

CHAPTER 6

Her Stories – Otherwise Told : Scope of Alternative Viewpoints on Women’s Issues in the Contemporary Bengali Theatre.

6.1. INTRODUCTION

Group Theatre's effort towards building dramatic production around women's issues has, therefore, remained an area of ambiguity in West Bengal. While there was a genuine underlying demand within the Group Theatre movement to replace the patriarchal ethos and modes of operation inside organizations and drawing conclusions to theatrical production as both this aspects of Group Theatre movement was found to be highly influenced by the Leftist political bias during the early phase of Left Front rule in the state, surprisingly enough, when the influence of globalised market economy, in the latter half of the Left Front rule, quite swiftly washed out the Leftist political prejudice in the Group Theatre culture, and more women with great spirit came to join the camps of theatre, formed their own associations to build theatre of their own, they simply rejected any conformity to feminism to such an extent that they denounced any identity in the limits of 'women director'.

In my opinion, they were caught into the same proverbial trap that 'theatre is a director's game altogether' which, definitely, maintains a hierarchy within the organization of theatre, the rout to patriarchy, again. These powerful directors with brilliant creative enterprise were behaving like 'masculine' females within the group while building theatre. The power equations in the way the talk, the way they conceive an idea, the way they improvise, the suggestions they create through dramatic performances and conclusions they use to draw was quite similar to the one most feminist would complain to be detrimental in the previous milieu where the role of women were being marginalized.

Parimal Ghosh, however, pointed out that such a 'crisis' is basically fall into an area of concern he brands 'vadrlok culture and politics' and the commons remained at distance to observe. Gradual decay in the middle-class audience from the Group Theatre ventures, took the so called movement to a stage of vulnerability altogether. [Ghosh, Parimal; "Where Have All the 'Bhadraloks' Gone?" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 January 2004] Then, an obvious question appear, here, has Group Theatre productions during the Left Front rule in West Bengal failed to produce any serious social impact under the powerful influence of cross currents of Left ideology and imperatives of globalised market economy ? Before resorting to any serious conclusion, I would refer to an alternative theatre perspective that is striving to resolve women's issues through theatre activism following Augusto Boal's much discussed methodology of '*Theatre of the Oppressed*'. This has been identified as an apparatus of psycho-treatment of the weaker section of the population by making their issue public and expanding the scope for audience to interact rather than remaining static at their seats breaking the traditional barriers between the actor and viewers.

In *Forum Theatre* as the core of *Theatre of the Oppressed* designed, advocated and championed by Brazilian theorist & theatre practitioner Augusto Boal, performance is never limited to the proscenium. In this methodology of building theatre members of the team, by themselves, choose, build, and describe a social predicament from the experience of their everyday life. Combined with an aesthetic decoration the production is then taken before an audience who are to find a way out to the problem shown. Inactive spectators then become occupied 'spect-actors'. Spect-actors are then taken to the acting arena to enact and show the solutions they offer after debating with skilled activists on the practicability and achievability of the way out the spect-actors have suggested. Thus several individuals freely and in public slot in to tackle a social problem that has hitherto remained without facing a protest and breaks the profound silence to empower the victims to deny what they have long accepted as if a ill fate. This endeavor slowly but surely insinuate promises for emancipation from that subjugation in real life.

6.2. WOMEN-CENTRIC APPROACH OF THEATRE AND THE THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* techniques fundamentally concentrate on 'oppression'. *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, therefore, intend to draw attention to the varieties of harsh conflicts within society and produce them in dramatic form by which these issues could be argued and examined. The interactive nature of these modus operandi give emphasis to the conversation and exchange of views between the actor and the observers. The involvement of spectators generates the opportunity and leeway of defiance and challenge and the social capacity of victims of oppression to crack the conflicts increases within society.

As Berenice Fisher observed the application of *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a pedagogy in social work by the French and Dutch feminists, she noted that by 1980s *Theatre of the Oppressed* became a welcoming phenomenon in France in the context of family planning movement. Alongside the conventional educational programmes, social help groups used the Forum Theatre technique focusing the subjects like abortion and gynaecological care to empower the women to determine her right to reproduction and struggle against prevailing form of oppression they suffered due to lack of options when they get pregnant. The pedagogy of *Theatre of the Oppressed* also broaden the feminist consciousness in regards to family planning amongst the target population by enhancing their capacity to interact with greater number of women who remain victims of reproductive injustice. [Fisher, B; "*Feminist acts: Women, Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed*" in *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*; J. Cohen-Cruz (ed.); Routledge; New York; 1994]

Ans Pelzer, a sociologist and social activist from Amsterdam in Netherlands also found *The Theatre of the Oppressed* an effective technique of transforming life of those women who remain victim of assaults within their families. At a point of performance both the audience and the performers went beyond their pains to get stronger together and thought out different modes of survival. According to Pelzer,

"If you [the actors] had been through all this and could talk about it and make a play about it, then it must be possible to survive" [Fisher, B; "*Feminist acts: Women, Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed* " in *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*; J. Cohen-Cruz (ed.); Routledge; New York; 1994]. In Netherlands the feminist activists has appropriated *Theatre of the Oppressed* for the similar two purposes alike France; firstly to bring transformation in the life of the women suppressed by social and family maladies by transforming there persona towards activism, and secondly to reach out to further number of women through the activists. As Pelzer observes, *The Theatre of the Oppressed* bestowed an aesthetic opening for women to expose their oppressions. Through this course of action, they develop a stronger will to encounter the oppression they confront and develop the genuine desperation, collectively, to seek way out to their oppressions.

The two distinct schemes of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* has been utilised in two different aspects of addressing the issues of coercion against women by the feminists, so far. While the Forum Theatre technique emphasised on expressing one's experience through dialogue and action that instigate the spect-actors to sensitize the issue and express their opinion to resolve the issue and debate on their suggestion to finalize the conclusion to which they also become a party to social activism in the line they finalised, the Image Theatre scheme is offered where the victims cannot express their subjugation in words, here the body of the performer creates the image of the domination that initiates the interaction and intervention of the audience to make a move towards creating collective solutions. Thus, *Theatre of the Oppressed* in such experiences becomes a consciousness-raising feminist activity. "His (Boal) *theatre of the oppressed* techniques promised to broaden the language of consciousness-raising to include non-verbal and not easily verbalized responses to oppression. His focus on acting seemed to bridge the gap between theory and action. His emphasis on working together to find a way to respond to oppression seemed to support cooperation in an educational setting" [Fisher, B; "*Feminist acts: Women, Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed* " in *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*; J. Cohen-Cruz (ed.); Routledge; New York; 1994]

Cultural, political and economic issues other than the social oppression the women faces is also being addressed through the activism in line of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* which, in turn, seems to be a rich instrument of feminist response and activism through shared experiences, investigations, creative expression and collective solutions. As the *Theatre of the Oppressed* involves manifestation, conversation and decision-making via theatrical prospect, this amounts to the core and substance of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* in terms of designing strategies through 'performance'. The drama, itself does not struggle opposed to domination, it necessitates the intercession of the spectators who become stimulated as characters in a fight against repression. The dogmatic and authoritarian customs that add up to women's oppression are interrupted by the 'performing' act of the spect-actor, through defend against and tussling against the oppression publicized over the acting space or arena. The intrusion of the spect-actor by using her own body and performing tactics reconstitute the oppressive scenario in the script being presented on the stage to conclusive of resistance and retaliation, thus building a course of a radical inner dynamics constituted within performance. [Boal, Augusto; *Legislative theatre : Using performance to make politics*; Routledge; London & New York; 1998]

The interaction between the peer group of performers and the spectators broadens the scope of performance in either side of the acting arena, breaking the conceived wall between the performers and viewers the spectators come to the central stage to demonstrate the way the propose to encounter, fight back or challenge oppression. In this respect, the performance itself then become a metaphor in re-constructing the gender roles. The theatrical form by which the oppressed women learn to challenge or retaliate oppression, then signify the entire course as 'Performance as Resistance' that denounce at once any stereotype understanding of gender.

The *Theatre of the Oppressed* therefore, has the finest attributes to be a feminist project as it proves that the 'gender' is an artificial construct and can be consciously denied once radical stimulations are added to instigate the spirit of opposing the gendered roles sooner it becomes oppressive to an individual. Theatre of the Oppressed has

contributed in both the ways in aesthetics and activism, as a methodology of building theatre and pedagogy of feminist activism as and where required.

6.3. JANASANSKRITI CENTRE OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Ever since 1991, Jana Sanskriti has moved itself extreme from conformist and typical Group Theatre activity to widen the exercise of Forum Theatre to distant and secluded rural areas of the Sunderban region in southern most West Bengal. The journey of Jana Sanskriti started from a petite village named Badu in North 24 Parganas in 1985. Today it has at least 30 protectorate theatre units in West Bengal, mostly in the districts of South and North 24 Parganas and Purulia, 2 each in Tripura and Jharkhand, 1 each in New Delhi and Orissa. The units are active in lower income group populations and tribal localities. Units have also been created in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka. These units get in touch with at least 2,00,000 spectators every year by means of their performances. Augusto Boal recognized, "Jana Sanskriti is the largest and the longest lasting forum theatre operation in the world". [Ganguly, Sanjoy; *Youth and Theatre of the Oppressed*; Palgrave Macmillan publication; New Delhi; 2010] Amongst these units in West Bengal, 9 are solely women participant theatre groups, perhaps there is no single example of theatrical activity at such a grassroots level that existed prior to Jana Sanskriti in India. "Anyone who wants to understand the usefulness of Boal's work and its possibilities, especially when removed from Boal's own projects and from its implementation in a first world context, needs to pay attention to Sanjoy Ganguly and Jana Sanskriti" [Ganguly, Sanjoy; *Jana Sanskriti: Forum Theatre and Democracy in India*; Routledge; New Delhi; 2010]

Since 1991 Jana Sanskriti had the opportunity to work with Augusto Boal, himself, on several openings. Jana Sanskriti was invited to participate in two major International Carnival of Theatre of the Oppressed respectively in Paris (1998) and in Rio de Janeiro (2002). Over three decades and more Jana Sanskriti has dealt with issues of social concern, more specifically, the issues which are troublesome and

detrimental to women and sometimes dangerous for their life, like domestic violence, premature marriage, flesh trade and women trafficking, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment at the workplace, maternal and physical health of woman, primary education, Anti-illegal liquor business, etc. by means of theatre. Since 2004 Jana Sanskriti has also been regularly organizing its festival Forum Theatres named Muktheadhara once in two years.

6.4. PERFORMANCES AND STRATEGIES OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED AT JANA SANSKRITI

"Everyone is aware of such banal facts. But the fact that they are banal does not mean they do not exist. What we have to do with banal facts is to discover – or try to discover – which specific and perhaps original problem is connected with them" [Foucault, Michael; *"The Subject and Power."* in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*; Dreyfus, H. and Rabinow, P. (ed.); The University of Chicago Press; Chicago; 1982]

"Seven Performances and forty six interventions took place while performing a theme on anti-liquor campaign in the initial week of launching the theme at Harinkhola, Bhairabinagar, Bajberia. That indicates the success rate and the power of Theatre of the Oppressed. Since our performances are based on themes that women very often encounter in their regular life, they do react and participate to suggest the way out. We chose to prepare plays on problems that are very much there at the domestic level where women face oppression from near relatives like husband or in-laws or sometimes from the near circles like neighbour or family friends. Women used to keep mum and could not find any escape from such breath-blocking experiences. Sooner they come to interact with our volunteers, they develop a sense of belongingness with us to share their experience. And that is the turning point" said Sanjay Ganguly, the mastermind and the headman of Janasanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed. [Interview with Sanjay Ganguly, Director, Janasanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed, by me; 12-March-2006; Sisir Mancha, Kolkata]

6.4.1. PERFORMING 'VIOLENCE'

Inside the feminist approach 'domestic violence' is the most cruel measures by way of which the patriarchal domination and subjugation of woman within the family is confirmed. Thrashing the wife is common type of domestic violence which is in wide-spread in the society. An investigation of All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (IIHPH) reports in 2006 that the integer of domestic violence cases have been increasing almost 20% during the last five years. In almost all these cases majority of the victim women remain silent. Many of them repent that they are helpless to bear the mental and physical torture. As the fallout of such silent tolerance, large number of women face severe psychological disorders.[*Indian Journal Hygiene and Public Health*; Vol. 2 Issue 2; December, 2006; p. 127]

As per the statistics of National Crime Record Bureau, West Bengal stood in the 2nd position in the country on the basis of recorded case of domestic violence in 2006. For obvious reasons, this is only the tip of the iceberg. In respect of women's death due to dowry demands, West Bengal remained in the 4th position in the country. From 2001 to 2006 the rate of domestic violence has increased upto 80%. In 2001 the registered cases of domestic violence in West Bengal were 3859 which grew upto 6936 in 2006. There has been horrifying increase in the dowry death rate upto 68% by 2006. Whereas in 2001 there were 265 dowry death cases to have recorded, as of 2006 he number almost doubled to reach 446 recorded cases. During 2005, according to NCRB Report, 19 women were murder by their husbands and in-laws and 160 events of domestic violence were recorded at various police stations in the state. According to National Crime Record Bureau, one in two women is the victim of some kinds of domestic violence. [*Report of the National Crime Record Bureau, 2006*; Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India available at ncrb.gov.in/StatPublications/ADSI/ADSI2006/ADSI2006-full-report].

In West Bengal, death for dowry, beating the wife (either in motive or in intoxicated condition), burning the bride, suicide by reason of frustration, regular mental torture and physical malice by husbands or/and in-laws, forced abortion or female

foeticide, female infanticide etc. are the very common types of domestic violence enormously spreading in the society.

Performance : "Vango Noishabdo" [Break the Silence]

Launched:: 28.11.2003, Duration :: 35 minutes, Location :: Domestic Lawn

Theme: Domestic Violence

Characters: Minati (Wife), Kamal (Husband), Chhaya (Mother-in-Law), Pintu (Son), and Ranu (Daughter)

Ranu returns home from the school gleefully as she was praised by her Head Master for securing the top rank in the sent up test for Madhyamik (school final) examination to find her mother, Minati, in the kitchen with a purple eye and bleeding forehead. She comes to know that her grandmother, Chhaya, threw the metal dish in which she has been served the meal, to Minati's forehead as Chhaya found a piece of long black hair in her food. As Ranu was trying to talk to Chhaya on the incident, she rather ordered her to clean the floor where foods were still scattered, instead of going to school. Only then Pintu, the elder brother of Ranu enters home hungry and demands food shouting as he was drunken. Chhaya welcomes her with soft words and tells that all the foods are now gone wasted by his mother and she also offers some puffed rice and coconut to him. He keeps on shouting while Ranu and Malati start cleaning the floor. Here the actors freeze and with a song a narrator appears before the audience to indicate the discrimination on the basis of gender, the worse impacts of country liquor on youth being rampantly sold at villages and emphatically the torture the village woman Minati faced. As the song was over, entered Kamal, the headman of the family. Ranu runs to her father to describe her success in the school, but he is indifferent rather upset due to the huge lose in the selling of crops he grow o local agent. He was anxious how he will be able to repay his debts to the money-lenders. His mother, Chhaya comes to him with a glassful of water to offer and weeps on the misfortune and holds Minati responsible for all these as she indicates her as unlucky and advices Kamal to push her out of home and re-marry. Kamal accepts the proposal although his children were grown up. He then asks for food as he was hungry after a day full of harassment. His mother tells him the same fabricated story that the foods gone wasted. Being angry, Kamal runs to his wife to beat her like creatures. Chhaya joins him. Ranu wants to save her mother, but Pintu locks her in a room as he remember Minati refused to pay any money to him for his leisure. The actors again freeze and the

narrator appears to ask the audience in his song what would they do in such a situation after pointing the causes of indebtedness of rural farmers, superstitions of lucky and unlucky, problems of polygamy etc.

Strategies Against Violence

On the first performance, the viewers felt quite uneasy and upset, at times some of them were trying not to follow what was being shown to them. They did not welcome the theme or the play as such as the play was like a mirror shown to them and was making a common event of their life into an issue to criticise and perform. Moreover, they were watching the show with their real in-laws, who were being convicted in the play. After four/five shows of the performance 'interventions' started appearing. Out of four interventions three wanted to replace Minati's position in three different solutions. And one intervention replaced Ranu's position to offer a solution.

Solution A. As Kamal entered the kitchen angrily to scold and beat his wife, he discovers that she was serving freshly cooked rice and curries to offer him for lunch with already injured eyes and forehead. He was all stunned. Ranu reveals the truth to him. This miraculous conclusion, however, exposes the compromising attitude of the viewer.

Solution B. As her man pounced upon her with cruelty and Minati was helpless to resist, suddenly there entered the women of neighbouring household to rescue her and the truth was brought before everyone by weak and starving Minati. The neighbours promise to stand besides her as and when required and warned Kamal and his mother not to cross the limits.

Solution C. As Kamal, provoked by his mother, rushes in anger to scold and beat Minati, she came out of the kitchen angrily shouting at her husband why he was listening to whatever nonsense were being fed by his mother. As Kamal, being fierce to these attitude of Minati tried to pull her hair to beat her, she took the ladle and

threatened to hit her husband. However, others in the audience seemed not to have an agreement that this was the perfect solution that they were looking for.

Solution D. As Ranu found the situation was gradually getting hostile towards her mother, she ran to her Head Master and sought help. The Head Master then enters in the scene with police personnel who stopped Kamal attacking his wife and warns him citing the various laws against domestic violence and constitutional protections for women vulnerable before domestic violence.

In all the interventions, except **Solution A.**, the spect-actors intended to change the dialogue and actions performed or inserted characters from outside in the original play to alleviate Minati's situation from helplessness to community relieve or radical resistance. But in all the interventions except **Solution D.**, Chhaya the mother in law, was accused to be the oppressor. However, the majority of viewers voted for **Solution D.** as the best conclusion to emphasize that imparting proper education and social coherence would lead women to empower themselves to resist the oppression on them and face the challenge of gender discrimination.

Since then, the performers of Jana Sanskriti present before the audience all the four solutions offered through interventions and seeks vote o spread encouragement among the silent victims. Sometime it is **Solution D.** that voted most, but interestingly, when the show is performed in a remote village far from the nearest police station and office of civic authorities, it is the **Solution B.** that has been chosen most by the spect-actors.

6.4.2 PERFORMING 'HARASSMENT'

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome demeanour or remarks which bourns derogatory and negative impact on the mind of the victim and therefore is a serious violation of victim's basic human right. Sexual harassment can be an act of (a) unwanted remarks, jokes or innuendo; or (b) verbal abuse, intimidation or threats; or

(c) showing offensive picture, messages, cartoon, movie or anything of that sort; or
(d) forceful physical contact, exhibition of private parts of the body, bullying for clothing etc; or (e) all of these at a time.

Sexual harassment may take place both at workplace and domestic sphere. In the rural background this is quite common an experience of the women both at their home and workplaces, government or private, whatever may be the nature. Widows, separated, married but single (due to husband's occupation at distant place) women are the soft targets alongside young school or college going girls. But the victims remain silent and compromise either in the fear of being isolated and exterminated from their position, or they themselves helpless to be believed by others as the assaulting person is more powerful in family or office. Therefore only a negligible amount of information comes to surface. In most cases, such victims are further exploited through forced abortion and to their death sometimes.

Statistics of sexual harassment in workplace in urban areas are readily available through the publications of National Crime Record Bureau and National Commission for Women and other non-government agencies, but it is still quite a job to track such complaints at rural set ups. However, it has been felt to a great extent that sexual harassment of the women outside home like in Panchayat offices, rationing agencies, hospitals, schools, market places and even in the running vehicles happen almost at breathing frequency. At home, women of varied age group becomes the dupe of sexual abuse and harassment by their in-laws and neighbours. Yet they can't share the experience as they fail to articulate their experience to someone outside.

Jana Sanskriti's performance on sexual harassment of women inside and outside her home focuses several such aspects to break the wall of silence and to empower the victims to speak up as soon they face such strangling experience. The performance is an alarm to all women to show how sexual harassment is deployed in the

construction of the working place as a masculine space, which is sheer injustice to the women folk.

Performance: "Ghure Dnarao" [Stand Face to Face]

Launched on :: 05.02.2002, Duration :: 30 minutes, Location :: Public Office premise, Market, Hospital square etc

Theme: Gender Discrimination and Sexual Harassment in the Public Sphere

Characters: Archana (Widow), Anukul (Panchayat Headman), Maqbul (Party Leader), Paritosh (Archana's brother-in-law), Ashima (Archana's Daughter), Kushumi (Ashima's friend)

Archana is facing a real hardship to run her family and education of her only daughter Ashima after the death of her husband. All their savings could not save his life out of the deadly disease. Sometimes she and her girl remain empty stomach. Paritosh comes to pressurize her to leave the home to capture his brother's nominal belonging. Helpless Archana solicits piety from him but Paritosh starts sexually harass her. The narrator enters singing and indicating the motive of property as one of the ground of hostility against women and explaining the pains of an widow whose husband failed to provide sound financial backup for her. Ashima could understand her mother's jeopardy, but at her thirteen, she is too young to do anything. But she use to tell everything to her best friend Kushumi. Ashima comes to know from a local politician Maqbul, that she can have the peon's job in the Panchayat office where her husband use to work till death. She goes to Maqbul to state all her misery and ask for the help she require to get the job. Maqbul, instead of helping her tried to allure her for his own physical interest. To convince her he gave Archana a mobile phone to keep in touch with him and promised to take up her case to higher authority in exchange he wanted her to comfort him whenever he would call her through the mobile phone. The narrator reappears singing and explaining that the government has several welfare projects for the helpless poor yet the politicians due to their dirty desires exploit people. He also asks the viewer not to remain dependent on the political leaders and grow consciousness about various projects of the government designed to help her as these are their rights. When Anukul, the headman of the Panchayat, received an order to appoint the widow of the demised peon, she sent man to bring Archana to her office. As she went to meet her the old headman made several lose

comments about the 'service' she has to give to him. He even went to show his thighs to her lying to have grown some itching there. Archana was helpless to swallow all these and ultimately she broke before her daughter saying there must be some problem with herself only that so many men gets 'provoked' by her appearance. She said she would have died by committing suicide if Ashima was not there to be taken care of. Here the actors freeze and the narrator comes to the main circle singing the painful experience of the lady and seeking suggestion from the spectators to resolve the crisis.

Strategies Against Harassment

There had been nineteen interventions by which the spect-actors got involved in the play to make way out for Archana from the trouble she was facing. The strategies that spect-actors in Thakurtala, Taldharia, Mudiahath, Madankrishnapur and adjacent villages shaped could be characterized in three major types. Firstly, the victim women strive to muddle through the repression by resorting to government authorities and legal rights like going to the court or to the police'. Secondly, Communication was one more approach. The victim would expose the reality in public shouting loud that would isolate the miscreants who, by the way has public image or should play tactfully with them by hitting their weak points. Thirdly, Besides these two line of resistance, the last one was the tussle of spect-actors asserting to accomplish camaraderie among women so as to acquire control over the situation. The spect-actors, by means of interventions, wanted to bring certain crucial changes in the original play like -

Solution 1. Archana would learn the usage of the mobile phone that Maqbul gave her for his own interest and should record whatever conversations the ill motive persons exchange with her and should shoot her harassment in the phone through its camera and take them to the legal authority to launch complain against them.

Solution 2. Archana may tell each of these oppressors the same lie that her husband died of some infectious disease leaving the infecting germs in her body too. Any

person who would come to an extreme proximity would be further infected. The miscreants would then leave her being terrified.

Solution 3. Archana's daughter Ashima and Kushumi should bring the matter to the notice of other village women whose girls are their classmates. Then the women shall stand united behind her to rescue her from such clutches of harassment. They would also intimate the news media that would expose the criminals.

Solution 4. Archana herself should meet the wives of the Panchayat Headman, Political Leader and her brother-in-law, who in turn would check their husbands from such notorious acts.

Solution 5. Archana should start shouting and conversation in louder voice as soon any indecent proposal comes to her way to draw attention of the people around that would pressurize and restrain the culprits from doing any harm to her.

The performers of Janasanskriti debated for long on the practicality and safe sides of the solutions before finalising or accepting any of these solutions and found none of the solutions offered are feasible from Archana's perspective. There are risks like she may lose her job, revenge may come to her way in other aspects, she may be isolated and sent to exile being infectious etc. Thus any decisive conclusion is yet to be achieved in Archana's case and the dramatic production moves on to newer audience to get genuine feedbacks. However, the team also assess their own lacks, if they were failing short of describing the situation properly to the audience in regular review meetings within the group.

6.4.3 PERFORMING 'REPRODUCTION'

In classical feminist understanding, the issue of reproduction has been observed as a problematique, where the desire for male offspring has been seen as 'reproduction of patriarchy', whereas within the orthodox family system, the desire for male offspring is seen as the 'continuity of lineage'. Thus girls are married at an early age to avail

maximum number of chances to give birth to the son. And they are bound to breed until they reproduce a boy or boys in sufficient numbers. It is believed that sons would provide security and earn breads for the family when parents grow old and their wives would provide service in domestic affairs and reproduce the next generation of patriarchy. Women live in the extended household where the senior male member owes the authority over all other members, accompanied by the senior women, next. [Kandiyoti, D.; *"Bargaining Patriarchy"* in Gender & Society. Vol.2, No. 3; 1988]

In a country like ours, it is generally taken that poverty and illiteracy is the most important reason behind the high rate of abortion, female foeticide, child mortality etc. but a recent publication of the UNICEF states " While the child sex ratio within the general population dropped from 940 in 1991 to 919 in 2001, the Scheduled Tribes showed a lesser shift from 985 to 973. The least decline in the sex-ratio was among the Scheduled Caste community - from 946 to 938. The data highlights the adverse linkages between prosperity and girl-child preference and dispels the myth that the poor are opting for female foeticide or sex selective abortions. It emerged from the presentations that literacy and economic well-being did not necessarily ensure a positive child sex ratio. Income levels and access to technology also influenced sex selection and female foeticide ". [Adorna, Cecilio; *"Zero Tolerance for Gender Discrimination and Violence Against Girls"*; Published lecture of Resident Representative of UNICEF India Country Office in National Media Workshop on Sex Selection and Female Foeticide; June, 2007]

In rural part of West Bengal sex-selective abortions is not much in fashion alike the urban areas. However one major area of concern in the rural and semi-urban West Bengal is trafficking of young women and girls of adolescent age. It has been evident through several investigations that the carried or abducted women are sold to remote villages of Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujrat where they are kept as 'breeding bride' to reproduce sons as sex ratio in certain areas of these states are so vulnerable that a

match for a man from his own community has become almost impossible due to massive female foeticide.

Therefore reproduction remains a disputed issue to subjugate women's rights and self-determination in respect of family planning and the vital question of susceptibility and defencelessness of an over-reproducing female body due to lack of nutrition is emphatically ignored as the senior man or woman in the extended family may otherwise plan for a re-marriage of their son, to earn big dowry, on the basis of the complain that his first wife has failed to give birth to a son to continue the lineage.

Performance : "Sonar Pakhi" (The Golden Bird)

Launched on :: 01.06.2001, Duration 27 minutes, Location :: Domestic Sphere

Theme: Male Offspring

Characters: Mira (Pregnant Wife), Madhu (Mira's Husband), Sarama (Mira's Mother-in-Law), Aduri (Mira's Daughter) and Shefali (Nurse)

Pregnant Mira returns from the village hospital to her marital home after a check up and was welcomed with rituals by her mother-in law who wishes to have a grandson to save the dynasty. As she eagerly asks her son Madhu whether the doctor has given any indication about a boy to arrive in the family or not, Madhu replied it was illegal to determine the sex of the expected child before birth. Sarama was upset and demanded hat she wants a boy this time and nothing else. Little Aduri comes to her grandmother and says what fun it would be to have a sister of her own around younger than her. She would love to share her dresses, books and toys with her and guide her as well. Her father would not require to spend much after her. But the annoyed old women replied Aduri has leave the home and go to her in-laws place after marriage, who shall take care of the family then. Moreover she would drag much dowry with her which would weaken the family's economy, still having another girl in the family would not be acceptable. The actor freeze and the narrator enters. Through his songs the narrator indicate that the determination of sex of the foetus was illegal and punishable offense and also asks everyone to stop alienation of the girl child from the family since their childhood which makes them feel inferior within their paternal house.

Shefali, the nurse in the village hospital had seen all the test reports of Mira's pregnancy when she went for a check up. Sarama goes to her and gives her many costly gifts and sweets showing her fake joy over the good health of the expecting baby of Mira and eventually pushes Shefali to tell her whether the baby was a boy or a girl. Enticed by the costly gifts Shefali reveals to Sarama that the child the family was expecting is a girl again ! Sarama returned home with a broken heart. As she entered the premise, Aduri brings her the 'good news' that their cow has given birth to a calf and it was a female cow. Madhu was so happy on the arrival of a female cow, as he considered it as an asset. But then his mother demanded an immediate termination of Mira's pregnancy as she do not want any more girl in the family. The actors freeze, and the narrator enters singing and indicating the selfish contradictions of welcoming a female cow as asset and rejecting a female baby as burden. He also indicated the unethical and illegal acts of the greedy nurse to have leaked the information to a conservative women like Sarama and seeks the intervention from the spectators.

Strategies Against Gender Discrimination

There was only one intervention while performing at Basanti. The spect actors replaced the silent women Mira to become vocal and confident of her decision to give birth to the girl child. She convinces her mother-in-law that girls are no more a burden of the family. Provided they are given proper education and other cares, the girls may even bring pride and wealth to the family. Moreover, Mira says, the government was giving regular assistance and funds to rear up the girl child and finally she asks her mother-in-law if each of us prefer boy over girls, whom the boys would marry to carry forward the lineage ?

The solution, as suggested by the spect-actors was comprehensive and free from harsh confrontations within the family and was found appropriate to Mira's condition to voted as popular selection. Thus Janasanskriti was able to move an unanimous resolution on the issue of suppression of women through reproduction bias and was also able to campaign the needful family planning through useful contraception by men and women.

Performance : "Sampurna"

Launched on :: 03.06.2002, Duration :: 31 minutes, Location :: Domestic Sphere

Theme: Infertility

Characters: Ramala (Housewife), Mukul (Ramala's Husband), Arati (Mukul's Mother), Supriyo (Doctor), Nandini (Doctor's wife), Chinmayananda (Religious Guru), Police Inspector

The play began with Chinmayananda's visit to his disciple Mukul's house when he refuses to take food and other offerings from Mukul's wife Ramala as she was infertile. Mukul's mother Arati wept bitterly over the unfortunate situation and pray to guru to save the lineage. The guru suggests that Ramala should stay with her for five nights and six days as he would perform a ritual to remove her infertility and asked for some funds required to complete the rituals. Mukul and her mother Arati agrees and helpless Ramala, never knowing her worst luck consented to participate in the ritual in want of an offspring. Mukul, the driver of a private car of Dr. Supriyo asks some loan from his employer to meet the expenditure. Knowing the reason the doctor asks Mukul to bring his wife to his chamber for check-up and tests and to avoid the trap of such money making gurus. Mukul agreed to bring Ramala to the doctor but also insisted that satisfying the guru would console his mother. The narrator enters into the actors arena as all other character freeze. He sings the song to indicate the trap of superstitions has two sharp ends here, one is the loss of money the other is the loss of dignity of the woman. He also indicates that the treatment of infertility is an affair of medical science not a deal for religious rituals.

Ramala was found to be all okay to conceive a baby through all sorts of medical tests Dr. Supriyo conducted. It was evident that infertility was not there in Ramala, it might be in Mukul. The doctor asked Mukul to go through some tests. But his male ego stood erect and her mother Arati denounced the medical report and forced Ramala to go to Chinmayananda. Ramala had the extremely fearful experience when the old guru started molesting her to take her to bed. Ramala, somehow managed to escape and ran to Nandini, Dr. Supriya's wife and broke in tears. Mukul and Arati said they won't accept her again in their family. Nandini was strong to face the challenge and promised Ramala to return her place in the family while sending the guru behind the bars. The narrator enters again and in his song he asks the

audience whether Nandini was doing the right thing or not and if someone from the audience has any alternative suggestion to handle the complexity of the situation.

Strategies Against Reproduction Discourses

Two major interventions were welcomed after debate and discussions between the actors and the spect-actors when they performed the play at Minakhan, Bagdah, Amdanga, Deganga and other adjacent villages. The first strategy that they formed for the most part made use of 'modern' measures. Through counselling of the family members of the victim to make them understand the causes of infertility is gender-neutral, it is rather dogmatic to hold only the women responsible is inhumane. Moreover, infertility can be solved to a great degree with the help of modern science. Thus building awareness about the science of reproduction became the core of the first strategy. As far as the second strategy is concerned, the spect-actor tried to find a solution in adopting a child.

Solution I. Nandini and Supriyo drives to meet Mukul's family. Both Mukul and Arati was arrogant to except any logic from the couple. But as soon the police personnel accompanied with them show them that the guru was a real fraud and was an escaping criminal after several cases of rape and molestation at other places, they were ashtonished. Then the doctor explained that infertility is no more a challenge to modern science. Mukul and Ramala can have their own child through medicated procedure and bio-engineering. The course of the treatment was a bit costly but Dr. Supriyo was agreed to give Mukul the fund, not as a loan, of course, if he receives back his beloved wife. Mukul was ashamed of his foolishness and did as was suggested by his employer and there was a happy ending all the way.

Solution II. Here also the significant move was taken by the doctor couple. They exposed the religious fraud with the help of the police and convinced Mukul, Arati and Ramala to adopt an orphan child from the local orphanage and give him/her the love and care. All of them agree on the solution. Mukul and Ramala become parent of a beautiful little girl adopted with the help of the doctor couple.

Both the conclusions were melodramatic and emotional, however, Janasanskriti agreed to project both the solutions as both of these resolution leads to the spreading of awareness towards two other social causes, firstly towards the scientific attitude and secondly towards philanthropic attitude.

6.5 PERFORMING REALITIES : WOMEN'S ISSUES AS SHARED EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED.

“Experiencing” and “Living through” are the parameters that the performers of Janasanskriti Centre of Theatre of the Oppressed use when they try to define the problem the women face at the grass root level. Through the performance the integration of the theme and the viewers are built through easily flowing dialogues and physical acting. Moreover they use the methodology of interventions by means of bringing the narrator in between the progress of the theme. This imparts a handy training to the audience about how to intervene and why to intervene. Through such interventions the theatre works to develop the individuality and community feeling among the women, and *the theatre of the oppressed* introduces them to a collective space. They, then become a group, and detect diverse ways of discussion and sharing within the group, and most essentially they find the opening to exercise what they obtain as ‘real life’ solutions.

The *Theatre of the Oppressed* has been observed as effective in two major ways, firstly it projects the problems to be really closer to ‘real life’ that instead works as a ‘reminder’ and not as a ‘sympathy’ in the minds of the spectators, secondly, it also work as means by which women are reorganised as a community which in turn ensure women the scope to find out or build and engage in renewed position. The *Theatre of the Oppressed* enables women to argue their case against oppression.

Far from the hustle bustle of madly crowded cities and urban settlements where the theatre has become an elitist affair of entertainment, Janasanskriti has taken up the activism for the real people in real time and real causes and changing lives through

theatre. Collectivity and interactivity are the two major pillars of this approach that has markedly differentiated the Theatre of the Oppressed with the so called mainstream Group Theatre movement. Inside the *Theatre of the Oppressed* workshops, women performers collectively decide what topic would be dramatized based on the shared oppressions and may be performed before an audience. And through interactivity, the collectivity is extended further to encompass other women in the audience. To put it in simple words, the procedures of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* connects women through a chain of collectivity starting from the preparation to the performance and interactions. Through the involvement of the addressees, a collective space to talk about their oppressions is shaped. As a substitute of exhibiting a written script to the audience through memorizing all dialogues and actions, the *Theatre of the Oppressed* emphasizes on the cooperative work in the construction and re- construction process of forum plays.

Creating a play and responding to the strategies of the spect-actors are equally important in the process of Theatre of the Oppressed. Since these productions are result-oriented and based on shared common experiences of oppression, the dual experience of conscious raising for both sides, the performers and the audience, is very crucial. The performers has to remain conscious to welcome suitable changes in their performance that would immediately change the performed scenario of oppression on stage and the viewers who react through interventions become cautious about the solutions of the oppression in real life situations.

Another aspect of the methodology of Theatre of the Oppressed is, the script is never performed. Every show becomes a rehearsal as interventions from the audience changes the course of the play. There are numerous possibilities to reach conclusion in this methodology. Therefore the play is a continuous experience, not a built up show to repeat in every occasion of performance.

I began my journey of the present academic research with two sets of questions in mind. My primary enquiry was from the core of a performer's thought, as I referred earlier, what I consider as the fundamental question that arises in the mind of a

performer having long association with theatre that what is more important to the theatre itself, to react or to create reactions? Thanks to Janasanskriti and their activism through the Theatre of the Oppressed, that, perhaps, I have harboured to some satisfactory answer to that question. Theatre has the power and dynamics to achieve both the ends at a time, that is, to react on certain stimulation and to create reactions as a metaphor. Theater activism around the proverbial Group Theatre movement has already lost its way and aims, yet theatre is very much alive and reaching the root of public sphere to introduce the people with their own potentials to bring changes in their life and surroundings what they seek to change.

So far my academic queries within the limits of the present study are concerned, let me conclude in a separate chapter that follows.

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