

Jana Sanskriti Masterclass

10 April 2025

Maison de la Recherche SHS
CY Cergy Paris Université – site des Chênes

The workshop 11 AM / 16 PM Introduction to Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre

Jana Sanskriti offers a workshop in two of the three fields of Theatre of the Oppressed:

- a) Introduction to Theatre of the Oppressed and Image Theatre
- b) Forum Theatre
- c) Legislative Theatre

Abstract: Tools for Socio-Ecological Change and Multispecies Legislative Theatre

This workshop explores the powerful tools of Theatre of the Oppressed (ToO) as instruments for driving socio-ecological change, with a focus on Indigenous peoples' struggles and the rights of non-human beings. Participants will be introduced to the diverse arsenal of ToO techniques, including Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre, to critically analyze and address the various forms of oppression faced by Indigenous communities, particularly in relation to traditional forest management practices.

Through engaging exercises, the workshop will examine how Forum Theatre can be used to highlight the challenges faced by Indigenous peoples, both historically and in the present, as they navigate the intersection of traditional knowledge and modern environmental policies. Special attention will be given to how these communities are affected by external forces such as deforestation, land rights conflicts, and policy decisions that ignore their traditional practices and wisdom.

The workshop will also incorporate a multispecies perspective, exploring how non-human beings—such as animals, plants, and ecosystems—suffer from systemic oppression in environmental and political decision-making processes. Through Legislative Theatre practices, participants will create and perform scenes that depict the struggles of these non-human entities, connecting with their inner spirits and exploring their personhood in the context of policymaking. The aim is to foster a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of recognizing the rights of non-human life in legislative frameworks.

By the end of the workshop, participants will have gained practical experience in using Forum and Legislative Theatre as tools for advocacy, fostering creative dialogue and action aimed at challenging oppressive systems. This immersive workshop will provide valuable insights into how theatre can serve as a catalyst for both human and ecological justice, encouraging participants to rethink policymaking and advocacy through the lens of inclusivity, empathy, and multispecies approaches.

Lecture of Sanjoy and Sima Ganguly, Jana Sanskriti 16.00 to 17 H

After the workshop a lecture will be given by Sanjoy and Sima Ganguly leaders, founders of the theatre of the oppressed movement Jana Sanskriti. The speech will essentially focus on the already existing perfection within every individual and theatre as an act of Love. This lecture explores the pioneering work of Jana Sanskriti, India's largest and most impactful theatre group, dedicated to the Theatre of the Oppressed (ToO), a method developed by Augusto Boal. Founded in 1985, Jana Sanskriti has redefined the relationship between the oppressed and the theatre by empowering marginalized communities to create, perform, and reflect on their own stories of resistance and struggle. Through various forms of participatory theatre, such as Forum Theatre, Image Theatre, and Introspective Theatre, the group provides a platform for individuals to confront and challenge oppression in their daily lives.

The lecture delves into how Jana Sanskriti's work extends beyond performance, transforming spectators into active "spect-actors" who engage in the resolution of social issues. The session will examine the impact of Jana Sanskriti's theatre in fostering critical thinking, community mobilization, and social change, with particular attention to the way it motivates participants to take action both within and outside the theatre. The talk also highlights the group's efforts in reaching diverse communities across India, including tribal groups, youth in violent environments, people in slums, and individuals with mental health challenges.

Through this lecture, participants will gain an understanding of how theatre can be used as a tool for social transformation, offering both a theoretical framework and practical examples of how Jana Sanskriti's work has empowered individuals and communities to challenge societal norms and fight against oppression.

/////////INFO ON JANA SANSKRITI/////////

Founded in 1985, Jana Sanskriti (JS) was the first exponent of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) in India. Over the years, the Centre has evolved into one of the most significant points of reference for the global community of Theatre of the Oppressed.

JS believes that there is inherent perfection within every individual, waiting to be discovered and manifested. When a person uncovers this latent perfection, they are able to overcome the sense of inferiority imposed by centralized social culture. This self-discovery empowers individuals to become articulate, confident, and capable of confronting the challenges they encounter on their journey of personal and societal development.

The core mission of Jana Sanskriti is to create a space where the oppressed can engage in deep introspection and discover their true potential. It seeks to facilitate a profound connection between the individual and the perfection within themselves, because as the Centre believes, "What is this perfection but the richest resource of human society?"

Over the span of more than three decades, JS has addressed critical social issues such as domestic violence, child marriage, girl child trafficking, child abuse, maternal and child health, primary education, healthcare, and the fight against illicit liquor, all through the transformative power of theatre.

In fact, a recent study led by Dr. Jyothsna Jalan from the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata, has proven the significant impact of 'spect-acting'—an interactive form of theatre developed by Augusto Boal—in building a strong, active, and responsible community of citizens.

JS continues to stand as a beacon for change, utilizing the power of theatre not only as an art form but as a tool for social transformation.

The movement

Jana Sanskriti was the first group in India to practise Theatre of the Oppressed – conceptualised by Augusto Boal in Brazil - a theatre in which the oppressed speak, act and express their social and political will.

Jana Sanskriti came into being in 1985 with a deep commitment towards building up such a movement based on humanism and equips people to fight against oppression

In Jana Sanskriti's theatre, the oppressed are not passive listeners anymore. They are no longer awaiting the arrival of enlightened leaders to show them the way. The oppressed are now actors themselves. They make their own theatre, based on the oppression they face in their lives. And they perform before audiences who are living through similar experiences. A unique feature of this theatre is the relationship between actor and spectator, where the spectator becomes spect-actor (a term created by Augusto Boal).

Jana Sanskriti today

Jana Sanskriti's journey began from a small village in the Sunderbans. Today it has 25 theatre teams in West Bengal (mostly in the districts of South, North 24 Parganas and Purulia), Jana Sanskriti has through its training developed teams of TdO in Tripura, Jharkhand, New Delhi, Orissa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka. Teams have been formed in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Bihar. Jana Sanskriti is perhaps India's largest theatre group in recent times.

The Arsenal

Jana Sanskriti's theatre teams reach out to thousands of people every month, with aesthetically refined theatre and hard-hitting questions on the reality around us. Jana Sanskriti's theatre does not offer any solutions – the attempt to arrive at a solution is made with the help of the spect-actors.

In India, Jana Sanskriti is the only truly exponent of Forum Theatre in which members of the theatre team select, construct, and narrate a social problem from their daily life. With artistic direction this play is taken to an audience who must now find a solution to the problem. Passive spectators then become engaged spect-actors. Spect-actors come on stage to enact the solutions they have thought of, debating with trained activists about the feasibility of the solutions suggested. Thus, individuals publicly engage in tackling a problem that has thus far provoked the most profound cultural silence and acceptance. This exercise gradually suggests possibilities for liberation from that oppression in real life. Over the years we have seen that the experience of 'spect-acting' has motivated people to be active outside theatre as well.

In Image Theatre actors and spect-actors recreate images of their own reality – through consensus. They look at their reality in an objective manner, try to understand and analyse it. This is called the real image. Spect-actors then proceed to make the image of a situation that they desire – the ideal image - in which the oppression will have disappeared. We then return to the real image and debate begins. Each spect-actor must then show images of different stages in the possible transition from real to ideal. This entire experience becomes a rehearsal of how to deal with oppression in real life.

Introspective Theatre affords an individual the scope of being her own spectator. As a spectator she introspects, analyses and understands the reason for every small experience of oppression in her life. She discovers the talent within herself – this gives her confidence. She recognizes how various social values are guiding her actions. One of the very important things in this theatre is that actors can observe their mind. By being observer and observed at the same time they can have the courage to deal with the conflict in mind.

Jana Sanskriti's Theatre Teams

The 25 theatre teams active under the banner of Jana Sanskriti in West Bengal today comprise men and women of agricultural worker families. Putting up performances regularly in and around their villages on current issues, engaging in collective debate and following up with action on the ground keeps them busy throughout the year. Jana Sanskriti has eight all-women theatre teams, perhaps another first in India.

Our teams in other parts of India work in association with organisations of the oppressed. In Tripura we work with youth who have grown up in an environment of violence. In Jharkhand and Orissa we work with tribal people living in remote inaccessible villages and in Delhi our work is with people living in slums, in Chennai we work with people having mental illness, in Bihar we work with women in slums and villages.

Taking theatre beyond performance

Jana Sanskriti's theatre has played a significant role in empowering individuals as well as communities. It has dealt with a range of issues through performance, forum theatre and collective action. We have seen theatre giving birth to a political movement with a human content – On stage we create critical thinkers and off-stage actors transform themselves into 'Act-ivists' and spect-actors become 'Spect-Activists'.