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The Theatre of Oppressed: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the theatre of oppressed in India and its role to bring a social change by bringing up the shortcomings of the society. They give space for people to think and act in order to bring a certain change. My analysis is based on how the organization like Jana Sanskriti, which is West Bengal based, deals with the issues of violence against women, political corruption, poverty, in rural Bengali context, these are the issues that plague all nations specifically discussing India. The selected plays which I will be discussing in this paper are “Gayer Panchali” (1985), “Sarama”, “The Brick Factory”, “Where We Stand”, and “Perspective”. I will be analyzing in my paper how they become instrumental to fight against the oppression and to transform the society that gives rise to those oppressions.

Keywords: Oppression, society, India, West Bengal, Women, politics, corruption, transformation, change.

“Theatre of Oppressed” gained significance from the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. He brought the Theatre of Oppressed in focus in 1970s, first in Brazil and later in Europe. He was influenced by Paulo Freire who was a Portuguese theorist and an educationist. His best and the most influential work was Pedagogy of the Oppressed. His technique was to use theatre as a tool to bring a sort of social and political change by protesting against the radical rule of the government, by bringing in notice the follies of the government as well as the expectations of the common people. In the Theatre of Oppressed, the audience becomes active, they explore and analyse in order to take a step forward to transform the reality in which they are living. Augusto Boal was a great supporter of using interactive techniques in the context of theatre. His ideas were considered as “a new media perspective”. His ideas got even more advanced with the passage of time or rather in the modern-day context. The creation of the Theatre of the

Oppressed is largely based on the idea of dialogue and interaction between the spectators and the performers. Hence these ideas have served as a strong framework for the development and evolution of even more stronger ideas.

In the same way in India, Sanjoy Ganguly took the initiative of bringing “The Theatre of the Oppressed” as a tool for people in order to bring a social change, in West Bengal during 1985. This was the time when a lot of political actions were taking place. This forum started working with the rural context with the contemporary regional Leftist government, that had the reputation of working for the rural poor since 1977. Since long time, the government’s success in elections was enough to put a full stop on all sorts of doubts regarding the government’s mode of rule and representation but unfortunately soon, the Leftist government got involved with the large-scale of land expropriations and shooting the rural protestors who were fighting for the land acquisitions in 2006-2007, which very categorically recognizes the problems of the political representation of government in West Bengal. The protests, violent repression of people and the heightened political drama in the state definitely employs a question mark on the basic ideology of the Leftist Government, of working for the rural poor, who were the major vote-bank for them. Hence at that time, the organization name *Jana Sanskriti* played the major role in expressing the doubts of the people and highlight the dominant spaces of political representation in West Bengal for the last three decades. The organization aims to work in order to make use of theatre to think, reimagine, and reconstruct ‘development’ and ‘democracy’ in India. Presently their activism and performance have gained national and international significance.

The organization has now established itself as one such Forum for expressing doubts, debating normative assumptions about the electoral politics, and organizations of political collectivity. They use theatre as an alternative medium for the representation of the politics of the state. Sanjoy Ganguly took the initiative of working in this prospect. It was an act of provocation and exchange. Sanjoy Ganguly started his journey by working in the rural areas outside Kolkata during 1980s as a political activist, he had no significant experience in theatre at that time. As he describes in an essay in Boon and Platow’s *Theatre as Empowerment* and in his own book, *Jana Sanskriti, Forum Theatre and Democracy in India* , he was quite aware of the limitations of propaganda and the available possibilities of the performance traditions as a medium for the articulation of issues affecting people and make them aware of their own talents and resources.

His early plays were made together with the people from the community like agricultural labourers, daily-wage workers,-as a part of the life of the community. In this way, *Jana Sanskriti* is much more than just a 'theatre company'. It began with a small circle of Ganguly and his wife Sima and later grew to become what is now the 'core team' of performers. Together with this, the performers themselves also grew other performing teams in their local areas and later it rose to form the performing groups from other Indian states as well. The groups work on the principle of the life of the area and respond to issues which arise and around which the structure of the play develops by bringing up suitable discussions and appropriate actions. The performers of these plays are also social and political activists.

The plays which I will be discussing in this paper are adapted to suit local circumstances. Augusto Boal believed in employing a neutral party to be at the center of the proceedings, such an individual is usually known as the "facilitator" whereas from the Boal's point of view this role is referred as the "joker", it is with reference to the neutrality of the Joker card in a deck of playing cards. This character takes the responsibility for the logistics of the process and ensures a fair proceeding, this character has no right to intervene or comment upon the content of the performance. In the same manner *Jana Sanskriti* also employs 'joker' who guides the subsequent working of key scenes and specific moments of the play. The intervention of "joker" in Ganguly's play transforms spectators into 'spectators' and 'given circumstance' into deconstruction and debate about possible change. The plays are always open to all kinds of feedback. Ganguly describes as involving spectators in reflection leading to rational collective action and a culture of dialogue which resists the monologue of social and political hegemony, makes these plays 'collective' or collaborative acts in a very real sense. Partly because of their 'unfinished' nature and because, ideally, they are made in response to specific local issues, these plays represent the archetypes of the kinds of 'oppression' faced by the rural people and in later cases often including the urban participants. The plays presented in this paper are also fascinating in terms of the ways in which they work dramatically and the kinds of scenario they represent. From a sociopolitical point of view they offer insight into many of the fundamental issues affecting the life of 'the masses' in India today that is corruption, patriarchy, dowry, exploitation of workers, hypocrisy and manipulation by political parties. From a dramaturgical point of view they present an original blend of structures and strategies by which these issues are foregrounded, sharpened, given symbolic form, allowing them to be grasped as theatrical images and thus interrogated and

‘played with’ by receivers. Key aspects of Ganguly’s compositional and directorial practice emerge from the unique combination of script and diagrams: scenes begin and end with striking group images of oppression; dialogic exchange and representational action is framed by intensely evocative folk-based singing; sequences are divided by energetic dance patterns. This framing and sectioning, similar to that used by Brecht but in fact no stranger to many Indian forms (Ganguly often says that Brecht would have been Indian if he had not been born in Germany), breaks the emotional and narrative tension, invites a different and critical perspective; it is mirrored positionally by the actors not involved in scenes, who are distributed around the sides of the playing space, itself framed by sticks arranged on the ground. One of Ganguly’s first decisions was to play on the same level as and in almost immediate contact with the spectators. This choice is paradigmatic for the operation of his theatre practice, which rests on and is nourished by the respect it gives to the intelligence of performers and spectators working together to examine and shape the circumstances of their lives. Augusto Boal regarded *Jana Sanskriti*’s work as perhaps the best example in the world outside his native Brazil of the essential tenets of Forum and Image theatre; and Ganguly is one of the leading players in the international network of Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners.

Jana Sanskriti combines indigenous cultural forms with Brazilian theatre director, Augusto Boal’s “theatre of oppressed” methods which translate Paulo Friere’s “pedagogy of the oppressed” into theatrical techniques. Sanjoy Ganguly, in his plays has brought all different sorts of stories, experiences, and political commentary that emerged through various theatre workshops and political mobilization across West Bengal. These plays are a product of individual efforts together with collective creativity and critical thinking. These plays employ the politics of representation. Jana Sanskriti considers classical and folk theatre very valuable because they represent complex characters like that of Gods, humans, nature, and kings with all sorts of follies and foibles together with the powers and their concerned agencies. The complexity of these characters gives rise to critical thinking among the audience because it disables outright empathy for any one character, heroic, or otherwise. The complexity of characters and the challenges people face in choosing moral action become the grounds for constructing the moral of the story in indigenous cultural practices. The peculiarity of Jana Sanskriti is that they bring together methods of representation to the extent that they are fundamentally in sync as suitable modes of constructing political struggle.

The major goal of the “theatre of the oppressed” performances is to construct spect-actors that is active and engaged spectators) who will think critically and collectively about representations within plays, re-script these plays to represent reality in their own terms, and rehearse social change collectively. Here, the making of the play is a metaphor for the making of social relations. This form of theatre teaches us how to see a world of seemingly inevitable social relations as malleable social relations that constitute a world of possibility. While theatre of the oppressed has been appropriated, used, and abused in numerous contexts, the appeal of the “theatre of the oppressed” methods for Jana Sanskriti cannot simply be tied to the history of decentralized state and development. In Jana Sanskriti’s practice, these methods are not used as depoliticized tools in service of neoliberal development and a state shrinking from its social welfare responsibilities. The “Theatre of the Oppressed” is appealing to Jana Sanskriti because it is a contemporary form that resonates with the history of power, form, and representation residing in indigenous cultural practices familiar to the audience.

In the plays, performance, and political actions of Jana Sanskriti questions the ideological divisions between fiction and reality. It represents the strategic fictions we live offstage as contributing to the reality that confronts us as if it were an immovable structure on and offstage. Further, they combat the limits of onstage critiques by making normative changes offstage to dramatize possibilities and alternative forms of social relations. Jana Sanskriti disrupts the fundamental ideological division between fiction and reality as a vehicle for disrupting other ideological divisions that reify structures and norms such as state and society, gender and class, as well as secular and non-secular social action. The theories of performance have focused on everyday performativity which are concerned with the daily acts that are disloyal to norms and structures together with the power of staged performance which simply means that onstage acting that presents actions that are disloyal to norms and structures. Hence Jana Sanskriti provides us the lens with which we can place staged performativity in relation to everyday performativity in the making and unmaking of power relations.

The first play which I will be discussing or rather analyzing in this paper is Gayer Panchali (Song of the Village). It was written in 1986. It was the first play of Jana Sanskriti. The actors of this play were almost entirely agricultural workers. Few people did have some land still they had to rely on working on other people’s land for 80% of their needs. This play is a critique

of the nature of political society in formation in rural Bengal as seen through the lens of marginalized farmers and agricultural labourers. It was written by drawing vignettes of people's experiences and lives, as rural citizens to reflect on the elitism and corruption within organizations of political collectivity and representation in rural Bengal. This play questioned the formation of political society in rural West Bengal long before the current crisis of hegemony got manifested through the conflict over land acquisition for industrial development. This play supported offstage mobilizations for the Right to Work in villages. The chorus of villagers brings up their demands into focus that, they want "to live in the village, to work in the village, to cultivate a field of our own. From village to village, they wanted jobs to enable their right to survive throughout the year".

The play focuses on high rural unemployment, the phenomenon of seasonal migration, and its attendant problems of rural households. This play consists of ten scenes, each bringing up their problems one by one by talking of how they are oppressed in a musical pattern together with pyramid formation, in order to express their sentiments in the forefront. The first scene of the play talks about the heritage of rural people, they are blessed with lots of land and greenery, which is very productive as well. They express the fertility of the land by singing that "Flowers in every branch". They say that they are blessed with grains and flowers. They call these lands as their mother. The productivity of their land is so beautiful that even the honey bee comes and sleeps on the flower by getting intoxicated by the fragrance. They express the depth of their crisis by saying that "They are alive at the mouth of death", when the interlocutor asks about them. The scene ends at the slogan of the chorus which says that "They want to live in the village, to work in the village, to cultivate a field of their own". They are exploited by working in mills, factories, fields, and farms of the rich people. They represent their unity by forming different pyramids, the synchronization between their actions represents the echo of their voice unanimously.

The second scene of the play talks about the maneuvering of the capitalists and the politicians. They talk about how they are caught in the vicious cycle of loan and debt, which does not leave them till their last breath. Here they criticize the Integrated Rural Development Program, which was initiated in 1980 as a nation-wide poverty alleviation intervention to be

disbursed through local government institutions known as panchayats. They tell the audience, how this program contributes towards their exploitation.

The third scene talks about how the politicians manipulate everything to fulfill their own vested interests. The conversation between the boastful and arrogant Romoni and the poor and unfortunate Sanatan tells us how the politicians and the rich moneylenders exploit the poor people of the village in the name of government schemes, which aim at alleviating poverty. Even the panchs also speak in the favor of their own interests completely ignoring the underprivileged. The fourth scene talks about the conversation between Kalam, a young man with an old man and a woman, which signifies the all sections of society are equally effected. They also talk about how politicians go to their doorstep of their poor voters with alluring promises but unfortunately they end up in an illusion, further oppressing them. The politician is shown to be proud of the powers he hold, he says that the democracy is in hands, this shows that here democracy is no less than a dictatorship were only the powerful and the influential is happy. The fifth scene of the play is present between a person disguised as snake and the snake-charmer. Here, after a few rounds of dancing on the tunes of the snake-charmer but later the snake refuses to continue and protests against the snake-charmer by striking towards him. He sings a song which says “We want work, we want work”. He explains his sentiments by saying that, the modernization of agriculture is having adverse effects on these workers and they are losing their jobs and are further more exploited and oppressed. In the sixth scene, Sankirtan leaves to Calcutta for work in order to earn money leaving behind his father and his wife Yamuna. Due to over-exploitation of these poor laborers in the city, Sankirtan succumbs to death, they criticize the health facilities in the city, as they offer no help or rather no humanity to the poor. In the seventh scene the audience is represented how the people from all age groups slowly succumb due to lack of health, education, shelter, work and food. A child dies because he couldn’t get polio vaccine at the right time, another dies due to lack of saline in the hospital. Even the doctors are not empathetic towards the poor. In the eighth scene we are made aware how these poor people get locked up by the police in a fake crime case and treated in the most inhuman behaviour possible. The next thing about which they talk about is how the women are biggest sufferers in this scenario, they are treated as commodity and if they dared to raise their voice against the injustice, they too meet the same fate like men that is death. In the ninth and the tenth scene of this play the actors began to criticize the administration, they tell the audience that the politicians are only

concerned with their own vested interests, they have nothing to do with the poor. They compete with the opposite party in the most brutal way possible. Later, in the last scene they expressed their sentiments by saying that the amount of money our government spends on the defense projects can very well eradicate their poverty. They are nothing without work, they need proper facilities to live, rather to even breathe, the people are dying every second. This is a serious issue which throws light upon how people ignore humanity in this modern world. They also express that these workers are the backbone of the society and they are the ones who are being exploited. This behavior represents the ungratefulness of people.

The second play which I will be discussing in this paper is *Sarama* which was written in 1992. It was scripted and directed by Sanjoy Ganguly. It contains eight scenes altogether and leaves the audience with a question in the end. The major peculiarity of the play is that, here the actors do not present themselves as educators, rather they have attempted to build a progressive relationship between actors and the audience. *Sarama* is the protagonist of this play, who is an ordinary woman yet does not remain in the confinements of the social norms. She is incredibly courageous and self-confident. Hence she is completely unafraid of speaking the voice of her soul. She is raped because of a woman's extra-ordinary audacity. The whole crux of the play is that the people are completely away from the idea of humanity and empathy. Instead of giving a sort of emotional support or rather empathizing with this woman, her rape becomes an occasion for a political battle between the ruling and the oppositional party keeping *Sarama* at the center. Nobody cares about the trauma which *Sarama* is going through, where on one hand *Sarama's* love leaves her and on the other hand the media of the state can't stop torturing her in every way possible. The accused rapists are recognized as the anti-social elements nurtured by the ruling party, they are known as the muscle men who do the job of harassing people and forcing them to vote in order to vote for their leader. *Sarama* is actually a victim of the "criminalization of the politics". Although *Sarama* has the support of a number of non-political organizations so she had the strength to speak. The time depicted in the play exactly precedes election campaigns that is why the rape gets particular attention. *Sarama* does never completely break down. She does break down when her lover *Adheer* who had previously promised her with marriage leaves her and calls her a slum woman. This was the most sensitive moment for *Sarama*. Each day of life becomes oppressive for her. The fate of the people is like a long walk through a dark tunnel, their life is without soul, they have dreams but no thinking, they have will but no solutions. After

every act in the beginning of the play the chorus sings that “Mother land, you see it all and yet you are blind. Motherland, you here it all and yet you are mute”.Sarama hums the song composed by Rabindra Nath Tagore and recites a poem by Birendra Chatterjee. She looks for the ray of light to gain some strength whereas in the poem she expresses her sentiments by saying that “Kings come and go, Kings Change, with a red attire on with a blue attire on”. She says that only the name of the authority changes whereas its nature of exploiting the poor remains same.

The last scene of the play is interrupted by a woman who says we are Nirmala Social Service organization in Thane district. She says that we stood with Sarama and helped her financially to move forward with her fight against such heinous crime. Despite having all sorts of support Sarama’s case took ten years to come to its conclusion where the accused were acquitted. She question’s what about those women who have neither economic independence nor social independence, they have to confirm to these sorts of abuses on a regular basis. This is the question brought in the notice of the audience, on what kind of society do they want to develop.

The third play which is also written and directed by Sanjoy Ganguly in 1997 is, The Brick Factory (Ithbhata) . This play consists of three scenes. The idea of this play has been taken from Sarama, where the woman question about the plight and fate of the tribal women who do not have access to such non-profit and non-political organization. She question the authority that what about those tribal women who are neither economically nor socially independent. This play proves itself to be beyond the limits of the word empowerment. These women tell us about the challenges of survival. The women of Santal tribe, an old tribe of West Bengal, worked as contractual labors in a brick factory. This play shows how deeply patriarchy is rooted in the contractual labor system of the Santal tribe. Within these extraordinary constraints people figure out how to survive. But it has to be said that male-female relationships among them are no better than among classes better off than them. They have not been able to come together to fight for their collective survival. This play also brings up the issue of “equal pay for women”. It tells the story of Phulmoni, and the way how she is exploited by the brick factory owner. The owner of the brick factory befools his workers by making them work for more than eight hours. He makes a fake promise of giving them extra wage for making them work for extra hours. Later, the owner of the brick factory very conveniently deceives them, he does not give them the overtime wage and of course forget about equal pay. He also exploits Phulmoni physically in order to

satisfy his sexual urges. Phulmoni retorts his efforts but unfortunately could not stand by her words. The owner used to threaten her depriving her of all her comforts and her husband, she had no other option but to succumb to the owner's demands. The song which the actors sing has these line "The dark of the night, Is behind us now," ,these line express their sentiments by saying that the dark times of following them and they are quite afraid of it. They are scared that their doomsday is near. Finally in the end of the play, the owner is excused very conveniently of all his crimes whereas Phulmoni and her husband Madan, being the poor, the oppressed, the exploited are punished for no faults of their own. The power of authority plays the major role in this aspect. It also criticizes the lack of unity among the workers.

Jana Sanskriti's is distinctive in their efforts of bringing up multi-dimensional constraints of the society. Brick Factory is one such example of the value in persisting with an everyday engagement in dramatizing a "dead end" rather than persisting only when there are recognizable signs that what is going on is a "rehearsal of revolution" (Boal 1979).The play Brick Factory also served as reflexive reminder to Jana Sanskriti that all though "economic empowerment is not enough" (Ganguly 2004), radical re-structuring of economic power remains a fundamental site of struggle.

This form of constructing collectivity grounded across multiple geographies of struggle allows Jana Sanskriti's regional mobilisations to take on trans local relevance together with the pedagogical force.

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