landowning classes (Kohli 1987). Others have argued that this class composition and focus of CPM's *bhadralok* leaders has resulted in a thorough neglect of caste and gender inequalities (Basu 1992). These opinions concur on the view that the CPM has transformed its agenda from radical transformation to the mechanisms through which to deliver development and ensure electoral stability. Contrary to the definitive character of these perspectives, my view is that while CPM has focused most of its attention on reorganizing relations of production, they do have a cultural program – evident in the *panchayat* system, the sports associations and cultural clubs at the village level. However, while the CPM has given marginalized places and people *access* to representation (rather than reorganizing production relations alone), the party has ensured that people never come to *control* the terms and the meaning of representation and their participation in these processes.

During my first interview with him, Sanjoy Ganguly, the founder and artistic director of Jana Sanskriti, told me that Jana Sanskriti's work, although not about providing services to people, is nonetheless about development because they create human beings by fighting the violence and divisive effects of all forms of instrumental politics on human relationships. He contended that while the provision of material resources and social services could perhaps alleviate poverty, it could not combat the sense of inferiority that political marginalization and economic exploitation nurtures in people. The object of his critique was, at least in part, CPM's focus on class issues. Sanjoy Ganguly, who has seen CPM and trade union politics from

¹ *Bhadralok* literally means genteel, decent man, and in everyday parlance this term means gentleman. However, when I refer to the *bhadralok* I am referring specifically to the middle- and upper-class of persons produced under certain historical conditions in the course of colonial rule in Bengal. *Bhadralok* led the anti-colonial movement in Bengal deploying culture quite centrally to accomplish their critique of the colonizers.

close quarters, views CPM as a party conducting a narrow class politics, inattentive to the complexities of social inequalities and realities in West Bengal.

Jana Sanskriti's "theatre of the oppressed"

What does Ganguly mean by his alternate definition of development? How do Jana Sanskriti members come to offer a redefinition of the state of their world and the meaning of development in rural West Bengal? What does it mean to say that we are working on development because we are creating human beings? Why is this an appealing practice for people without access to and control over the means of production and a secure means for survival?

Composition and Practice

Jana Sanskriti is composed of three urban, middle-class members and 350 agricultural and wage labourers who have committed themselves to the task of representation for the past 18 years. Jana Sanskriti's rural members come from landless to middle-class and low- to middle-caste families. They have an approximately equal number of (predominantly Hindu) men and women. Together they share the task of playing scripts and scripting plays for the stage, and challenging power relations offstage.

Jana Sanskriti has theatre teams in various villages in the southern districts of West Bengal and numerous regions of India. Each of these theatre teams combines activity onstage with activism offstage within the villages in which the theatre teams are formed. They have their organizational centre in a suburb of Calcutta called Badu. There are two integral *practices* to Jana Sanskriti's work: performances and fieldwork. The first practice involves rehearsals, theatre workshops, enactment of plays, engagement in Forum Theatre, and organizing cultural festivals. The second involved the process of calling meetings, discussion and debate groups, brainstorming sessions, "ideological training," all of which was aimed at maintaining a semblance of cohesion, coherence, and continuity over seasons and across theatre teams situated in disparate village communities in rural Bengal. Through these two practices, over time the theatre teams come to constitute nodes of cultural and political activism and representation in villages. They engage in bargaining with the *panchayat*² for the right to cultural spaces, fighting dowry and domestic violence, mobilizing people to participate in cultural activities, demanding the right to work in the villages rather than being dependent on migration for work, and mobilizing anti-liquor agitations.

In the course of this essay, when I say Jana Sanskriti does this or that, I am referring not just to its urban, middle-class component or even the leaders of Jana Sanskriti of whom four out of seven are from rural, agricultural backgrounds. These seven leaders and amongst them the three urban, middle-class members do in some sense direct the processes, which other Jana Sanskriti members re-script in terms real and immediate to themselves. However, even though the urban, middle-class members play an important role in directing Jana Sanskriti's process, they cannot dominate the process of scripting power on or offstage. By Jana Sanskriti, I refer equally to the entire community of people – theatre teams in various villages, audiences, the central theatre team, urban, middle-class members - who have

² Village-level institutions of governance first implemented in West Bengal in 1978.

engaged in Jana Sanskriti's theatrical and political work and identify with central aspects of its political agenda. In this sense, Jana Sanskriti is a process rather than a bounded entity.

On the other hand, this process is particularly significant because it requires sustained involvement and presence of the urban, middle-class members *in rural areas*. The fact that Jana Sanskriti leaders are single-minded about making rural subjects (rather than urban non-government funding opportunities, efforts, and trends) its primary audience is unprecedented in the realm of political work outside of party politics. Most non-governmental organizations in rural Bengal intervene for brief periods in order to implement their service-oriented projects in particular rural communities. This mode of political work reinforces the rural-urban divide of development projects. By comparison, Jana Sanskriti chooses to commit itself to deep and long-term involvement in rural communities. Jana Sanskriti's compositional and organizational features make its members transgress the rural-urban divide. These members come to live against the grain of the experiential separations and order produced through the rural-urban divide.

Method

Jana Sanskriti consistently uses a range of Boalian techniques in its rehearsals, workshops, and performances. Ganguly has played a central role in creating a powerful combination of Boalian Image Theatre and Forum Theatre. He has combined these techniques with iconic national leitmotifs and drawn from Indian folk cultural forms to produce a theatre that resonates with the populations that make up Jana Sanskriti's primary audience. Most significantly, the stories that Jana Sanskriti's plays tell across the rural landscape of Bengal are stories drawn from the lives of landless labourers, of wives in patriarchal homes and communities, those marginalized from history, victims of *panchayat* corruption, party political violence, and victims of capitalist development. Ganguly and other Jana Sanskriti leaders are able to draw on such stories precisely because their performance is combined with fieldwork. To belabour the power of Biswaranjan's words, theatre without fieldwork, i.e. without knowledge of particular histories of marginalization within rural communities, is not enough.

Forum Theatre is a good example of how people engage in scripting plays. Here, Jana Sanskriti members debate the social context of a problem such as domestic violence in theatre workshops. Themes and vignettes depicted by members are then ordered into a narrative by the artistic director. The director refrains from offering final solutions to the problem. The play is usually performed for a rural audience. It is then played a second time with a character called the *joker* mediating between actors onstage and audience offstage. The joker prompts the audience to re-script the play from start to finish. The audience actually steps onstage and becomes in Boal's terms a "spect-actor." The audience intervenes in particular scenes of injustice played onstage which they see as worthy of transformation in order to change the experience of the oppressed protagonist *before* the point in the narrative where oppression turns to aggression and violence. The idea is to imagine household and village relations differently at a particular point in the performed narrative when the options for transformation are not foreclosed by the weight of accumulated experiences of violence and subjugation.

One might ask whether the interactions onstage translate into changed norms and behaviour offstage. The point is not to be able to establish a measurable and stable correlation between participation on the Jana Sanskriti stage and transformed lives even though there are innumerable instances of tangible change in people's lives. The noteworthy point is that Jana Sanskriti's work must be seen as a substantive engagement with the practice of representation where nobody tells people what their problem or the solution to their problem is. People themselves represent reality and how history and reality have treated them. This political theatre is political because as a kinetic art, having once lived an alternative conception of reality or the future onstage, people have lived a representation *as* reality. Forum Theatre engages people in enactments where actors and audience members step onstage and have to persuade an audience that their reconstructions of a solution, an alternative reality, or future, are plausible and possible. Since the audience is at liberty to reject the implausible and fanciful as they often do, this is an exercise in rehearsing and living transformation, which occurs not in the absence of real power relations, but very much in the presence of real hindrances.

Jana Sanskriti is a travelling troupe – teams go to villages with which they may have only the slightest connection, demarcate their octagonal stage on the floor in a public place and draw crowds. Most importantly however, Jana Sanskriti goes back to these places because in Ganguly's words, they believe in sustained involvement, not just intervention. The sustained involvement gives their work pedagogical power because audiences can repeatedly watch the same play. Or engage in spect-actorship by role-playing different characters within the same play on the Forum Theatre stage. Over time, those who were reserved initially can gain the confidence to suggest solutions onstage. Repetition is a powerful tool in this theatre method because it gives people the time and space to nurture their confidence. People enacting solutions onstage sometimes reach dead-ends. These too are powerful if there is the chance of trying again, with another solution. It is not for nothing that Jana Sanskriti's Forum Theatre performances particularly in places familiar with their work go on for over two hours.

Redistributing the Means of Representation

In my view Jana Sanskriti's repeated performances, sustained involvement, transgression of rural-urban boundaries, class lines, and patriarchal norms gives it its distinctive identity in the global community of people using theatre of the oppressed. Their deployment of Boal's technique produces a social movement based on a fundamental and lived challenge to the ideological separations between artist and audience, rural and urban, expert and subject of development. Jana Sanskriti not only distributes the means of doing theatre, they distribute the means of representation itself. Here, by representation I mean both the symbolic expression of an idea, as well as the political practice of speaking for somebody. The symbolic and political aspects of representation are of course inextricably linked, but sustained involvement produces the political vision and definition of development as going from alienation towards creating human beings who build healthy cultures.

While most theatre of the oppressed performances likely engage oppressed people's capacity to tell their own story, few actually nourish people's capacity to tell their stories repeatedly, and persuasively enough to combat institutionalised norms and meanings offstage.

Jana Sanskriti is able to accomplish this by combining attention to dilemmas onstage and daily challenges offstage. In this sense scripting a play becomes a process of scripting power and redistributing the means of symbolic and political representation. This kind of emergent political practice ensures that stories of marginalization and visions for the future represented on Jana Sanskriti's stage are *of* the oppressed. Following Jana Sanskriti, it is my belief that theatre *of* the oppressed as political tool cannot be realized to its full potential without this sustained, offstage commitment to a particular place and people.

I see Boal's intervention as an unparalleled contribution to understanding that the transforming the process and methodology of representation alters power relations of representation. However, we should not diminish the promise of this technique with the argument that *any* engagement with "theatre of the oppressed" is therefore inevitably political and transformative. There are specific and identifiable reasons why I see Jana Sanskriti's theatre as political, why their social movement is social, and why their power is legitimate. One, over 18 years, Jana Sanskriti has built a community of people who came together to express their critique and construction of social relations and alternate futures onstage. Jana Sanskriti reorganized people's sense of self by offering a significant space for people to express their alternate visions of relations with urban markets, political systems, and health centers as well as with local politicians, patriarchs, development practitioners and landowners.

Two, when *Jana Sanskriti* members collectively converted spaces such as playing fields, schools, courtyards, bus stations, and streets into a dramatic stage where people represented their visions for the future, everyday arenas of Bengal's rural landscape were legitimized as new spaces for governance. These new methods and norms of political representation had at least two consequences. The rehearsals, performances, and the cultural festivals Jana Sanskriti members organized, gave people reason to build relations of cooperation rather than relations of competition and division historically nourished by party political rule and market relations. Second, these new methods and norms of political representation prevailed over people's historical marginalization from the project of constructing what development should mean. Over time this meant that people found ways to render unsustainable, unrealizable, and indefensible some of the fundamental and unquestioned norms of patriarchy and neo-liberal development.

Finally, people learn how to and teach others how to commit themselves to living new commitments offstage (see Mohan 2004, forthcoming). For example, Far from being ephemeral and individualistic expressions of suppressed views, Jana Sanskriti's social movement, combining cultural and political representation *of* and *by* landless labourers, has proved transformative. By redistributing the means of representation, Jana Sanskriti's social movement transforms the meaning and potential of "representation" where people not only claim pre-scripted rights, they script the rights evaded by the present historical conjuncture.

From Alienation to Healthy Culture

The first sub-section in the final part of this essay gives an ethnographic account of one Jana Sanskriti's member's negotiation of alienation in the workplace. The second sub-

section describes a community effort and uses the social context of a place to animate the claim that Jana Sanskriti creates human beings who collectively build a healthy culture.

Culture Travels with Potatoes

The point I have made earlier in this essay about rural-urban divide should not be interpreted to mean that there are no existing connections – there are urban markets, development initiatives do penetrate the countryside, and folk culture is taken into the city for urban cultural festivals. This did not stop people from questioning the character of these connections, which kept secure the experiential divide between rural and urban subjects, separating the *bhadralok* from the *chotolok* (small person; of low status – simultaneously a class- and rural-based definition). Landless labourers in rural areas are forced to migrate because of the high levels of rural unemployment. Those most in need of money find themselves working under the Dickensian conditions. Apart from seeing it as an unavoidable source of jobs and survival, migration was considered undesirable. Not just because people preferred employment in rural areas, closer to homes and communities, but also because the insecure, risky, exploitative cash culture of urban jobs were antithetical to what people defined as healthy culture.

West Bengal recently reformulated its farm policy. After many years of policy and planning which aimed at protecting middle-level peasantry in West Bengal from an unfettered onslaught of privatization and profit, the CPM has recently hastened its pursuit of liberal reform in the agri-business sector. The farm policy proposition further underscores a historical trend in the Communist government's coalitional agenda of uniting rich and poor farmers while pursuing policies that favour the former. This policy reformulation is crucial to this story because of how agricultural labourers who migrated to work in potato storage units negotiated the demands of reproducing their lives.

I juxtapose the recent reformulations in farm policy with the experience, dilemmas, and decisions of those who work in some of the potato storage units and export-processing units for which the state government is providing renewed support. In 2000, the CPM government of West Bengal employed the management consultant firm, McKinsey and Company Inc. to undertake a study of agricultural and industrial production potential in West Bengal. Based on the directives of the consultancy, the Chief Minister circulated a proposal for agricultural and industrial reform in June 2002. The document suggested encouragement for building food processing zones and instituting contract farming. The new farm policy proposal was rejected as “anti-farmer” by allies of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), especially the Forward Bloc (FB) and Communist Party of India (CPI). The proposal is in the process of being redrafted. Despite the fact that the farm bill is on hold, on July 1st, 2002 *The Statesman* reported that the government had employed a firm called Mecon to do a feasibility study of constructing food parks in Malda and Durgapur (*The Statesman*, 1st July, 2002). This proposal came from the horticulture and food-processing department which had already set up export processing units for pineapple, *lichi*, and potato in various districts

in the state. If successfully rephrased, the new farm policy will normalize a trend that is at present specific to a few export commodities like potato.³

While the West Bengal government has done a great deal to improve irrigation and rice production in the countryside it is constrained by the need to rejuvenate its “sick” industrial sectors. The agri-business initiatives set priorities not on food security and hunger in the state so much as the revenues from export and employment generation through industry.⁴ The West Bengal population sorely needs employment opportunities and a make-over in the industrial sector. The conditions of such employment are however inhumane to say the least, but this does not appear to concern a reputedly ‘progressive’ government that claims to be a champion of the most depressed classes. The unemployed population must be placed at the service of agri-business if West Bengal is to catch up with the rest of India’s liberalizing efforts.

The working class experience in rural Bengal seen from this structural level appears to be at the service and mercy of the machinations of warring interests of its union leaders, central and state policy makers, and politicians. Consider now, Yudhistir Kaniara’s experience working in the potato storage units and his words of resolve never to return.

In the cold storage, the work is – lot of money in very little time. There is a 5 storey building. You have to carry bags weighing 60 kg up a ladder to the top of the building. You have to work from 7 am to 10 p.m. Daily earnings are sometimes Rs. 70, sometimes 100, 120 at times. But they deduct the food expenses.

It is very risky because there are no proper safe ladders. There are two sticks, set up against the building parallel to each other. At regular intervals there are small notches. In the notches are placed horizontal pieces of wood. So when you are climbing you have to be very careful. If you step too much to one side, you will fall all the way down.

Another very risky thing is that if a labourer on top of the ladder drops his heavy bag, then all the others who are on the ladder below him will get hurt and fall. Yes, I have seen it happen. There are many men on the ladder, one after another. (*Shows the rows with his hands*). So if any one of them makes a mistake all the others have to suffer. Or, if any one of

³ Since I wrote the chapter of my dissertation on which this essay is based, the farm bill has been passed with a crucial amendment against bringing contract farming to the Bengal countryside. Explicitly denying the influence of McKinsey’s suggestions, the West Bengal government passed the policy of promoting agri-business in Bengal.

⁴ The proposal on food processing has the support of the Central government which increased its budget allocation for food processing by Rs. 400 crores projecting a 10% growth in a sector whose present growth rate is 2%. The clincher in the report is the rationale that Brazil has 87% of its food under food processing and India’s figure for the same is a dismal 2% (which, the argument goes encourages 35% of the food in the country to be wasted). In the very same report it is stated that the West Bengal government will give land to private entrepreneurs to set up food parks which will service needs in Europe, (rather than feed the hungry in India). The promise for West Bengal is in terms of increasing employment since ‘It is expected that about 54,000 people get employment when 29 food parks are set up’ (The Statesman, 1st July, 2002). Although these policies of industrializing agricultural production have run their tragic course in other parts of the world, these are the new visions for a West Bengal keen on cleaning up its image of a hostile and undisciplined, union-torn environment with no work culture capable of supporting private investment.

them is taking a little time, all the others have to wait on the ladder with the bags on their back.

How many bags do you have to carry to earn Rs. 120?

There is no fixed rate. The rule with the potato cold storage is that you have to fill up one store in 10-15 days. So one has to work from 8 in the morning till 10 at night. So you have to carry these potato bags, each weighing about 60 kg. And climb up these makeshift ladders upto 50 feet high. If any one person falls or slips, all the others also fall. Sometimes while falling, if a leg gets stuck in the ladder, it can even break. I have seen it happen. What happened to me is that I hurt my knee very badly. Even then I continued to work for about 4-5 days. After that I just could not work. So I stayed back. But there was no one to look after me, not even to ask me how I am, no one to help me walk. They all went off to work. I just lay there in pain, crying. Then I decided to come back home. No, they didn't pay me because I had not completed my quota. They gave me my bus fare.

Yudhistir Kaniara explained later that this was one of the most de-humanising experiences of his life, one which he has sworn never to go back to even if it means that he and his family would have to starve. In a context of low wage rates, meagre landholdings, and the few job opportunities in Kaniara's village, potato stores were the source of quick money that could enable families to survive the crucial months. Yudhistir is amongst the poorest in the Jana Sanskriti group. His experience and his words of resolve to never go back to that kind of work embody a resistance to the present government's policies to promote food-processing units and the way of life and work it legitimises. Note that it is not just the cash and physical conditions of work that make the experience de-humanising. When he says "But there was no one to look after me, not even to ask me how I am, no one to help me walk. They all went off to work" he offers an evaluation of what these alienating working conditions mean in terms of the destruction of what is human in relationships. Yudhistir objects to a policy decision that promotes de-humanizing working conditions and the state's implicit evaluation embodied in such a policy that the people who work in these conditions have nothing much to lose.

Jana Sanskriti members routinely and publicly narrated stories about Yudhistir. His choices and decisions in certain situations were held up as ideals. Yudhistir had become a powerful standard of measure where the logic was something like: if Yudhistir as the poorest had refused to give in to the money factor, 'x' could certainly afford to resist working in potato stores. Moral standards played an active role in everyday judgements about where people chose to work and whether the general level of well-being in their household justified such a choice. A household that could not justify its pursuit of money with demonstrable need was open to being construed as "greedy" and a wilful agent of commercialisation. These everyday moral sanctions played an important role in the offstage process of fighting the unhealthy and alienating commercial culture differently critiqued onstage.

"The success of the performance is tied to the neighbourhood's honour."

In contrast to the short-lived development interventions, the exploitative and instrumental relations with urban markets and employers, and the corrupt and fleeting relations with party politicians, Jana Sanskriti seemed to people to be part of their landscape. Satyaranjan Pal described the difference between commercial performances brought to rural areas by urban

entertainment companies in search of post-harvest cash and Jana Sanskriti productions in his village, Digambarpur in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal:

There it is all ready and you go and sit. The *jatra* begins, you exchange a few common greetings, eat a bit of *muri* (puffed rice), and leave. And what is it here?⁵ A call goes out when it is located in the neighbourhood (*para*). The *jatra* party arrives first thing in the morning, they have probably trained for days in some neighbouring village, employed men and women for the performance. When they arrive the neighbourhood kids will be asked to go and immediately spread out the mats (*madurs*) so they can sit and rest their tired feet. Most of the time there is no question of money. People come spontaneously and help in setting up the evening's performance. The success of the performance is tied to the neighbourhood's honour (*maan*).

The *Jatra* performance I saw in Digambarpur organized by Jana Sanskriti was practiced for nights on end with tensions rising high and admonitions growing in severity as the final day drew near. The whole process of preparation on the day of the performance was a production. The preparation is part of the performance because the aim of *Masanta Parab* is to bring the community together in producing and celebrating cultural engagement. I joined others to watch how five men turned the inanimate rows of bamboo into the scaffold for the grand stage. Once the 'ugly' interior had been covered with coloured cloth a proud Deepak asked me, sweat still dripping from his brow: "How does it look?" By mid-afternoon the tea stall by the river had relocated its services by the side of the stage ready to serve the tired, and those with insatiable appetites for tea like Sanjoy Ganguly and me.

As usual the Pal household was the anchor of the production that evening. They would be cooking the meals for the *jatra* party that day. The kitchen area was out of bounds for all non-productive hangers on like me and the children. By dusk, the generator powering the floodlights and mikes onstage also brought the strange glow of a tubelight in the ordinarily oil lamp-lit kitchen area in anticipation of the prolonged night. Stories of Prabhati *boudi's* famed obsession with *jatra* were familiar to me. If the title of a particular *jatra* caught her imagination (as did "A Stitched-Up Bharat"⁶) she would save money, finish her work early, gather some *muri* in the *aanchal* (long, loose end) of her sari and walk hours across fields to watch the all-night production, and return at dawn to start her morning ritual of washing the floors of the house with cow dung. She enthusiastically told me the storyline of *jatras* she had seen, adding her interpretation of the moral of the story: 'Can you imagine such a thing? - Families where the sons don't even pay 200 rupees for a parent who needs an operation. This kind of thing is after all happening today.' That day I would not have dared to disobey her instructions to everyone to eat well before the production (or afterwards with the actors) so that they would not interrupt her during the performance and asked to be served food.

⁵ Jatra is a popular folk form of theatre in West Bengal.

⁶ Bharat is the name for India, given in a Hindu epic poem which has religious status and significance in contemporary India.

Women in Digambarpur are customarily required to abide by certain norms of Hindu *pardah*. Work takes them outside the boundaries of their homes for very specific tasks, mostly in service of their own household. Only the poorer households are compelled to have their women work in other people's homes and fields. The economic status of a household however does not fully explain the hesitation over sending women to work in other people's homes. Tied in with financial need is male honour in the sense that it reflects on a man's ability to provide for his family if he has to send his wife out for work. In the context of these norms, and despite the fact that theatre does not service any household financial need, Jana Sanskriti has been able to persuade families to send their women to meetings and rehearsals where they would be seen onstage with men from other households. The fact that some women in Digambarpur act on the Jana Sanskriti stage is testimony to a community's belief that Jana Sanskriti is not engaged in 'bad culture' even though Jana Sanskriti as an urban middle-class initiative is bound to be constructed as an element of 'the modernized outside' and thus in tenuous relation to 'traditional' forms of authority and rule within villages. The journey to such a reputation is a slow and arduous one marked by contention and alliance. In concluding this essay, I describe one story which highlights how Jana Sanskriti has come to be tied in with the history of Digambarpur in people's memory and perception.

In Digambarpur, it took 17 years of an evolving and situated practice of community-building for people to identify *Masanta Parab* (the end-of-month festivals with Jatra, Gaajan, and Jana Sanskriti performances) as a key means of bringing people in the village together. This statement has a special significance in Digambarpur's recent history since the village had been divided into two feuding groups because of a conflict in the village centred around a piece of land upon the premises of a Kali temple. I heard many versions of one side of this story. Through an act of deceit one group in the village registered the building under the category of a 'club' rather than as a temple. The point of conflict was that "Naming it a club created grounds for exclusive membership whereas anyone can go to a temple" (Deepak Pal). Overnight, this act made for a tension-filled environment in the village, one where women "felt unsafe to walk around even during the day, let alone at night" (Alaka Bera). "It created a very unhealthy environment in our midst, meaning there was no healthy way of solving the dispute. People would not talk to each other" (Amulya Pal). "The two neighbourhoods would hold two separate Kali *pujas* just across the road from each other" (Giribala Giri). Jana Sanskriti's presence and involvement improved the situation.

They tried to negotiate and when that did not work so well, they basically organized *Masanta Parab*. And there was a committee on which they put people from both sides of the feud. This way they had to cooperate and talk to each other. The pride and happiness that came from these cultural events gradually brought people together and they started eating at each other's homes again.

Prabhathi Pal

When you have collaborated to produce something that has brought people happiness it is not so easy for politicians to incite you into violence against each other. You will think twice about stabbing someone who has become your friend. And this is the power of culture.

Mahesh Pal

While political parties take people apart, what is our work? We bring people together.

Paresh-*da*

These words attest to the conflict as well as the effort to unite, cooperate, and reconcile differences. These words are part of not just Digambarpur's memory but also Jana Sanskriti's. It was formative of the present Digambarpur community as much the Jana Sanskriti community. The birth of *Masanta Parab* is inextricably linked with the process of scripting healthy culture which in turn is now tied in with the history of Digambarpur. What healthy culture might be is of course different for different people. For women like Alaka, a healthy culture is not one where women fear walking outside their homes. A healthy culture is not one where you can't share a meal with neighbours. Nor is it one where the same neighbourhood holds two separate Kali pujas. Finally a healthy culture is not one where people of the same community are divided on the basis of access to property or political affiliation. But a healthy culture for an organization of urban initiative that is aimed at addressing and intervening in issues of representation does entail being around rural subjects to hear their constructions of marginalization, their critiques of inequality and asymmetry, and their vision for the future. A healthy culture and a progressive political practice in this case entails transgressing the experiential divide that separates rural from urban subjects.

Masanta Parab offers a space for people to come together to enjoy cultural performances. It provides people with a monthly occasion to wear their better saris, to laugh, to interact outside of work or political gain. As a cultural institution it brings people together, which is a fundamental, even if understated, fight against the alienating experiences in workplaces such as the potato storage unit Yudhistir worked in. *Masanta Parab* is a cultural institution and practice which is a result of people's engagement with the project of constructing a community and environment as *they* would like it to be – transcending the divisions and feuds that politicians, NGO activists, fathers, and older members of the community have engaged in.

This kind of cultural life bears a radically different relation and imprint in people's lives from the kind that mark alienating policies, instrumental party politics, short-lived relations with urban markets, and commercialized folk performances. *Masanta Parab* relies for fun, funds, and cooperation on the community itself unlike the commercialized productions. In comparison with the deeply historical and daily experience of alienation in the spheres of production and representation, Jana Sanskriti produces a nurturing community where people draw on their power and their marginalization to build relations with each other onstage and offstage, and construct a healthy culture for the future. In this powerful effort, theatre of the oppressed is the catalytic, kinetic art that holds the possibility for transformation. In Jana Sanskriti's hands, this theatrical method has produced a legitimate and powerful social movement that fights alienation.