Comparation between Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base

It may be interesting to understand the similarities and differences between the forms of theatre practised by Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base in terms of their ideologies, approaches and processes. While Jana Sanskriti is an activist organisation directly working with Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, Contact Base is an NGO primarily using theatre for social campaigns and social communication as part of commissioned projects. Both formats have their specific challenges and strengths and tackle vulnerability within rural communities through addressing power relations within these communities.

In this chapter, we compare Theatre of the Oppressed as practised by Jana Sanskriti and Theatre for Development as practised by Contact Base. The different aspects based on which a comparison has been drawn between the two organisations include historical and theoretical context, ideological underpinnings, organisational structure, relationship with the community, theatre formats, expected outcomes, research and documentation, and funding of the interventions.

6.1 Historical and Theoretical Context

Jana Sanskriti’s theatre, in its current form, was inspired by Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and its objectives, ideology, and processes. The founder of Jana Sanskriti at a stage in his life was disillusioned by the socio-political mechanisms of the State and was looking for a way to establish a more participatory, equitable, and inclusive way for reducing oppression in the lives of the rural communities he worked with. He realised the power of performances on the people he was working with and started Jana Sanskriti as a group that used theatre for raising awareness. Eventually he came across the work of Augusto Boal and incorporated the ideas of Theatre of the Oppressed into Jana Sanskriti’s theatre.

Augusto Boal was himself inspired by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationist. Freire had developed the concept of popular education aiming at the illiterate and poor people of the Brazilian Northeast.
He emphasised the importance of dialogue and collective action in the process of transforming their oppressed situations (Ferreira and Devine 2012). Freire also laid out the importance of lived experiences in the education process as against the ‘banking method of education’, which views students as empty containers into which knowledge is to be deposited by experts. Therefore, central to his theory of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed was an approach of dialogue and collective action wherein powerless people are no more acted upon but themselves initiate action to become subjects of their own lives. Freire termed this process as ‘conscientização’ (roughly translated as awareness) through which the oppressed people are able to analyse their own social, political, and economic reality and ‘to enter the historical process as responsible Subjects’ (Freire 2005:36). Thus, it enables the oppressed to analyse social, political and economic oppression and act collectively to liberate themselves from the oppression.

In continuation of this movement initiated by Freire, Boal conceptualised and developed Theatre of the Oppressed in the 1970s with the same philosophy. It was a theatrical expression of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed where he introduced the concept of spect-actor — the passive spectator turned into active actor, which broke the hierarchy between the performer and the audience and introduced dialogue, active thinking and interactions between the performers and the audience, thus building an equitable space for collective action.

Jana Sanskriti further adapted Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed to suit the context and need of the local rural people and introduced the new concept of spect-activist discussed in detail in the previous chapter. Hence, Jana Sanskriti’s format and process has deep roots in the history of liberatory activism.

**Theatre for Development** as practised by Contact Base is designed with the objective of carrying out social campaigns as well as facilitating popular education which is dialogic and interactive.

The foundation of Contact Base’s social campaigns using Theatre for Development is in the Theory of Participatory Communication already discussed in Chapter 2. It may be helpful to revisit this theory and its principles here to set the context for understanding the theoretical underpinnings of Theatre for Development. The concept of a participatory approach in development communication emerged in the 1970s as an alternative to the ‘top-down’ approach of development that was being developed.

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1 Boal has also described various participatory theatre methods, particularly in his books ‘Games for Actors and Non-Actors’ and ‘The Rainbow of Desire’, that can be used without necessarily following his philosophical approach. Contact Base does in fact follow these methods in their theatre workshops and research projects.
criticised and questioned. Participatory Development Communication emphasised the need for using traditional, inter-personal means of communication which would help the communities to identify and analyse the problems and think of solutions themselves. Essentially, ‘participatory communication is characterised by a horizontal flow of communication based primarily on dialogue’ (Prasad 2009 :77).

Based on this basic concept of Participatory Communication, Contact Base has undertaken an approach of social campaign which is informative and interactive, and at the same time mobilises communities to think and sometimes act on the issues dealt with in the campaigns. Such social campaigns trace back to theoretical perspectives of Social Marketing and the Communication-Persuasion Matrix.

The Communication-Persuasion Matrix, also called the input-output framework (McGuire 2012), identifies source, message, channel, and audience as the input variables, and audience responses to campaign stimuli as the output process. Exposure is the process of receiving the message and processing includes mental comprehension, interpretation, cognitive connections and emotional reactions triggered by the message. Exposure and processing leads to learning, attitudinal changes, and behaviour change, which is action taken as per the messages of the campaign (Rice and Atkin 2012). Public communication campaigns are based on various theories. Agenda Setting (McCombs 2004) is about the importance of choosing the right topic depicting the social problems for the campaign which affects the campaign’s impact. Diffusion of innovations (Rogers 2003) establishes the relative advantage of the behaviour being recommended and the process of the individual’s decision to adopt that behaviour as well as diffusion of opinion leadership through interpersonal channels. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 2012) and Heuristic Systematic Model (Eagly and Chaiken 1993) established the relation between the level of audience involvement and its effect on cognitive responses and generation of thought. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1986) established the process of impacting mediated messages through role models and clearly demonstrated behaviour. The theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980, Ajzen et al. 2007) relates to development of personal attitudes, perception of certain norms as established by influential others and motivation to give in for achieving the recommended behaviour. The Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska and Velicer 1997) identifies the stage of progress of sections of the audience in the process of behaviour change for a specific recommended behaviour, thus establishing their preparedness to try, undertake or practice the recommended behaviour. Finally,
Uses and Gratifications (Katz et al. 1973, Rubin 2009) established audience motivation for choosing particular media, being receptive to medial messages and use learned information for adopting particular behaviours.

The methodology of Theatre for Development used by Contact Base as a campaign tool has the theoretical approach of both Participatory Communication and Public Communication Campaigns.

6.2 IIDELOGICAL APPROACH

Even though the goal of both organisations is to create leadership and activism through community actions, philosophically the two organisations are completely different. Jana Sanskriti works as one large group of Forum Theatre activists who truly practice community-led activism where nothing is pre-designed and pre-determined. Their approach is to enable the community who are oppressed themselves to know what they already know as well as realise and analyse that knowledge. Jana Sanskriti’s theatre initiates a journey for the oppressed wherein the oppressed community participants analyse their situation from their own as well as others’ perspectives, and develop an internal revolution which is reflected in the making of the theatre. Once the theatre is taken to the spectators, both the actors and the spectators experience a common identity created by the oppression and think collectively about how to take action against this oppression. As the Forum mobilises spectators to come and take over roles in the play to suggest and act different solutions and possible actions, the process involves scripting the play even while it is being performed, and through collective knowledge building the process scripts the power within the individual actors and spectators and within the collective. The teams of Jana Sanskriti carry on Forum Theatre shows without any payment for these shows because they view this theatre as a rehearsal of the way they can fight oppression and liberate themselves from this oppression. They regularly perform because this theatre helps them to grow intellectually and emotionally, making them confident about their own capability. For these teams, Theatre of the Oppressed is thus an essential component of living. Jana Sanskriti believes that the current political and social system promotes a culture of monologue in a structure of hierarchy where the political parties and social leaders will dictate to others. They feel that a conscious effort is made to control the masses by undermining their right to free thinking and action, and that although ‘various laws have been enacted in recent years to
make government more democratic, ... where there is a lack of political will, laws do not change anything’ (Ganguly 2010a :14). Jana Sanskriti challenges this culture of monologue and promotes dialogue and discussion within community groups to trigger self-reflection, introspection and a plan for collective action. Jana Sanskriti’s theatre promotes this freedom of rational thinking among the oppressed people so that they can think for themselves and others.

Contact Base in contrast works on a project basis as a specialised organisation and pre-designs and pre-defines technical aspects of an intervention to make it most effective. It breaks down the complexities of social problems and issues into simpler and easy to understand messages that are intertwined in stories of the communities. It enhances the communities’ knowledge on rights, laws, regulations and external support systems such as schemes, helplines, etc. The theatre teams are paid for the shows and the campaign is assigned to the local communities. Additionally, it is expected that the trained groups would continue to campaign with financial support from local government or other local stakeholders supporting the same cause.

Jana Sanskriti always works with the ‘people’s agenda’, where the issues to be addressed are necessarily identified by the community. Contact Base takes an approach where it identifies agendas and issues through in-depth local studies and community consultations and then negotiates or integrates these issues with larger social issues put forward by the funders. The organisation also reject projects which are not consistent with their philosophy. However, the themes are still externally decided and not generated by the community, and to that extent, they remain top-down and the threat of imposed agendas with dubious benefits to people remains.

Jana Sanskriti’s core team members clearly view their work as political activism that opposes the current political and social system, which they believe promotes a dogmatic and monological hierarchical culture. In particular, Ganguly feels that laws and policies have no effect when there is lack of political will, and is not interested in engaging with the establishment. Contact Base, on the other hand, takes the less cynical view that the ineffectiveness of existing structures, especially when they are apolitical, is in many cases due to incompetence rather than wilful inaction, whether due to malice or corruption. They feel that to make laws and policies more effective, training and sensitising local stakeholders such as the administration, police, and NGOs is as necessary as sensitising the general community about laws and their rights.
6.3 Organisational Structure

Jana Sanskriti has a core group of Forum Theatre specialists who perform shows themselves, train community groups in Forum Theatre, and support grassroots activist movements. The theatre performers in Jana Sanskriti are the oppressed people themselves. These oppressed people are directly involved in identifying the issues portrayed in theatre they script and develop themselves, making the whole process a rehearsal of the process of liberation from oppression. The trained community groups of Jana Sanskriti continue to generate new movements and motivate and capacitate the community groups to sustain their efforts through Theatre of the Oppressed. Apart from the core and senior theatre group, Jana Sanskriti is essentially a network of community theatre groups scattered across their intervention area, namely parts of the districts of South and North 24 Parganas.

Contact Base is an organisation consisting of non-theatre professionals who are separate from the local communities actually undertaking a campaign. Contact Base designs the campaign, helps the local communities or folk theatre group to develop scripts based on key social messages, trains the community groups in interactive social theatre, and coordinates the actual campaign for a given period of time. The performers are chosen from the local communities but are not necessarily themselves oppressed. The rationale for training local communities is that this makes it easier to overcome the barriers of local language and culture and gain better acceptance within the community at large.

6.4 Relationship with the Community

Jana Sanskriti has worked in the same areas since 1985, and has addressed issues of day to day oppression as well as bigger social problems such as human trafficking through community movements. Jana Sanskriti therefore does not leave the areas of their work. By design, the community groups that are formed become part of Jana Sanskriti’s network of independent activist movements. Because Jana Sanskriti is working in the same areas for so long, it is able to observe and experience the social change along with the community theatre groups and activists over time. The actors, spectators, and spect-actors know each other well and continue to fight collectively...
for their rights. The process of Forum theatre used by Jana Sanskriti is such that it becomes a medium of direct political intervention wherein through people’s participation in bringing about societal change, ‘democratisation of politics’ happens. The Human Rights Protection Committee serves as an umbrella organisation for channeling this action beyond theatre.

For Contact Base, the entire approach is that of an intervention in a campaign mode which is carried out for a specific time period in a systematic pre-designed manner. Thus, the specific number of shows, specific timings of the shows, specific locations where the shows will be held, etc., are pre-determined by the organisation in consultation with some local stakeholders. At the end of the campaign, Contact Base leaves the intervention area. The interventions are sustained by the trained performers and the established community-led action groups. As a follow-up to the shows, Contact Base organises meetings with the community action groups to discuss and strategise their actions. Linkages are established with the local stakeholders such as health workers, administrative officers, police, and local NGOs to support and strengthen their actions.

6.5 Theatre Format and Process

The two organisations work with two different formats of social theatre. In Theatre of the Oppressed as practiced by Jana Sanskriti, the Forum Theatre form has a technical format where the play is stopped in the middle, when the oppressed situation has heightened, and the audience is called upon to participate and provide solutions to the problem. The same act of the play is repeated for every new member of the audience who comes forward to argue their point and voice their opinions at this ‘Forum’. The task of managing the Forum requires skill and is usually assigned to the most experienced actor of the group, who must then effectively facilitate, manage, and continue the Forum. Jana Sanskriti terms this entire process of the Forum as scripting the play by the spectators, and in the process collective knowledge is generated which enables scripting the power to rise against oppression. The same play is also taken to the same audience a number of times at regular intervals to develop this collective knowledge and mobilise collective action. In every show, spect-actors argue and contest oppression on stage through participation in the Forum which triggers rational thought and introspection among the spectators. With every show, the arguments strengthen and mature and finally give shape to possible community action against the oppression.
Thus no solution or messages are provided through the play but the possible solution is evolved through continuous engagement of the spectators on the issue through the play.

Therefore, the principle of Jana Sanskriti’s theatre is that it is not interventionist but is designed, performed, executed and continued by those people for whom this theatre was constructed in the first place. The play is an integral part of the lives of the performers themselves. Another important aspect is that no message or solution is provided in the play. The play rather raises questions for which even Jana Sanskriti performers do not have answers and then the spectators and the actors collectively rationalise the situation depicted, analyse the oppression and come up with possible solutions from multiple perspectives.

This exercise leads to the development of collective knowledge, which motivates and mobilises collective action for social change. Forum theatre through its argumentative process not only foregrounds the societal oppression but also sets in motion processes facilitating intellectual growth, rational thought, internal revolution and introspection of the actors and the spectators which then lead to a collective and external action. Here the individual identity of the actors and the spectators merge into one identity through recognition of a common oppression and a collective role in fighting this oppression.

Theatre of the Oppressed transforms art into the politics of living. A specific incident shown in the play leads to the analysis of the underlying system which gives rise to oppression. For example, the difference between a girl and a boy child transcends the gender difference of this specific case into challenging the system that supports such discrimination. In order to sustain the process of Forum theatre, the methodology is handed over to the oppressed themselves who then continue to make and perform plays as per their needs. The origin of this Theatre of the Oppressed is political activism which is democratic in nature.

Theatre for Development used by Contact Base has a street theatre format, which incorporates a discussion session involving the audience at the end of the show. The goal of the theatre show is not to raise questions or generate collective debate, but rather to effectively communicate predetermined information, typically specific facts related to the social problem, legal and social entitlements, resources such as important helpline numbers, etc., so that the community members can act in an informed manner. It highlights a specific social issue not only to raise awareness about it, but also to provide ‘solutions’. Likewise, one purpose of the post-show interaction is assessing the retention of the key messages delivered through the play. However, another purpose is generating post-show
discussions. The extent to which these goals are achieved depends on how successful the play has been in enthusing the audience. When this happens, discussions touch upon the challenges, gaps, and needs in the field, and community feelings and opinions. Sometimes, if the grievances of the community are strong and the systemic gaps are serious, the post-show discussions get heated with expressions of mistrust about the local administration. It sometimes takes skilled and strong coordinators and theatre performers to close the discussion on a positive note and mobilise the audience to participate in further community meetings.

More importantly, the contact details of audience members who stay back after the show and actively participate in discussions are taken, and are invited to community meetings to discuss possible community actions. Contact Base believes that theatre shows alone cannot lead to social change, and it is important to develop local resources and action groups. Particularly, as Contact Base leaves their intervention area after a project, an important component of Contact Base’s approach is to develop a cadre of possible future leaders for social action through the formation of local community-led action groups. The organisation also carries out meetings and workshops with the local administration and link the community action groups to relevant officers or agencies so that a collaborative initiative can be undertaken at the local level.

Thus, in both the theatre approaches audience reactions and feedback become very important. However, in the case of Jana Sanskriti, stimulating the audience to think and provide solutions to a given problem or oppression in a participatory manner is an end in itself as well as a means to generate collective thinking and action. In the case of Contact Base, it serves the dual purpose of assessing the effectiveness of the performance and identify potential members of local community action groups.

6.6 Expected Outcomes

For Jana Sanskriti, Forum Theatre as a creative expression of the oppressed class is by itself an outcome of their interventions. Forum Theatre provides a space for the oppressed, marginalised communities to fulfill their creative and intellectual desires through scripting the plays, performing the shows, and facilitating the Forum. Thus, instead of using pre-written scripts, the rural communities themselves develop the script as they develop a play. Forum Theatre also fulfills the
objective of motivating the spectators to participate, think, voice their opinions, provide their own solutions, and collectively take action to stop exploitation or oppression. Thus, the audience is not directed to take any particular action or think about a problem in a certain way, but rather the whole process evolves and gets richer with greater community participation, collective reflection, and analysis.

Jana Sanskriti believes that intellectual growth of the oppressed sections of the community is critical for developing their self-confidence, self-introspection, and understanding of the source and ramifications of the oppression. The process of the Forum enables the participants to evaluate and analyse the oppression and become introspective. Through Forum participation, participants go through self-introspection and experience an internal conflict which eventually shapes external collective action. The Forum theatre shows are followed up by meetings organised by Jana Sanskriti with the active members of the community who participated in the Forum to collectively strategise social action. Since Jana Sanskriti works with the same community and in the same area for many years they continue to hold these meetings to strengthen community action. They also go back to the same community with different plays based on different situations of oppression as identified by the community themselves.

In contrast, for Contact Base street theatre is simply a tool to create awareness by delivering social messages through theatre and mobilise rural communities to come forward and take action for their own well-being in an informed manner. Here the actors are mostly professional theatre actors or community members trained by Contact Base, and the audience consists of villagers who watch the shows, identify with the situation, internalise the information and message, and process this information to shape collective action. The street theatre shows are followed up by community meetings with the more active members of the audience of the shows to develop a community based local action group who takes leadership in formulating social action. Contact Base works in an interventionist mode and stops working in their campaign areas once the campaign or the intervention is completed.
It is also interesting to note that Jana Sanskriti does not systematically document their field work. Their focus over the years has been on activism and social change, the knowledge of which is retained only in the memory of the theatre activists. Systematic recording of change and developments, which is essential for both academic and social practitioners to analyse Jana Sanskriti’s success and impact, has not been done. In recent years, Jana Sanskriti has started documenting community feedback from the Forum; each theatre group has a register where they record Forum feedback for future follow-up with these community members. Audio-visuals of some of their plays have also been developed. However, social change that Jana Sanskriti has experienced over the years in their intervention areas is narrated mostly through anecdotal evidence, and the organisation does not attempt to collect data to evaluate the impact of their work. However, unlike Contact Base, Jana Sanskriti’s work, process, and impact has been studied and documented by a number of researchers and theatre activists from different parts of the world, who have articulated its philosophy and approach. The founder of Jana Sanskriti himself has published books and articles on Jana Sanskriti’s methodology, principles, and achievements supported by case studies and field stories which bring out the essence of Jana Sanskriti’s work very well, of which Ganguly (2010a) possibly offers the most comprehensive introduction to Jana Sanskriti’s journey.²

Contact Base on the other hand systematically collects data from the field throughout their project intervention. Pre-campaign data consists of quantitative and qualitative data from primary and secondary sources, case studies, and newspaper articles to understand the current situation and extent of the problem. This data also serves as a baseline for analysing change. During the campaigns, community feedback is systematically recorded at each show and community meeting to build evidence of the local problem as well as document local solutions, suggestions, opinions and grievances. This is used by the organisation not only as important material for strategising future interventions, but also for influencing policy and programmatic changes by the government. After the campaign and meetings, sometimes an end-line study is carried out to analyse immediate change and impact of the intervention. This activity is done especially in case of long term interventions which create some impact in the field. Such end-line studies cannot however measure social change, which needs to be studied over a much longer period. As Contact Base exits a target area after

²See [http://www.janasanskriti.org/publication.html](http://www.janasanskriti.org/publication.html) for a more complete list of publications by Jana Sanskriti.
the project period is complete, it is less likely to be able to measure long-term social change as a result of its interventions. Only in the case of a very few interventions, where the organisation has continued to work for more than seven to eight years, have they documented social change over time.

6.8 Funding

Jana Sanskriti is led by the vision of a single person, the Founder and Director of the organisation. Being a theatre specialist himself, he is invited to undertake workshops on Theatre of the Oppressed across the world, from which he earns technical fees. It is with this money that the grassroots movements of Jana Sanskriti are sustained. Philosophically, the organisation does not believe in involving social development funding organisations as they invariably come with their own agenda, and consequently, Jana Sanskriti has seldom approached such organisations for financial support. The challenge faced by the organisation is its complete dependence on its founder and lack of alternative funding sources to sustain its work. However, it is also interesting to note that the community groups sustain Forum Theatre shows without any payments because they view the process as a rehearsal for social action against oppression in real life and immensely value the intellectual and creative growth they experience out of it. Thus these shows undertaken by the community are not part of any assignment but a way of living.

Contact Base approaches and mobilises diverse funding sources to carry out necessary interventions in the field. It carries out its own research about local needs and gaps, and negotiates with the top-down funding programmes to arrive at a common path where under the umbrella of more global concerns, local needs and problems are addressed. The organisation is run by a core team of educated people who are not theatre specialists themselves but are sensitive to social needs and facilitate community-led movements for social development through theatre. Hence, it faces less crisis and challenges in terms of its own sustenance.
In this chapter, we have presented a comparative analysis between the social theatre approaches of Jana Sanskriti and Contact Base in terms of their ideologies, approaches and processes. One question that naturally arises from this comparison is: to what extent are these approaches truly participatory and inclusive, and how do they compare to the traditional top-down approach towards development? Jana Sanskriti clearly adopts a participatory bottom-up approach as a matter of principle. Although their plays had elements of propaganda theatre in their formative years, they have adopted a truly democratic form of theatre after being exposed to the work of Augusto Boal. The situation is not as clear in the case of Contact Base. At first glance, it seems to represent a top-down approach where messages from its funders are simply articulated and communicated more effectively using theatre-based participatory communication methods. However, Contact Base views the situation as more nuanced, because they do not blindly transmit the messages desired by the funders. Rather, as described previously, they often carry out their own research to identify local needs and gaps based on local feedback, and then approach various funding sources to carry out necessary interventions in the field. Even after undertaking a project, they perform an initial assessment to evaluate ground realities, and when they believe it to be necessary, they negotiate with the funding programmes to arrive at a common path where local needs and problems are addressed under the umbrella of a global agenda. They also decline to undertake projects that they feel are not consistent with their philosophy.

Here it may also be relevant to revisit the analysis of social theatre by Kidd (1985), where he divides the application of what he refers to as popular theatre into a number of categories. Contact Base’s theatre may be considered an example of mass education and rural extension in his classification, whereas Jana Sanskriti’s theatre is an example of community-based participatory development. Kidd criticises the first kind of theatre because it is a message-oriented persuasive form addressing a passive audience who are not involved in developing the content of the communication. However, Contact Base addresses some of these weaknesses by involving local stakeholders, local theatre performers, and sometimes local community groups in developing the messages from an early stage, although the broad topic remains pre-determined. Jana Sanskriti’s theatre is more truly ‘democratic’ because there even the topics are selected by the community. It is important to
note that even in the case of Jana Sanskriti, the topics are selected not in a completely democratic way, but only by those who choose to participate in the process. However, the Forum allows a wider discussion and refinement of the understanding of a topic. Kidd criticises community-based participatory development saying that such approaches often ignore heterogeneity within a community, and may make it possible for the local elites to monopolise development benefits. In our study we did not find any reason to believe this to be a shortcoming in Jana Sanskriti’s approach, although our study was not wide enough to make any definite conclusion.

Perhaps a more relevant question is whether one of these approaches is more or less successful than the other in achieving social change or social development. Unfortunately, even the question could mean different things depending on how one defines development. In any case, our study is not equipped to answer this question in a definitive manner. We come back to this question in the narrower context of empowerment in the next chapter, where we address the question of how social theatre empowers the women who engage with it, and again as part of the concluding discussion in Chapter 8.