This study explores the work of two NGOs operating in West Bengal, Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base, which practice different forms of social theatre to fight social oppression and address problems, in order to understand the different processes of their theatre-based interventions in rural Bengal. The two NGOs were identified based on my past professional experience as an employee of Contact Base for more than a decade, during which I also came across the work of Jana Sanskriti. This thesis provided an opportunity to study the work of these organisations in detail, with an in-depth understanding of social theatre. There are two distinct aspects of these forms of social theatre: the intellectual theory that drives the organisations, and the practical dynamics that members of the communities are involved in. For both organisations, though the theatre performers themselves are always drawn from the target community, the factors motivating the performers are different. These organisations also provide varying degrees of mentorship though their approaches to training and handholding of the rural performers are also different. A senior representative from each organisation was interviewed to understand the processes from their perspectives, including the ideological and philosophical aspects of the strategies they employ. In order to understand the processes from the point of view of the local performers, various individuals and groups engaged in social theatre were interviewed. Specifically, Jana Sanskriti’s core and central theatre group members who train and facilitate the work of other community groups were interviewed, along with two other actors from its community group in Kulpi. The diversity of respondent groups provided a rich understanding of the process. The interviews with the representatives of the organisation were extremely interesting in terms of the differences not only in the forms of theatre used but also the implications and sustainability of the processes.

Both NGOs focus on women’s oppression and work substantially with women’s groups. This study particularly focused on their women-led interventions to understand whether such interventions have empowered these rural women in any way, and if so, how. Towards this end, village women who have been engaged with social theatre and were part of the women’s theatre teams were
interviewed. It should be noted that assessing the wider impact of these theatre-based interventions on the local communities was not a goal of this study, and hence no one not directly involved or engaged in social theatre was interviewed.

In this chapter we describe the process of Theatre of the Oppressed, particularly Forum Theatre, as practiced by Jana Sanskriti and how it affects community organisation and mobilises community action. In Chapter 5, we will similarly describe the Theatre for Development approach of Contact Base.

4.1 Description of Jana Sanskriti, Its Study Area, and Respondents

The subsections below detail the profiles of the organisation, respondents, and the actual study areas. Primary data was collected through interviews and secondary data was collected in the form of reports, audio visual recordings of Jana Sanskriti’s theatre shows, articles, and publications which were accessed to support primary data.

4.1.1 About the Organisation

Jana Sanskriti is an organisation founded in 1985 and based in West Bengal that practises Theatre of the Oppressed, the theatre method originally designed by Augusto Boal. Although this form of theatre is practised in more than 70 countries across the world, Jana Sanskriti is probably the largest and longest-lasting Forum Theatre operation in the world, and was considered by Boal himself to be the chief exponent of his methodology outside Brazil (Ganguly 2010a :xv, editor’s preface). The organisation has a core team of theatre specialists who train and support satellite theatre teams based in various villages that perform Forum Theatre locally and carry out theatre-based activism to fight local oppression. Jana Sanskriti’s first all-women team was established in 2002, 17 years after its inception. It has a training cum administrative centre, Girish Bhavan, located in Badu, North 24 Parganas, named after Girish Chandra Ghosh, the noted 19th century Bengali playwright, director, and actor. Most of the participants are volunteers. The funding for sustaining the organisation’s activities is mainly acquired from collections from the audience after performances and theatre workshops abroad, facilitated by the organisation’s founder Sanjoy Ganguly.
The philosophy behind Jana Sanskriti’s work is developing the capacities of rational collective thinking among the villagers who are otherwise passive sufferers of oppression and exploitation. Their process is designed to encourage independent analysis of the problems being addressed, self-reflection, and autonomous decision making, which ultimately leads to collective action to take charge of their own lives and development, thus democratising politics. The aesthetic component of Forum Theatre is also important as it nurtures the intellectual needs of the villagers. Jana Sanskriti has reached more than 250,000 spectators in West Bengal.

In 2006, Jana Sanskriti established the Indian Federation of the Theatre of the Oppressed with its teams outside Bengal which meet twice yearly for meetings. These teams are connected with and provided training by Jana Sanskriti, and are spread out across the states of Orissa, Tripura, Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Delhi, and Mumbai.

In West Bengal, the organisation has been working in the two districts of North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas, across the five Blocks of Sandeshkhali II and Hasnabad in North 24 Parganas, and Kulpi, Patharpratima, and Kakdwip in South 24 Parganas, covering about fifteen Gram Panchayats. It has a total of seventeen satellite groups out of which nine are women-only groups. Jana Sanskriti also runs a Human Rights Protection Committee (Manabadhikar Suraksha Samiti) consisting of active villagers who have come forward to demand their rights. The Committee members regularly organise meetings in the villages. This Committee has a total of 40,000 registered members across its various branches.

This study deals only with the Forum Theatre process as performed and experienced by the groups of West Bengal, as well its outcomes on a selected subgroup of the communities engaging in social theatre. Sanjoy Ganguly was interviewed to understand Jana Sanskriti’s work. Other respondents interviewed included the core team members based centrally in Girish Bhavan at Badu. The community respondents interviewed were suggested by Mr. Ganguly and the core team, and the actual meetings and interviews with these community members was facilitated by one of the core team members who accompanied me for all the interviews.
4.1.2 Core team members of Jana Sanskriti

Some of the core team members of Jana Sanskriti were interviewed. Brief profiles of the respondents are given below:

- Core team member 1 from Shyamnagar village, Kulpi (South 24 Parganas) is practising Forum Theatre with Jana Sanskriti from the late 1980s. He is traditionally a Gajon actor.

- Core team member 2 also from Shyamnagar village, Kulpi (South 24 Parganas) is practising Forum Theatre with Jana Sanskriti for more than seventeen years. He is traditionally a Gajon actor.

- Core team member 3 is from Uttar Kashiyabad village, Kakdwip (South 24 Parganas). She is engaged with Jana Sanskriti’s work for more than twenty years.

- Core team member 4 is from Ram Ganga village. She is involved with Jana Sanskriti’s theatre work for more than 20 years and joined Jana Sanskriti during the late 1980s. She had interest in theatre and liked performing in plays from her childhood and had experience of performing for schools and clubs.

- Core team member 5 is from Basar village (South 24 Parganas) has completed BA. She joined Jana Sanskriti during the late 1980s. She was also interested in theatre and used to perform stage theatre in her village before joining Jana Sanskriti.

The Jana Sanskriti training centre at Badu has an office space, extra rooms where people can stay overnight, as well as an open ground with a cement stage in it which is used for developing and practising new productions. Since some of the core team members commute from distant villages, they sometimes stay back in Girish Bhavan to finish their work. The building was constructed with the labour of some of the core team members, and the older members have seen it being constructed and expanded. The core team members exhibited pride and tremendous ownership of this space and their work, and treat each other like family members. They work together like a large family headed by the founder of the organisation. These members have an activist orientation and it seems that social development in the villages they work in is a single motto they follow collectively. The interaction with the group was two hours long and each member of the group
narrated his/her story of how they came to Jana Sanskriti and how Jana Sanskriti has affected their lives. I found during the interview that this was an extremely confident, free minded, and mature group of men and women who were passionate about their work and the organisation they are a part of. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder after informing the respondents and taking their permission.

4.1.3 Field Visits

The respondents identified for interview by the organisation were all located in South 24 Parganas district. I reached the district by car from Kolkata, where a Jana Sanskriti core team representative met me and accompanied me to meetings with two community theatre actors and an all women’s theatre team in the villages of Shyamnagar and Basar Uttarpara respectively. All the interviewees were informed beforehand about our visit. We met the theatre actors of Shyamnagar at their home. The women’s theatre team members had all gathered in the house of the team leader for our interactions.

After the interviews were completed, we traveled by van to watch an actual theatre show that was scheduled in a village nearby. The show was an hour long and there were about 250-300 people in the audience, consisting of villagers from the vicinity.

4.1.4 Women performers / activists

Anita, a resident of Shyamnagar village, is a community theatre actor of Shyamnagar Jana Sanskriti Shakha and is performing Jana Sanskriti theatre for 10 years. Her village was close to the main road. We walked for five minutes after getting down from the car to reach her house. The all-women team from Basar Uttarpara was interviewed as a group. Details of the demographic profiles of the group members interviewed are given in Appendix A. This was a more remote village, which had to be reached on foot through mud and brick roads. We walked for about half an hour after getting off the car before we reached the village. One of the Jana Sanskriti coordinators who assisted me throughout the field visit guided me to both places. A total of seven women members joined the group discussion from this all women’s team of Jana Sanskriti, Jana Sanskriti Mahila Samity.
The leader of the group, Lata, gave me a detailed interview and explained most of the team’s work. She is socially and economically better off than most of the other women in her group. Her family consists of her husband, her son, and married daughter and her in-laws. She is educated till class X and is extremely articulate and presented herself confidently. She was excited to speak about their work and one could sense her leadership quality even during the group discussion as she guided the proceedings and encouraged her team members to answer the questions and meaningfully participate in the discussion. She contributed to making the entire group including me feel comfortable which enabled a smooth interview and discussion. The other women (Chhaya, Kobita, Asha, Janaki, Rama) explained the working of oppression in their lives, their motivation behind joining Jana Sanskriti’s theatre team and their experience of such engagement with Forum Theatre. Lata said that she is practising Forum Theatre for 10 years. Some of the others were practising it as long as Lata whereas others were more recent entrants. These women members have similar profiles. Their husbands are mostly daily labourers and work under the MGNREGA scheme. They do not have regular work all through the year. The women support their families by working as maids and as daily labourers and their families run on debt. The women also have the additional burden of household work and taking care of their children. The women said that after serving their family members they get little time for themselves, which they try to utilise in their own ways by engaging with Jana Sanskriti Mahila Samity theatre group.

The interview with the entire group and the discussions were carried out in Bengali. The interview and the discussions were recorded on an audio recorder after informing the interviewee group and taking permission from them. An interview schedule was used to guide the interactions. The group had gathered in Lata’s mud house and we all sat in a circle on her portico for the interview. The interview in the form of a group discussion lasted for about four hours. After the initial introductions, as we went deeper into discussing the role of social theatre in their lives, all the women were very excited to speak about their experiences. They narrated their stories with a lot of enthusiasm and reiterated that it was because of Jana Sanskriti and what they have learned from it that they are able to express themselves clearly in the interview. They proudly shared the success stories of their activism and sometimes the discussion also moved to a more general account of the socio-political conditions of their village about which they expressed their own (often strong) opinions. They seemed well informed as they discussed about issues of social betterment and development of their village with an independent and rational mind. They also shared their
stories of exploitation and while doing so some of them had tears in their eyes. However, they expressed confidence in their ability to lead their own independent lives which was a changed situation compared to previous times.

4.2 UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESSES OF SOCIAL THEATRE

In this section, we describe the processes of social theatre as practiced by Jana Sanskriti. We summarise the ideologies and objectives which inspired the organisational initiatives, and outline the actual processes of production development, performance and intervention, outcomes, and interaction with local folk theatre forms. These findings are based on interviews with representatives of the organisation being studied, as well as with community members who engage with Forum Theatre. The latter group, which includes both professional folk theatre practitioners and non-professional ‘theatre activists’, provides perspectives of the local communities engaging with Forum Theatre, leading to a more holistic understanding of its processes. The theatre form was also observed to get a first-hand experience of the actual process as well as the immediate impact on the audience. These different sources of data help present an in-depth description.

4.2.1 Ideology and background

Jana Sanskriti is an organisation specialising in Forum Theatre, in which members of theatre teams comprising primarily of the village community select, construct, and narrate a social problem from their daily lives through theatre. The agenda of the organisation is twofold:

- To use Forum Theatre or Theatre of the Oppressed for liberation of villagers from different forms of oppression, thus breaking the silence of the oppressed.

- To use Forum Theatre to fulfill the intellectual needs of the ordinary rural people (agricultural labourers, people doing menial jobs, etc.) by giving them space for their development by nurturing their own thought processes and rationality.

Jana Sanskriti was inspired by the ideology that the process of development should be democratic in nature where common people actively and equally participate as stakeholders to shape their own
development through dynamic thought and action. This ideology stands opposed to the prevalent political culture and development practices where agendas are top-down, that is, determined by the planners and policy makers rather than the communities who are the ‘recipients’ of this development. Current political actors promote doctrinaire beliefs as a culture, discouraging rational citizenship among deprived and marginalised sections of the population. Theatre of the Oppressed on the other hand is based on ‘true’ democracy, and approaches the process of development as a bottom-up dialectical process, mobilising common people to think, understand, debate, and take informed decisions and actions, in contrast to a top-down approach where the community remains passive and is often exploited. Jana Sanskriti’s work has been about democratising politics because it challenges political authorities and their actions through grassroots activist movements using Forum Theatre. Jana Sanskriti describes this form of theatre as ‘political theatre’ because it begins to question and hold political authority accountable regarding a particular rights based issue and generates debate and dialogue among the oppressed on the issue through the participatory platform or the Forum.

Sanjoy Ganguly, the founder of Jana Sanskriti, was a member of the Communist Party in his youth. Disillusioned with what he considered to be a dogmatic party culture, which discouraged questions and discussions, he left and went to work with the people of a slum in South Kolkata alongside an NGO. Many of these slum dwellers had migrated from the Sunderbans, and during his interactions with them, they requested him to also work for the social development of their families who resided in the Sunderbans. He subsequently went to the village Dahakanda in the Sunderbans to help the villagers organise themselves. During this period, he got his first exposure to the folk theatre form Gajon, which was the most important folk performance in the region. Upon watching Gajon he realised that this form of theatre depicted reality and real life characters as against the idealised characters of sophisticated intellectual city theatre representing only the ‘good’ or the ‘bad’. This exposure led him to discover the power and rich possibilities of theatre and his own inclination towards it. Learning more about Gajon, he formed a small team consisting of local villagers, wrote a play, and started performing it to create awareness among the people about various social issues. Thus, Jana Sanskriti was born.

Over the next few years, while working with local folk theatre for social awareness, he realised that what he was doing was actually a form of directive ‘propaganda theatre’, which limits people’s capability of critical thinking by dictating to the audience what should and should not be done in absolute terms. The theatre of Jana Sanskriti evolved during this period to address some of his
concerns, but did not reach the critical insight that would truly make it Theatre of the Oppressed. Finally in 1990–91, he came across the work of Augusto Boal and learned about Forum Theatre. This opened up a new horizon for Ganguly and led to a rebirth of Jana Sanskriti, which has continued to use Forum Theatre ever since, and has even adapted the format of Forum Theatre to fit the needs of the areas where it works.¹

Jana Sanskriti’s work necessitates participation of the deprived marginalised rural people, especially women and youth, who suffer daily exploitation in their lives. They are mostly poverty stricken, often dropouts from school, lack regular employment and are subject to caste and gender exploitation. These are the real stakeholders of Jana Sanskriti’s work, who are otherwise faceless and silent, with little say in their own process of development, adding to their marginalisation.

4.2.2 Design of Forum Theatre

structure Jana Sanskriti uses Forum Theatre to ‘create a space for collective and reflective action’. In this form of theatre, actors on stage enact an event from real life which projects a concrete situation of oppression and then motivates the audience to participate, debate, and argue on this issue with the objective of finding out ways to end this oppression. The play begins with a story, which depicts a real life scenario with which the audience can identify, and then reaches a climax where the social problem being depicted becomes acute between the oppressed actor(s) and the oppressor actor(s). When the show reaches a point where conflict or arguments between the actors have heightened in the play regarding the problem, the play is stopped without resolving the problem, and at this point the audience is invited to come on stage and play the role of the oppressed or protagonist and present their solutions to the problem. The idea is that people from the audience can voluntarily come up and join the play to argue their point or express their thoughts by replacing the protagonist. This section of the play is called the Forum. Members from the audience who come up on stage to debate and argue their points of view and suggest solutions transform from passive spectators to engaged and active ‘spect-actors’. Different members of the audience may participate to play the role of the oppressed and present their own arguments and analysis of the problem. This way, a collective and dynamic understanding and perception of the

¹ See Ganguly (2010a) for a detailed account of the early history of Jana Sanskriti and its evolution during its formative years.
problem develops. Forum Theatre involves the audience to the extent that the audience gets angry, agitated, and protests against the oppression.

**Joker** The Forum is guided by an actor from the theatre group who is designated as the ‘joker’ (Boal’s terminology; the word also means ‘anchor’ in Portuguese). It is the Joker’s responsibility to ensure the smooth running of the Forum and guide the debates. The role of the Joker is usually played by a senior and experienced member of the team who can channelise discussions in the right direction, handle agitated audiences, and at the same time keep the Forum going.

**The Forum as a Space for Growth** Various possible solutions are enacted in the course of a single forum by the spect-actors who present their own analysis, opinions, logic and counter-logic of the oppression resulting in collective knowledge about the oppressed situation in real life. Thus, an argumentative space is created in Forum Theatre, the objective of which is not creating negative conflict or ‘winning over’ somebody, but is about generating an environment of collective learning, feeling, and rationalising the situation or problem. This process unifies people, actors, and spectators to come together to think about and suggest possibilities and strategies for liberation from that oppression in real life in a collective way. The theatre show itself does not provide any solution to the social problem. It helps the participants to intellectually evolve and become social critics of their own reality.

**From Spect-Actors to Spect-Activists** The same play is taken to the same audience more than once to provide multiple opportunities to the spectators to continue with their debates and discussions and come to a resolution. Even when the play remains the same, the Forum becomes different at every show. When the same show is performed in front of the same audience more than once, sometimes the Forum becomes more interesting and engaging because the spectators who are already informed and aware to some extent generate new discussions and new ways of dealing with the issues / problems concerned. Hence new thoughts emerge, and the participants, both the actors and the spectators, evolve intellectually. This process of debating and discussing the oppression depicted in the play, understanding the complexity of the problems or situations and reflecting on how to resolve and reconcile the problem requires an ongoing engagement with collective thinking before taking action. Thus repeated viewing of the same play and participation in the different
Forums provides the opportunity to the spectators to explore solutions for their off-stage lives. This also leads to an environment where the audience continues to discuss the concerned issue collectively and freely, without fear or intimidation. Over a period of time an environment is created which enables collective action outside theatre by the spect-actors. Passivity is thus overcome, the culture of silence and acceptance of the oppression is broken and the spect-actors turn into ‘spect-activists’ (a term coined by Jana Sanskriti) and take collective action against the oppression. The most important factor that turns audience into spect-actors and spect-actors into spect-activists is the construction of a non-hierarchical relationship between the actors of Forum Theatre and the audience, wherein both the actors and the spectators learn from each other and inspire each other to act off-stage. Thus the principle behind Forum Theatre is that learning happens both ways. The attitude of the actors should be that ‘we are here to discuss.’ The feeling that ‘I am also learning from you’ has to be genuine and not theoretical. Only then will this format of theatre work. The spectators are respected for their knowledge, opinion, and perceptions and are treated as rational thinkers who participate in a democratic space for collective learning and are eventually mobilised to take collective action for liberation from oppression in real life. The spect-activists thus act as rational social actors who make an effort to transform their oppressive reality, which then leads to a social transformation.

Jana Sanskriti explains its Forum Theatre method as one which does not provide any direct solutions to the social problem or oppression but enables both the actors and the spectators to grow intellectually. Thus, problems of patriarchy or domestic violence cannot be solved by organising a thousand shows alone; what leads to an action for bringing about social change is the critical understanding of the problems through discussion and collective thinking by the oppressed villagers and evolving the ways of combating this problem. To quote Ganguly (2010b:147):

When actors and spectators act onstage, they are actors and spect-actors, and while they act outside the stage to bring change in their reality, they become activists. Our method here brings acting and activism, acting onstage and offstage, into relation and confrontation with each other.

An interesting dimension of Jana Sanskriti’s work is that it reaches out to all strata of rural audience through its Forum Theatre—those who suffer extreme poverty, deprivation and
exploitation; those who are less deprived, poor, and exploited; and even those who are comparatively better off. The objective is to learn how everyone is thinking about the oppression or the problem addressed in the play, because any social problem concerns all the people living in a society. In order to generate collective will and action to cope with the oppression, it is critical to raise the consciousness of the society as a whole including those who are not directly affected by the oppression as well as those who are. For example, dowry is a practice for which the entire society is responsible. Therefore in order to abolish the practice of dowry and bring about positive social change, everyone in the society needs to be aware or conscious of the problem and its different dimensions. The Forum Theatre work by Jana Sanskriti has taken the form of a socio-political grassroots movement because of its intensive strategy of working in the same geographical areas for more than 27 years. Hence the actors and the spectators know each other well and interact, negotiate, and organise continuously to bring about social change for their betterment.

**THEMES**

Many different themes are identified and theatre productions are developed on those themes. Considering the strong presence of patriarchy in the village society of India, issues related to women’s oppression naturally come up as recurrent themes. The themes vary from place to place depending on the local problems and needs, but issues related to patriarchy are common for all of Jana Sanskriti’s teams in West Bengal. People’s agenda is supported through Jana Sanskriti’s plays and this agenda or local issue is identified through workshops with the villagers. This agenda is then turned into a theme for the play. Over the last two decades Jana Sanskriti has worked on various issues including corruption in the public distribution system (ration) affecting healthy living and nutrition of the villagers, local liquor production and associated problems of alcoholism and draining of family income, superstitions, caste discrimination, poor quality of rural primary education services, violence against women, dowry problems, child marriage, and child trafficking. The issues may vary from village to village.

Often the focus on some of these themes is maintained for years because the issues are deep-rooted and continue to be relevant. Of course, manifestations of the underlying problems may change over time; for example, the central problem of dowry remains the same but the way dowry negotiations happen are more subtle and indirect. When a play is performed again and again over the years, it may undergo editing depending on the changing local situations, while the central problem or issue remains the same.
The actual performance of the shows is planned by the theatre performers or groups themselves. First, a list of all villages and areas where the group intends to perform is prepared and a day-wise plan is chalked out. In the morning of the show-day or the previous evening, the theatre group members visit those identified places and tell the local people about the exact location and timing of the show. On the performance day, after reaching the show spot, the group also starts playing drums and the local people gather. Since everyone in their area and in the neighbouring villages knows the theatre group they start gathering when they see them coming. On average, each show attracts about 150–200 audience members.

4.2.3 *Forum Theatre in Action*

This section describes an actual theatre performance to enable the reader to visualise Forum Theatre better. A play called ‘Sonar Meye’ (Girl of Gold) is being performed by Jana Sanskriti teams in rural Bengal for the last 18 years (Ganguly 2010b). This play was observed through an audio visual documentation of Jana Sanskriti shared during the interviews. The play is about a girl child being forced to get married, and shows her experience of life before, during, and after marriage, the humiliation suffered by her father, and the problems of dowry. In the play, the girl’s family is very poor. The characters in the play include the young girl who is the protagonist, her parents, and her young brother. The prospective groom and father-in-law come to see and inspect the young girl to see whether she is fit for marriage. They inspect the girl’s looks including her skin complexion, the length of her hair, her eyes, any disabilities that she might have by asking her to walk around, etc. Once they approve of her, dowry negotiations begin. At this point the Forum is opened up to the spectators.

In real life, this issue of child marriage and dowry constitutes different dimensions of oppression, and it is important to understand these dimensions in order to guide the forum and the audience interactions. Having determined the acceptability of the prospective wife through inspection, dowry negotiation starts. This is a socially acceptable practice, however agonising it may be for the girl and her parents. The most oppressed character in the play is the girl’s father who has to bear all the humiliation from the groom’s family and pay the dowry to get her daughter married off early. Moreover, in order to fulfill the requirement of dowry without which he will lose the opportunity
of getting a groom for his daughter, he falls under severe debt. The young girl’s character is also extremely oppressed because her dignity as a person is not recognised and she is reduced to a commodity that the groom’s family is buying.

In the play, the idea or expectation of opening up the Forum at the stage where the young girl is being inspected is to see how the audience reacts to the socially sanctioned norms and oppressions of patriarchy and how they feel that the young girl can be liberated from this oppression. The audience is thus called on to take the place of the young girl and play her role. The woman spect-actors who join the Forum typically refuse to do all those things that the prospective groom asks. For instance, a woman spect-actor does not let the man measure her hair length. They also refuse to marry and express their interest of continuing education. Almost all the spect-actors in the forum speak against the dowry system. Both men and women participate and intervene as spect-actors and try to provide solutions for bringing the girl child out of her oppression. To cite a specific example, in one of these shows, a woman came up on stage to be the spect-actor and replaced the young girl in the play. As the scene was being re-enacted and the prospective groom tried to measure the length of her hair, the spect-actor resisted and said (Ganguly 2010b :151):

Spect-actor: You cannot measure my hair in this way. But it is not my concern what you as an individual is doing. In fact, as an individual, I too can resist your actions. But the question is, why social norms should be such as to give men the authority to inspect women in this way. If women similarly inspected men before marriage, would it be any good?

Upon hearing this dialogue, the women in the audience clapped and supported the women spect-actor. The author explains that the women spect-actor saw the problem depicted in the play as not just a personal issue of one family but was able to analyse the problem as the oppression of the larger issue of patriarchy. As the other women joined in to applaud the woman spect-actor, a feeling of a collective force was generated which motivated the oppressed group to take some form of action against their oppression collectively. As Ganguly (2010b :152) says:

For this woman, the problem depicted in the play is not the problem of some individuals and families . . . she saw the problem of a patriarchal society. This is an interaction when a person is led to articulate not just an event but the social forces producing an event. They can see the origins of a local problem in the broader forces of society.
In this way, the audience grow together intellectually... This is what I am calling an internal revolution — one that breaks human passivity and makes them transformative agents of the external social world.

When the issue of education was raised by the woman spect-actor, the girl’s father in the play stated that he was already educating his son he did not have the financial means to educate his daughter. At this stage the issue of gender discrimination and social exclusion was brought into the bigger gamut of patriarchy. The play at this stage triggered the thought that the daughter was deprived of education whereas the son in the family was offered education, and the spect-actors intervened on this issue as well in the Forum.

One interviewee, a rural theatre performer in the Shyamnagar Shakha, recalling his own experiences of the Forum, said that sometimes audience members get completely involved while participating in the Forum and act out their roles with a lot of emotion. There are instances when the spect-actors cannot hold back their anger and even try to beat up the actor playing the role of the ‘oppressor’ character. It has also been observed by the Jana Sanskriti actors that when the majority in the audience are deprived and exploited having problems and challenges that are more acute, the Forum becomes much more interesting and engaging.

As an example, one such incident that occurred during a play on dowry was narrated by the interviewee. There was a scene where a father and his son had come to see a girl for the son’s marriage and was asking for dowry which included a bicycle among other items. The girl’s father was poor and did not have the means to provide dowry and was seeking mercy from the potential groom’s family. As the scene unfolded depicting how dowry became the most important deciding factor for selecting the girl, the Forum was opened up to the audience. One person from the audience who came up to play the role of the daughter’s father in the Forum got very angry at the actor playing the role of the son’s father. As their negotiation about dowry continued the spect-actor walked out of the stage, picked up a bicycle parked nearby (belonging to someone from the audience) and brought it up into the scene. He gave it to the son’s father and asked him to marry his son with this bicycle instead of his daughter and refused the marriage proposal altogether. The audience applauded the spect-actor at this point thus showing their collective support against the oppression depicted.
During the field interviews I observed an actual Forum Theatre show that was performed in a village in Kulpi by the local theatre team. The show was scheduled to start around five in the evening. When I reached the spot accompanied by a Jana Sanskriti theatre member, the stage was already set and audience had gathered. A black curtain was put up as the wing behind which all the musical instruments were placed and the actors waited for their turns. The audience had gathered on one side. The show started with Kathi dance, a very rhythmic and attractive dance performed by the all the actors. Each of them had two small sticks with which they made the rhythmic sound by clicking the two sticks together and also with each other’s sticks. The founder of Jana Sanskriti had narrated in his interview that interested members of the Jana Sanskriti groups learned this dance form from an artist in South India and started their show with it because the audience liked it very much. In fact, one of the Basar Uttarpara team members interviewed specifically mentioned that she was so attracted to this Kathi dance that it became one of the primary motivations for her to join the group. When she eventually perfected this dance, which has complicated steps and needs a considerable amount of coordination, she considered it to be a big personal accomplishment.

After the dance, one of the actors (who later served as the joker) came on stage to narrate a story about trafficking of a young girl. A young girl was sent to Kolkata to work as a domestic servant and used to send money to her family every month. While she was working, she met another girl and became friends. She got to know from her friend about better work opportunities in some other part of the country. After some days this girl became untraceable and could not be found. She came back to her family in her village after fifteen years with her husband and a few other friends of her husband. Her parents were very happy to find her and she narrated how she has lived happily with her husband for the past years. They also said that they were looking for good-natured Bengali village girls like her for marriage. Seeing how fortunate their daughter has been, they let the other villagers know about the proposals for marriage and few more young girls got married. All of them left the village and they never returned. The reality was that the young girl who went to work in Kolkata was sold and suffered terrible physical and mental abuse. When she lost her charm and beauty she was abandoned. Because of social stigma, she could not return to her parents and had nowhere to go. During this time, for her own survival, she agreed to take more men to her village for trafficking some more girls like her. In return she was offered some money with which she could survive.
After this story was narrated as a prelude to the show the actor announced the starting of the play *Pachar* (trafficking). In the first scene, a village household was shown where a young girl, Bulti, was getting ready for school and asking her mother to give her food. Her mother was busy with household chores and was serving food to her and her grandfather. During this time, Bulti’s father entered the scene. He had consumed a lot of alcohol and was intoxicated. He came to Bulti’s mother and asked for food and when she expressed her annoyance at his current state, he started beating his wife. Bulti and her grandfather tried to stop him and a commotion was created. The actors froze and the scene ended.

The next scene showed another household where a mother was scolding her disobedient and undisciplined teenage son, Apu, who just listened to Hindi film songs and chatted with friends and did not go to school or help his parents in any way. While an argument was going on between Apu and his mother, two men came in. One of them was a local villager’s son Chhotu who is now in his twenties and the other man was a businessman. Chhotu started a conversation with Apu’s mother and said that he was working in a factory as its manager and was earning about 30 thousand per month and he also introduced his companion as the owner of several factories and a business person. Apu’s mother, fed up with his son, requested Chhotu to look for a job for Apu and Chhotu immediately confirmed that such an opportunity exists in one of the factories and it will be easy to appoint Apu in a factory job. He also added that Apu’s salary may start from five thousand but it will soon go up to ten or even twenty thousand. Apu’s mother upon hearing this got very interested and became ready to send Apu with them. Chhotu then asked her about his search for a young village girl who could serve as a maid servant in a house in the city and Apu’s mother informed them about Bulti with the assurance that she will talk to her parents about this opportunity. At this stage, all the actors froze and the scene ended. In the third scene, Apu’s mother came to meet Bulti’s mother and informed her about the job opportunity for Bulti in the city. Bulti’s mother did not like the idea and refused to send her daughter saying that she is very young and she should study now. Apu’s mother tried to convince her and asked her to think it over. Shortly after she left, Bulti’s father came in and Bulti’s mother told him about the job opportunity. Bulti’s father though a little apprehensive at first liked the idea when he heard the possible salary that she may be earning. While their conversation was going on, a neighbor came in and upon hearing the story tried to stop them from sending their young daughter to the city with unknown people. The two men, Chhotu and the business person also came into the scene at this
time and said that they were in a hurry and would have to leave on that very night. Bulti’s father was convinced by their proposal and asked Bulti’s mother to make their daughter ready for sending her with them. Bulti’s mother, though unfavourable to the whole idea, could not stand up against her husband and brought Bulti in to send her with them.

The next scene showed a prostitute zone. The senior lady of the group was collecting money from the other women when the business person entered the scene with Bulti. Bulti looked scared and doubtful and kept on crying saying that she did not want to live in this place and wished to go back to her mother. The business person forcefully sold her to the senior lady and left. Bulti was then taken behind the curtains and after some time the audience heard the painful scream of Bulti. She was then covered in a cloth and was hurled in front of the audience, marking her entrance into the dark world of exploitation and abuse.

Here the play was stopped and the actors returned to the third scene where Chhotu and the business person was trying to convince Bulti’s father about possible job for Bulti in the city. They were saying that since Bulti was young the house where she would work as a maid servant will take good care of her, give her easy household work and also pay her well. In this scene the neighbor and Bulti’s mother were also present. Here the Forum was opened up and one of the actors requested participation from the audience to play the role of the neighbour who was trying to discourage Bulti’s family from sending her away. A woman from the audience came on stage to play the role of the neighbour, and urged the father to not send Bulti away without knowing where exactly she is being taken. She also said that Bulti is young and she should not work as a maid at this early age but rather go to school and study. The audience clapped at her response. This woman spect-actor then went back to the audience. More participation from the audience was encouraged and some of the women members of the audience started a dialogue from within the audience. One of them said Bulti should not be sent because her father has not checked the credibility of Chhotu and his companion. Another woman added that Bulti’s father should accompany Bulti and himself go and check where Bulti was being taken to. Another person said to Chhotu that he should take older people for maid’s job because older people can understand and do such job better and also suggested him to consider taking Bulti’s father at which the audience clapped and laughed. As the Forum continued, another person from the audience came up to play the role of the helpless mother. This spect-actor became very vocal while playing the role of Bulti’s mother, and said that she cannot allow Bulti to leave for work. Bulti is young and innocent and she will not be able to
manage work at this age. She refused to send her for money stating that their family may have one less meal but stay happier together. During the Forum the conversation also digressed to the problem of alcoholism where a spectator stated that Bulti’s father was interested to send her daughter because she would earn money, which he can then use to buy more liquor and this she would not allow. The women in the audience clapped in agreement. After the two spectators acted out their role the Forum was stopped. The actor who was coordinating the Forum reiterated the points that were discussed and emphasised that checking the credibility and whereabouts of the outside person who came to take Bulti was very important and that she should have been accompanied by her father.

4.2.4 Follow up to Forum Theatre

Jana Sanskriti realises that just performing plays is not enough, and further support is needed to nurture those villagers who come forward to participate in the Forum to give them a chance to do something for their own betterment. In order to fulfill this need, Jana Sanskriti actors note down the names and contact details of Forum participants along with what they have said in the Forum. Meetings are later organised with these villagers in groups of five to seven people, where specific action points are discussed and finalised. Such discussion points include whom to approach with a particular concern or problem, whether the panchayat and block development office should be involved, what activities need to be undertaken, etc. These group meetings also serve as platforms for further sharing of community perceptions and needs in a focused way and strengthen the community mobilisation process. Active participants in the meetings are enrolled as members of the Human Rights Protection Committee, a people’s network that Jana Sanskriti has formed at the grassroots level with the active villagers of their intervention areas. This Committee provides a common identity to villagers who raise their voices against oppression, fight against exploitation, and uphold their rights to education, health, shelter, etc., through grassroots activism. The motivated villagers who join the Forum and the Human Rights Protection Committee as activists influence and mobilise more people to join their movement, thus strengthening their efforts. It was stated by the Founder Director of Jana Sanskriti in his interview that the Human Rights Protection Committee currently has 40,000 members.
4.2.5 *Forum Theatre Training Process*

The villagers who are attracted to Jana Sanskriti’s work and theatre and show interest to engage have to join the training process to learn about Forum Theatre. The training focuses on Forum Theatre structure, its principles, philosophy, purpose, and achievements. The process also focuses on developing new plays, as well building life skills of the participants.

Jana Sanskriti theatre specialists who are members of its regular core team, as well as the founder himself, train community members in groups through a residential training process in their workshop space cum office at Madhyamgram. The training process is rigorous and targets not only development of a theatre production but also internal development of the performers themselves through a method of introspection and knowledge enhancement.

The entire process of training is essentially participatory. The participants are asked to identify the social issues or oppression, which they would want to address in their area. Jana Sanskriti theatre specialists facilitate this process through discussions and interactions among the group members. The participants are oriented on the structure, purpose, and principles of Forum Theatre and how it can fight inequality and exploitation experienced by the participants in their lives. These discussions are also intended to make the participants conscious not only of the problems that exist in their lives but also the role they can play in the process of their own liberation. Once the social issues or problems are identified, a theatre workshop starts. The workshop has different stages of learning and skill development. In the beginning, through different participatory activities, the shyness and inhibitions of the participants are broken and their confidence, communication, and presentation skills are improved. After every such activity, the participants are asked to think and analyse how these activities could be related to their real life issues and behaviour. This not only helps those who have never done theatre before, but also those who were previously practitioners of folk theatre or stage theatre. For example, some of the participants who have been trained by Jana Sanskriti had prior engagement with folk theatre and also performed local folk theatre, Gajon, in their villages. One of the respondents, a regular Jana Sanskriti performer today, is also a Gajon performer. He stated that Jana Sanskriti’s training has not only helped him to develop self-esteem and confidence about his internal abilities, even though he is poor and illiterate, but has also taught him to be a good actor. Being a Gajon actor, he immensely valued his training in acting skills.
Jana Sanskriti has given him lots of opportunities to build and develop himself, which has given him the courage and strength to express, voice out and talk freely and rationally.

An example was narrated by one of the interviewees. A game is played with two participants at a time, where one of them acts as a blind person and the other person play the role of a guide. The person who is acting as the guide takes the hands of the blindfolded person and makes him walk around the room in any direction he likes. The blindfolded person follows the guide. Barriers are kept in the room such as chairs, tables, etc. and the blindfolded person stumbles on those depending on how he is being guided by the other person. The same participants then switch roles and play this game again. The blindfolded person then becomes the guide and vice versa. This game is then analysed and the participants are asked to explain how they felt when they were blind and how they felt when they were guiding. The participants express their feelings of fear, uncertainty, and lack of capability to do things on their own when they were blindfolded. While acting the role of a guide they felt confident and a sense of responsibility towards the blindfolded person. Then this game is compared to reality. It is realised that in real life many of the participants have followed other people blindly without any conscious thought of their own or without any information and knowledge about the reality. Relating to one’s own life, the participants reflect that blindly following one’s father or husband or local political parties make them weak, incapable of using their own judgment, and victims of exploitation.

Several such games / activities are carried out, making the participants think on their own about the problems they face in their lives in the villages and motivate them to analyse their own behavior and actions. These activities continue for one or two days. The participants realise that through this type of theatre they would be depicting the realities and issues of their own lives, which may include the problems of seasonal income, unemployment, poverty, corruption at the Panchayat level, lack of medicine and proper medical services in the villages, etc.

The workshop participants are also taught ‘image-making’, where the participants are asked to develop theatrical images, in groups of 3–4 members, through small actions depicting the issue/problem at hand. This exercise helps to develop the imagination, creativity, and analytical skills of the participants.

After these preliminary activities to orient them, participants are asked to develop a story, a script and a theatre production collectively. Forum Theatre is not developed on the basis of a pre-written script but the script is written while improvising the play. After identifying a social problem
or issue the actors start developing the production with impromptu dialogue. The participants are divided in groups of four to six members and are asked to develop a skit or small production on the different aspects of the issue identified. Images are first developed depicting the identified issue and then dialogues are inserted into these different images. In this process six to ten images or scenes get developed with dialogues. Under the guidance of Jana Sanskriti theatre specialists, these are then combined to create a complete play. The process essentially makes the participants develop their own play with self-developed images and dialogues.

Since the actors address problems or oppressions that directly affect them, they act out real characters with real conversations. As the play develops dialogues are added and changed. Jana Sanskriti describes this process as ‘scripting plays’ instead of ‘playing the script’. This process entails critical understanding of the society and the nature of the oppression as well as analysis of the oppressed and the oppressor characters from different perspectives. Thus, the process of incorporating dialogues and developing the script is a spontaneous exercise guided by the participants’ own thought processes. With the help of the trainers, the complete production is continuously refined through participatory discussions about the scenes and the dialogues, in order to make the production better. Through continuous revisions, a final production is developed, to be taken to the field. Once the production is fully satisfactory and the final show is ready along with the dialogues, the script is written down and then used by the theatre groups in future. Sometimes a play is also edited after enacting it in front of the audience, based on audience interactions and feedback.

In this entire training process, even before the production is taken to the village audience, the actors themselves become spectators of their own reality through the process of developing the production. Forum Theatre is thus a powerful tool for self-introspection by the performers and makes them critics of their own social existence. Personal problems and oppressions at the individual level are analysed in a larger context as social constructions, becoming the first step towards becoming agents for social change.

The training process not only includes capacity development in theatrical skills, script and production development, and self-development of the participants, but also knowledge-building on the issue or problem under consideration. In order to act, it is important to understand the larger issues and contexts. The training on the issue to be addressed is a very rigorous process undertaken before developing the actual production. The actors or performers undergo technical
training sometimes by external specialists about the complexities of the problem. For example, corporatisation of agriculture is a social issue. In order to understand this complex issue, Jana Sanskriti has invited political scientists and economists and organised classes for the actors.

Thus, the overall process of developing Forum Theatre involves capacity building of the performers in communication and presentation skills, development of independent thinking, analytical skills, creativity and imagination, and transformation from passivity to an active, conscious, and aware state of being. The strength and quality of Forum Theatre as a product depends on the success of it as a process.

4.2.6 Integration of Folk Theatre and Forum Theatre

Although Forum Theatre as practised by Jana Sanskriti has been adapted from the foreign concept of Theatre of the Oppressed, it has succeeded in appealing to the rural audience in West Bengal. Jana Sanskriti has been able to successfully integrate a Western form of theatre with local theatre forms. People who practice it or watch it do not feel that this is an alien form and internalise the philosophy of Forum Theatre as their own.

Historically, West Bengal has had a long and rich culture of urban as well as folk theatre. Although the urban elitist sophisticated theatre tradition can boast of remarkable achievements, it is ultimately derived from the Western proscenium theatre tradition, and retains the hierarchy between actors and the spectators, rarely breaking the fourth wall. On the other hand, rural folk theatre has always promoted an intimate democratic space between the audience and the actors during the performance, which creates a much closer and deeper relationship with the audience.

Moreover, rural folk traditions have always taken stories from our epics that have elements of controversy or conflict. These rural folk theatres depict stories from our mythologies and epics dealing with real and controversial characters with emotions and conflicts that the audience can identify with. As an example, Ganguly cited the play *Karna Badh Pala* (The Death of Karna), which shows the faults of Arjun, one of the heroes of The Mahabharata. Krishna, who is treated as God, is also not beyond controversies. So, making a character ‘controversial’ and ‘real’ is something that the rural audience is exposed to and is used to watching. Therefore, in the Theatre of the Oppressed, the person who comes up on stage from the audience during the forum is aware about
the controversial nature of the characters in the play not only from their real life experiences but also from the age-old theatre forms they have been experiencing.

Jana Sanskriti claims that in Forum Theatre, the intimacy that the actors try to build with the audience is what the audience actually wants, even though they may not realise that intellectually. Therefore what is new to the rural audience is the structure of creating the Forum for ‘giving intellectual space to the ordinary people’. This technical part is new to the audience, but the ‘ideology’ behind Forum Theatre is not new. What Jana Sanskriti practices is a new format, a new learning exercise, and a change from what the actors are used to practicing. Forum Theatre satisfies the psychological and emotional needs of the rural spectators in a way that is similar to traditional folk theatre and is therefore internalised easily.

4.2.7 Challenges in Forum Theatre

Jana Sanskriti through its Forum Theatre format tries to break the hierarchy of the relationship between actors and spectators. This is a challenging process. For example, the joker who guides and manages the role-playing by the spect-actors is often tense and starts measuring the success of the play by the number of spect-actors the team is able to mobilise to come up on stage. However, the number of people who become spect-actors is not the real target of the Forum Theatre; what is important is how the spectators engage with the issue as spect-actors, their interactions, and their analysis. It is a challenge for the joker to break the hierarchy between them and the audience and create a comfortable space to interact freely so that spectators are motivated to come on stage. It is only when the joker and the actors consider their audience as intellectuals and capable of thinking and reflecting that they are able to create the democratic space for the audience. Jana Sanskriti considers this as one of the most challenging tasks in the process, which gets easier only with practice and experience.

Ganguly further explained that in the current socio-political conditions the villagers are used to a process of development that is aid driven. With this mental orientation that currently prevails, the villagers have lost the wish or initiative to do or create something on their own. The current system does not promote collective action but nurtures a culture of alienation. It is a challenging task for Jana Sanskriti to continuously break this passivity and alienation. The demands and vested
interests of donors, political parties, etc., are difficult to combat. Also, if Jana Sanskriti wants to spread the movement of the Theatre of the Oppressed across the country they have to compromise to get money, and to get funding they will have to do what the donors want or demand. This is a threat because under such circumstances Jana Sanskriti will have to move away from its activism, commitment, and dedication as well as its connection with other such activist movements.

4.3 processes of community organising and collective action

The community groups who engaged with the Forum Theatre of Jana Sanskriti have organised themselves to undertake collective action and lead social activism at the grassroots level. Such community driven activities include performance of Forum Theatre shows to generate awareness and activate the minds of the rural communities on various forms of oppression and social problems. In addition to such shows, the sensitised and active community groups have organised themselves to take collective action against social oppression.

The community members who have been capacitated to perform Forum Theatre by Jana Sanskriti carry out shows on their own in their own village and the neighbouring villages regularly. In the Kulpi block for example, more than a hundred shows on human trafficking have been performed in the last year. Similar large scale campaigns have also been held in Kulpi on girl child education. According to a core group member, such sustained campaigns have changed the attitude and behaviour of parents, and girl children are sent to school regularly in Kulpi. The Mahila Samity Group of Basur Uttarpara regularly performs about ten to twelve shows per month in their own village and the surrounding villages. They develop their own productions and decide where and when to hold the shows. They have established themselves as an organised social group who meet to discuss social issues or problems to address, analyse the issues, develop productions, and actually carry out social activism through Forum Theatre.

The Mahila Samity members also fight for the legal, social and political rights of the villagers and raise their voice against oppressions and all the wrongs that are happening in their society. For example, alcohol addiction among men in these villages is a huge problem that aggravates wife beating and exploitation of women, and negatively affects the livelihood of the families as a whole. As women are directly affected by this issue, they campaign against alcohol addiction and
illegal liquor brewers and shop owners regularly. Through their Forums they energise other women viewers and strengthen their position to fight against the problem. The organised women’s groups have broken up local liquor shops and breweries in their villages, and their actions have created fear among the local liquor shop operators. The women’s group has also created pressure on the local administration and has *gheraoed* (surrounded) Panchayat offices to pressurise them to take action against illegal liquor. Both men and women’s groups have also acted against corruption in the ration distribution system. Earlier the ration shops, which were supposed to remain open for five days a week, were opened only for two days, and the amount of ration distributed to the villagers was much less than the actual amount earmarked for them. No receipt was provided to the villagers. The system lacked transparency. Community groups raised awareness and consciousness of the villagers on the corruption of the ration dealers and the regulations through Forum Theatre. As a result the villagers are now better aware of their rights and are not fooled by the ration dealers anymore. Due to the continuous activism, ration dealers are now afraid of cheating the villagers. They are now transparent about how much stock they have and give the due allotted amount of ration to the villagers.

The Human Rights Protection Committee, the network of organised community members from different areas of Jana Sanskriti’s interventions, continues activism on various locally pressing issues and has 40,000 official members who are registered and pay a fee of Rs. 6/- per year to keep their membership. The community theatre group members and the active community members of Human Rights Protection Committee work closely with the *Gram Sadashya, Panchayat Pradhan*, and Block Development Officers (BDO) for local social development and proper implementation of social schemes such as the *Mid-Day Meal* (MDM) scheme to provide free lunches in school, and the *Right to Education* (RTE) Act. For example, the MDM scheme had been halted for more than two years in the village schools in Kulpi because of political tensions between the two dominant local parties, both of whom wanted control of the scheme to get access to the funds allotted to the scheme. As Jana Sanskriti’s community teams are strong apolitical social activist groups trusted by the villagers, the BDO requested them to intervene. These community leaders held several meetings with the local villagers and with the members of the Human Rights Protection Committee to develop a strategy to re-start MDM. In consultation with the local villagers, they mobilised the local government to engage local *Mata Shiksha Samitis* (Mothers’ Committees) to run the MDM
programme. Mata Shiksha Samitis are formed by mothers of children currently studying in these schools, and engaging them to run the MDM program ensures local ownership of the programme. To ensure an equitable system of participation and profit-sharing, it was decided that every year the members of this Mother’s Committee will change. Currently this model is continuing with support from the BDOs in two primary schools in the two villages in Kulpi — Lakkhibasa (Keoratala) and Panchtala (Karanjali). After starting MDM successfully in those two villages through this model, the BDO sent a circular to all the villages in Ramkrishnapur area (where Jana Sanskriti does not directly work) that all the primary schools where MDM had stopped will have to adopt this model for running the MDM programme. Currently this model is working successfully in the above mentioned areas. Thus, collective action of the organised groups not only creates awareness and mobilises activism but actually contributes to effective implementation of local development programmes through community participation, leadership, and action.

According to Jana Sanskriti, through their work in the same rural areas over a period of 27 years, they have been able to break the passivity of the people. They noted that over time the dominating force in grassroots activism has been that of organised women’s groups. However, there are still several challenges that the organised grassroots movements have to counter and overcome. As Jana Sanskriti teams point out the flaws and corruption of the government system and challenge it through their theatre, their teams often face problems in the field when representatives of the local government and local political forces create disturbance during their shows and try to spoil the Forum and disengage the audience. There have also been incidents when political parties’ people have tried to influence young minds of their group by saying bad things about Jana Sanskriti’s theatre and work, trying to break up the group. They have also tried to stop the women from performing by threatening them. However, the organised community groups have continued to explain their theatre-based work and have invited local government representatives to watch and understand their shows. Over time, the community members have developed good relations with the local BDOs and Panchayats as discussed above and receive their cooperation whenever needed.
4.4 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has presented the process of Forum Theatre and how it affects community organisation and mobilises community action. The different stages of the theatre production have been outlined in detail to demonstrate how it engages with the audience and transforms them from spectators to spec-actors and then to spect-activists. The production process of Forum Theatre is also an important aspect, which contributes to developing readiness and confidence among the community actors for challenging oppressive social norms and practices. The chapter also highlights the challenges faced while performing Forum Theatre, from the community as well as political actors who are threatened by its power to initiate collective action and activism around social issues. The Forum Theatre format has its unique features, which make it distinct from other types of social theatre. Contact Base’s format of interactive street theatre, which is another form of social theatre, is discussed in the next chapter.