

BOAL'S RECEPTION IN INDIA: Dialogism of Jana Sanskriti's Theatre of the Oppressed

Shubhra Ghoshal and Nirban Manna ♦

Abstract: Augusto Boal, the Brazilian theatre personality develops the concept of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) as a dialogic praxis that uses performance as a participatory space in developing collective strategies to bring about social transformation. This paper explores the interactive aesthetics of TO in the Indian context as applied and amplified by Jana Sanskriti (JS). Using the methods of qualitative research with theoretical and comparative referential axis of dynamic synergetic experience, the paper examines dialogic dimensions achieved by JS during the various phases of its theatrical process towards subverting 'monologue' and propagating 'dialogue'. The pragmatics of JS is investigated to foreground that Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of 'dialogism' attains an empirical expression in the *modus operandi* of TO, and a dialogic culture is capable of achieving synergetic dimensions leading to sustainable development in the society.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Boal, Dialogic Aesthetics, Jana Sanskriti, Social Transformation, Theatre of the Oppressed

1. Introduction

The term 'dialogue' does not simply mean conversation of different characters in a play, but it refers to the dynamic exchange of each and every idea which influences and is in turn

♦**Shubhra Ghoshal** is a research scholar at the department of Humanities and Social Sciences in IIT (ISM), Dhanbad, India. Her interest areas include Performance studies, English drama, Indian literature and literary theory.

Dr Nirban Manna is Assistant Professor at Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT (ISM), Dhanbad. His areas of specialization include Indian Theatre, Performance Studies and Translation Studies. As a bilingual translator and scholar, he translated few Bengali plays including Bratya Basu's *Winkle Twinkle*, and *Black Hole*, Partha Chatterjee's *National Playlet* and Tripti Mitra's *Sacrifice*.

influenced by other ideas. Literature has always been dialogic in bridging different ideas, opinions, beliefs and cultures. This dialogic culture manifests itself most powerfully in theatrical performances, as they are the most expressive literary forms, capable of communicating not only through verbal dialogues, but also through different renderings of bodily images. In the recent years, with the rise of socio-political and interactive theatre forms, there has been a growing tendency to explore the dynamics of interactive theatre as a communication tool.

Theatre as an autonomous art form roots from the primitive communal ritualistic performances involving performers and spectators in the single act of devotion, and thus, effecting an egalitarian ambience among the people. With the successive ages, this all-inclusive form of theatre is transformed to a propagandist and commercialized form, with the eruption of barriers between performance and audience, relegating to the audience the roles of 'passive observer' and 'valued customer'. Though theatre starts relying more on audience for its sustenance, significance to audience-involvement is grossly denied. With the realization of theatre's potential as a medium of generating socio-political consciousness in the society, however, the exigency of interaction with the audience begins to be felt again. Thus, towards beginning of the 20th century, several attempts to restore the lost glory of audience's status are made.

The process of entrusting a pivotal role to the audience drawing them out of their inert state initiates with Vsevolod Meyerhold's application of 'biomechanics'¹ on the stage, and also with Filippo Marinetti's structure of 'variety theatre',² in which "the spectators actively responded during the performance with indications of approval or disdain, rather than waiting passively

¹'Biomechanics' is a movement-centred system of actor-training, developed by the Russian actor and director Vsevolod Meyerhold in the 1920s. It relies on shaping the thought process of actors through physical training.

²'Variety Theatre' is associated with the Italian theorist F. T. Marinetti, which subverts conventional norms of theatre performances, seeking audience attention through theatrical extravaganza.

until the curtain went down to applaud.”³ These attempts get a new dimension, with the rise of many experimental theatres, radicalizing the dramaturgy, production, and reception of a performance. Samuel Beckett’s renunciation of the conventional structure of plays in his ‘Theatre of the Absurd’,⁴ Antonin Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’,⁵ forcing audience-engagement in a subconscious level, and Jerzy Grotowski’s experimentations in stripping rich proscenium theatre naming it ‘Poor Theatre’⁶ pave the way towards increasing the physical and cognitive proximity between the stage and the audience. This investigation reaches another dimension with Brecht’s concept of *alienation*, which encourages a more effective reception of the event, not by ‘empathetic emotion’, but rather, by provoking an ‘intellectual perception’. Brecht’s model of rational communication through theatre is critically exploited and extended by Augusto Boal with the inception of his ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’. The primary objective of Boal’s experimentations is to create better involvement of the audience with the theatrical process so as to generate consciousness regarding the issues depicted in the plays.

2. Augusto Boal’s Theatre and Dialogism

Augusto Boal’s concept sprouts from a suppressing and unstable state of affairs prevailing in Brazil in the 1960s. During that period, Brazil is under the rule of a series of military dictators, leading to a state of suffocating political and economic

³Kirby Michael, *Futurist Performance*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971, 23.

⁴‘Theatre of the Absurd’ is a trend observed in the 1950’s in the works of a few European and American playwrights focussing on the concept of ‘existentialism’ doing away with coherency of conventional structures of plot construction, dialogue delivery and characterization.

⁵‘Theatre of Cruelty’ is conceptualized by Antonin Artaud in the 1930s which aims to engage the audience by resorting to shocking their senses. It assaults the instincts of audience employing horrifying stage, lighting and sound effects.

⁶‘Poor Theatre’ is a form of non-commercial theatre associated with Jerzy Grotowski growing to popularity during the 1960s. In its attempt to bridge the actors and the audience, it eschews all elaborate and lavish stage settings, using body as props.

oppression, resulting in anarchy. In this prevailing despotic scenario, Boal struggles for liberation from repression by utilizing the potential of interactive theatre through which the socio-political problems can be analyzed as well as addressed. Boal believes monologue to be the root cause of all oppression, and strives to eliminate it through propagating a dialogic culture in the society. He says, "I believe in democracy, but in real democracy, not a phony democracy in which just powerful people can speak. For me, in a democracy, everyone speaks."⁷ So, Boal begins experimenting with theatre as a medium of communication, where the oppressed people get a platform to share their thoughts, and to discuss on possible ways of fighting back their oppression.

The two key influences aiding Boal's structuring of the *modus operandi* of TO are Brecht's *alienation* concept, and Paulo Freire's theory of 'power relation and monologist culture'⁸. Instead of emotional identification on part of the audience with the characters of a play, Brecht proposes an objective, intellectual and analytical approach towards the issues presented in the play. By 'alienation', he intends to alienate both the actors and the spectators from the aesthetics of performance, and focus on the content being presented. The spectators should not be empathetically carried away by the portrayal of characters, but should be capable of making judicious assessment of the performance, concentrating on the issues depicted. Similar to Brecht, Boal also creates a distancing effect, by breaking away from the conventional theatrical modes, and by using the technique of 'role switching', where characters are reduced to alienated social masks. However, Boal is not totally opposed to

⁷Boal Augusto, "To Dynamize the Audience: Interview with Augusto Boal", *Canadian Theatre Review* (1986), 47.

⁸This theory finds expression in the seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published into English in 1970 by the educationist Paulo Freire. It provides an analysis of the Marxist class struggle and power relations between the colonized and the colonizer, finding a parallel with the power structures in the present education system.

emotional involvement as Brecht, but expects emotion to raise analytical thoughts, rather than submissive acceptance.

Boal’s ideas are mostly shaped by Freire’s concept of pedagogy of the oppressed. Freire is concerned with oppression in the education system, which Boal translates in the theatrical process. He advocates against the conventional one-way educational structure, where the ‘privileged’ teachers impart knowledge, and the ‘underprivileged’ passive students receive it, which aspires for a two-way collective learning of both the teachers and the students by mutual sharing of ideas and knowledge. Both Freire and Boal believe the root cause of oppression to be passivity and the monologic power structure existing in the society. As Freire opposes the demarcation of teachers and students, and believes in collective learning, Boal also opposes the boundary between actors and spectators (or non-actors), and believes in collective action. Both rely on a dialogic structure, which opposes authoritative imposition and induces critical reflection, leading to social transformation. This notion of dialogism counter posed to monologism finds its roots in the works of the Russian critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. During the analysis of the works of Dostoevsky in his seminal work *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin introduces the concept of ‘dialogism’.⁹ He asserts novel to be dialogic, as it contains different perspectives (voices of multiple characters), and thereby the monopoly of any monologic voice (of the author) be subverted. Dialogism refutes single ultimate truth, and recognizes the existence of multiple voices, capable of engaging with, and altering other voices, giving rise to multiple truths. This dialogic philosophy propounded by Bakhtin extends to application in the educational system by Freire, and Boal finds it to be most relevant in compliance with his theatrical art.

Boal opens a new vista of theatrical dialogism, which strives to restructure the power relations existing in the society by effectuating a democratic space to voice different opinions. While

⁹Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. and ed., Caryl Emerson, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

working as the artistic director of Arena Theatre,¹⁰ he starts the unique method of ‘simultaneous dramaturgy’ through which audience become constituents of the theatrical process. Here, a scene depicting some form of oppression is presented, and then suggestions are invited from the spectators as possible ways of dealing with the issues shown in the play. The suggested alternatives are then enacted by the actors again, which gives rise to further discussions, suggestions and enactments. In this way, the performative space becomes a forum not to conform to the dictates of a pre-determined fixed script, but trying out new versions of a scene by the spectators, simultaneously influencing the dramaturgy of a performance. It reaches the next degree when through ‘image theatre’ technique, the spectators are invited not just to suggest possible alternatives, but to present an image, or a series of images through their own bodies, so as to offer possible strategies or reactions to combat oppressive situations, which then continues to be modified by other spectators. Image formation, mostly, proves to be more evocative than verbal language.

This ‘active engagement’ gets transformed to the next stage of ‘active participation’ in ‘forum theatre’ technique, where the spectators are not just to engage critically with the performance and offer verbal or imagistic suggestions, but are expected to intervene directly to act out his/her suggestion by assuming any role she/he wishes to change in the scripted performance and re-enact the role according to his/her own approach to the situation. This gives birth to the concept of widely popular word ‘spectator’ propounded by Augusto Boal, where the spectators not only speculate over the performance suggesting possible solutions and changes, but also enact the change on the stage at that very moment. While Aristotle’s *Poetics* deals with catharsis, and Brecht’s with critical consciousness, poetics of the ‘Oppressed’ goes one step further, conceiving it as the ‘poetics of liberation’ where, “the spectator no longer delegates power to the

¹⁰Arena Theatre, known as Teatro de Arena, was located at São Paulo in Brazil. It was founded in 1953, and rose to popularity in the 1950’s and 60’s. Boal was the artistic director of this theatre from 1956 to 1971. Arena Theatre came to a close in 1972.

characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself!”¹¹ So, poetics of TO is in compliance with dialogism, as it is not about presenting any absolute solution to a problem, but seeking multiple ways of dealing with a problem. Boal’s experimental theatrical techniques are mainly aimed at discussing political issues and laws of the society, thereby achieving a higher degree of democracy and sovereignty by providing citizens the prospect to participate in legislative decisions. While Boal held the position of the city councillor, thirteen laws were passed using legislative theatre, where suggestions of the citizens were concretized to legislative actions. Thus the monolithic authoritarian power of the legislature gets transformed to a democratic power structure, where multiple voices are duly acknowledged.

3. The Journey of Jana Sanskriti towards Dialogism

Because of the pertinence and applicability of TO in contemporary time, it has gained wide popularity, and has been contextualised and performed throughout the world. To name a few of the groups, there are Ashtar group in Palestine, TO Vienna in Austria, ATG - Actionstheater Halle in Germany, GTO-Maputo in Mozambique and Kaddu Yaraax in Senegal. An International Theatre of the Oppressed Organisation has been set up, creating a network, with the objective of linking the various performing groups. Of this wide Theatre of the Oppressed network, Jana Sanskriti (JS) is the largest single organisation, which is performing in India under the guidance of its director Sanjoy Ganguly. The applicability of TO can be well understood in this country, which is also not an exception to the global socio-political and economic oppressions.

In the 1980’s, with no previous experience in theatre, Sanjoy Ganguly, as a member of an NGO, starts working on the problems of rural people, with the intention of becoming a full time political activist. While working, Ganguly comes to know of the various forms of oppression prevailing in the rural places. He

¹¹Frances Babbage, *Augusto Boal*, New York: Routledge Performance Practitioners, 2004, 38.

also comes in contact with the folk art forms and becomes aware of the convincing power of theatre as the most potent medium to address the sensibility of audience. So, he starts writing, directing, and performing plays, depicting various forms of oppression of the common people. This gives birth to the journey of JS, which was established in 1985 at a village named Badu, near Kolkata. While working for more than three decades, JS has now formed 30 satellite teams throughout India, extending its horizon to other states as Jharkhand, Orissa, New Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Karnataka. These teams reach over 200,000 spectators through their performances. During this period, JS has undergone a number of transformations in the attempt to become a true 'voice of the oppressed', rather than trying to become a 'voice for the oppressed'. As the actors, at the time of inception of JS, are not from the target group for whom the performances are meant, so often the oppression remains unrealized largely and thereby the suggested solutions remain impractical and based on idealized theories only. As a result, the performance by the 'outsiders' creates a hindrance for the plays to become a true theatre of the oppressed, since the victims of oppression still remain non-participatory spectators. Gradually, this restrictive propagandist framework gets transformed to an egalitarian structure with the realization that the combined efforts of the artists and the local residents can only help in eradication of problems, i.e., when theatre is not 'for the oppressed', but 'by the oppressed' and 'of the oppressed'.

A crucial turning point towards transformation in JS occurs during the first performance of a play *Sarama* (written in 1992) in Mallarpur, a village in Birbhum District of West Bengal. This play projects the story of a slum woman, Sarama, who gets raped by three anti-social musclemen; but rather than receiving any support, she is stigmatized by society, and is utilized as a manipulative tool by political parties. However, Sarama in the play is depicted as a brave and determined woman, who approaches and eventually receives the support of non-aligned organizations, and also takes the bold decision of attaining motherhood resulting from the rape. When the performance ends,

it receives wide appraisal from the audience as representing an ‘empowered woman’, but it is also questioned by a group of tribal women, represented by Phulmoni, regarding the practical feasibility of such an empowerment in real life situations. She points out the stark reality of their (women workers) situation, which forces them to be raped frequently by the owners or the contractors, denying which results in their expulsion from jobs. No organization comes forward in such circumstances to provide moral or financial support. The argument that she brings about is that the decisions and alternatives resorted to by Sarama, as shown in the play are not available to many others like Phulmoni.¹² JS realizes that the issues need to be much more grounded in reality so that fruitful rational discussion can take place. It becomes aware of the limitations of propaganda, and also of the possibilities of performance traditions not just to convey some abstract message, but also as channels for articulation and discussion of issues. Phulmoni’s post-performance interrogation results in the introduction of a new scene at the end of this play in the subsequent performances, pointing out the complicity of the problems. Ganguly realizes that for a healthy and concrete discussion with the audience, the issues and the stories presented must be the enactment of their real lives.

Along this line, the next play *Ithbhata* (The Brick Factory, 1997) details the problems encountered by women workers in factories, represented by the character named Phulmoni.¹³ This play addresses gender issues in multiple manifestations both at home and work places. The constant threat of poverty forces Phulmoni to submit to the demands of the factory contractor for sexual favour. The helplessness of the situation reaches its height when at the end, Phulmoni is declared guilty, but the actual guilty, the contractor, is not even accused. Though there is no immediate solution to these deep rooted problems, they can be collectively addressed by the people, which may transform thinking pattern

¹²Sanjoy Ganguly, *Jana Sanskriti: Forum Theatre and Democracy in India*, New York: Routledge, 2010, 18.

¹³Sanjoy Ganguly, *Where WE Stand: Five Plays from the Repertoire of Jana Sanskriti*, trans., Dia Mohan Dacosta, Kolkata: CAMP, 2009, 16.

of the people and society as a whole in the long run. A continuous exposure to these performances help in developing an objective analysis of the monologic structural constraints of society, which in turn, is expected to effectuate a gradual restructuring of existing power structures.

These vital transformations coincide with another breakthrough, when Ganguly comes in contact with Boal's ideas, and his practices of TO, which are instrumental in the evolution of JS as an interactive art form, where ideas are believed to evolve through interactive communication. Boal's egalitarian ideas make the JS actors to shed artistic elitism and look at the spectators with respect. Ganguly observes that not only a performance has the potential to influence the people, but the rural people also have the potential to influence performances with their actual experiences. So, JS starts staying together with the rural people to empathize with their lives and their problems. It becomes clear to him that the objective with which he started working with the people, i.e., to empower the mass, actually applies to everyone, including himself. Empowerment is not an abstract quality to be attained individually, but it is a unified realization, which is possible only through discussion, interactive discourse, and mutual collaboration of all.

Ganguly gives the glimpse of another barrier to dialogic culture, that becomes evident during the making of the play *Shonar Meye* (Golden Girl), first performed in 1991. This play depicts the struggle of a girl in three stages of her life – childhood, pre-marriage, and post-marriage. The first phase focuses on gender issues operating in families; the second phase foregrounds the helpless situation of the girl subdued under dowry system and early marriage; and the third phase elaborates the mental torture and violence that the girl is subjected to undergo at her in-laws family. In many rural areas, the same plight and challenges are encountered by women. Because of the continuation of feudal values, women are subjected to restrictions even to this day in getting out of their enclosed domestic spaces and engage in public performances. They are the most vulnerable prey to the monologic culture of society, with no escape from their manual

duties, and no scope to engage in dialogues using their intellect or reason. With this play, JS initiates participation of women from working class families for the first time, and it is observed that their inner potential and sense of logical judgement gets revealed. Thus the interactions during the theatrical practice transform the mute muffled householders to energetic, lively and self-confident women. This change in outlook makes Ganguly believe that this theatre has the potential of breaking the culture of silence and passivity. The thought of creating an all women theatre group clicks into the minds of the JS team during this period, so as to derive more benefits from the experiences as well as the constructive capacity of women in transforming the society. As women themselves participate in the plays, it creates more impact on the audience as the real experiences are presented, and the women audience also feel free to access the platform for discussion. The success of women teams can be assessed by the fact that at present, there are more than thirty women teams operating in different villages of West Bengal.

JS has also been able to stretch its horizon from Brazilian context to diverse subjects befitting to the Indian milieu, e.g., political protest, gender and class inequalities, patriarchy, health, education, superstitions, illicit liquor, child trafficking, qualitative education in primary schools, etc., which open new areas of exploration and discussion. JS also incorporates the techniques and exercises of TO in the Indian context, which not only accomplish them physically, but also emotionally and critically. Another unique feature of JS’s theatre activism lies in the fact that it is not confined to audiences in the urban cities, as followed in other countries, but reaches out to the remote rural areas where more acute monolithic culture reigns. This theatre also carries the potential to be realized and contextualized by people all over the world, even when the plays are performed in an alien sociolect and dialect to the audience. The success of *Shonar Meye* in France and Brazil proves that the language of oppression is the same everywhere, and even verbal language can’t create a barrier to communication.

4. Jana Sanskriti: Dialogic Process with Synergetic Dimension

The theatrical process of JS is not confined to interaction of the actor and the spectator only, but extends to the dialogic reciprocity between the script and the actor, the actor and the spectator, the spectator and the script, among the actors, and among the spectators. JS also relies on dialogic potential in all the three performatory stages – pre-performance, during the performance, and post-performance.

The interaction in theatre usually begins when a play-text, scripted by a playwright, reaches the actors, who go through it firstly as readers. The relation between a text and a reader was earlier considered to be unidirectional, focusing on the autonomy of a text, dealing only with its form and content. But with the advent of reader response theories, the reading process and the reader's role in re-creating the text while perceiving the multiple meanings lying inherent within a text begins to be explored. However, for an actor, the process does not end with just interpreting and analysing the meanings, but requires representation of those interpretations for another set of 'readers' (the audience) through proper rendering of dialogues and movements. In JS, the pre-performance duration is much longer than other theatre forms, as the scripting of a play in JS starts not with the imagination and perception of an objective playwright, but it evolves as the direct interaction and involvement of the group with the local residents from which ideas of the plays are derived and then scripted down. Moreover, the theatre group of JS comprises of the actual oppressed people, as well as some outsider artists. As a result, during the rehearsals also, the script keeps on changing, benefitting and enriching from the experiences of the local people involved in acting. The text gets influenced not only by the actors, but the audience are also capable of altering the script, extending the interaction from text-actor to text-spectator. It is evidenced by the addition of the last scene to the play *Sarama* and the scripting of the play *Ithbhata*, which are the direct results of interventions and discussions during and after the performance. So, the dominance of the script over the actors or the audience fades away here, as the script

becomes an ‘enssembled theatre’ voicing the experiences of many people.

The conventional theatrical plays have a pre-structured plot with a definite beginning and an end, while the audience watch it compliantly. Some of the recent theatre forms have attempted to allow occasional interactions with the audience during performance. For instance, asking for occasional responses (yes/no, guilty/non-guilty), or asking for some items during the act (e.g., match-box, water, etc.) from the audience. In JS, this is the phase, during which Boal’s most innovative praxis of ‘spect-actor’ is explored. This technique is unique in its practice, as the audience are not just to imagine and discuss possible solutions to end oppression, but to act that change on stage at that time. After the scripted performance ends, the play begins again, conducted and led by a Joker¹⁴ (the facilitator), where the spectators can stop the action at any time, and re-enact the role of any character he/she wishes to change, be it the oppressor or the oppressed. Ganguly says,

I had learnt – not through theory, but through experience – that everyone has an innate desire to act ... Boal’s theatre philosophy highlights this basic human urge and brings out this latent quality by breaking the monologic relationship between the actors and the audience.¹⁵

For a constructive management of the interactive process, Augusto Boal initiates the ‘Joker System’, whose purpose initially, was to provide analysis, explanation or comments on various sections of a play, connecting the probable gaps in the thought process of the script writer, the director, the actors and the audience. However, this concept gets reformed during the

¹⁴The word ‘joker’ is derived from the ‘Joker’ in playing cards, which is the most flexible of all the other cards. In this context, it implies an approach that allows flexibility in different ways of interpretation and presentation of existing texts. Later, it begins to be referred to someone who can role-play a number of characters, including actor, character, commentator, director, facilitator, chorus and observer simultaneously in the same performance.

¹⁵Ganguly, *Jana Sanskriti: Forum Theatre and Democracy in India*, 26.

evolution of TO techniques. Rather than creating an atmosphere of complacency, a good Joker strives to encourage better understanding and rational reflection leading to fruitful debates on realistic grounds. In our society, the people are so much used to monologic culture, that they have formed the habit of accepting the hierarchies, and submitting to it. So, in JS performances, Joker is the key figure to create a dialogic space. The calibre and training of the Joker substantially determines how much of the passivity, unease, and havoring can be overcome, in the way to interaction. The Joker needs to avoid manipulation or influencing of ideas with personal interpretations, and create a congenial and democratic ambience so as to invite all opinions and ensure participation of the maximum.

The performance of a scene of the play *Sonar Meye*, where a prospective groom and his father inspects the 'would be bride' as a commodity, scrutinizing the length of her hair, the working capacity of her hands, Sima Ganguly (Sanjoy Ganguly's wife and an active member of JS, acting as the Joker in that forum), invites interventions from the audiences. Observing the hesitancy, she begins with asking a simple question if the action is right or wrong. A collective 'No' comes as the response. She goes on stimulating the audience by bringing out the reality and gravity of the situation, and eventually succeeds in prompting a lady audience to come forward. While acting as the oppressed girl, the lady, who is so much reluctant to come forward just a moment ago, now feels free to renounce such commoditised marriage. When the parents of the girl go against this boldness of the girl, she even raises the questions of gender discrimination and financial independence.¹⁶ In the same scene mentioned above, of inspecting a girl by the groom's father, a woman intervenes to replace the 'would-be bride' and questions, "The question is not how politely a boy will see a girl before marriage, but why is there no custom of inspecting the groom by the bride's family?"¹⁷ In another intervention, a spect-actor replaces not the oppressed girl,

¹⁶Gautam Bose, *Playing for Change*, Jana Sanskriti, 2010. DVD

¹⁷Ganguly, *Jana Sanskriti*, 76.

but her father, and says to the groom’s father, “Stop this, I refuse to let you do this to my daughter. Who is the one to marry her? You or your son? People who look at girls like this cannot be decent folk.”¹⁸

These interventions affirm the presence of radical thoughts in common people, which finds expression through this theatre. It is clear that continuous exposure to these plays can gradually break the age-old repressions and encourage free outlet of ideas and dialogues. On this basis, JS performs the same play to the same audience a number of times, so that more unrestricted articulation and communication takes place.

In recent years, the alternative theatre practices have started giving a lot of stress on the importance of post-performance sessions for discussion with the audience to prolong the impact of the performance by critical appreciations and by discussing specific questions. However, similar to the elongated pre-performance duration, the post-performance repercussions of JS are also multi-layered. JS does not stop with interaction, or stage re-enactments, but it helps in analysing and exploring the problems of oppression, and then search out collectively for possible solutions. There are numerous instances of activities by the JS group along with the villagers, validating post-performance responsibility by rigorous campaigning and rallying. Staying of the JS group with the local residents, interacting with them, empathizing with their lives, involving them in the theatrical process, and collective risk-taking builds a positive energy and trust within the people.

JS also provides ample scope for dialogism among the various actors as well as the spectators among themselves. Since all the actors participate in scripting of a play, voicing their own observations and perceptions, there is an uninhibited sharing and accumulation of experiences. It breaks down hierarchies of the actor community, where the protagonist characters and the side characters stand on the same footing, sharing the collective responsibility of executing smooth functioning of the theatrical

¹⁸Ganguly, *Jana Sanskriti*, 76.

process. Similar to the interaction among actors, JS acts as the space of interaction among spectators also. Besides non-verbal gestures of approval or denouncement shared in theatrical performances among the audience, JS provides the additional scope of verbal communication among the spectators, to let others know of one's insight towards an issue. There are many instances during interventions when a spect-actor succeeds in convincing the spectators to come forward collectively to fight against some oppression. Thus, this dialogic culture has the potency to achieve synergetic dimensions, which refers to the situation when rather than giving individual efforts, all people participate collaboratively in providing joint endeavour, resulting to a much magnified enterprise. This synergism between actors and spect-actors have the potential to break any type of tyranny, domination and subjugation, as well as to conquer one's servility, subjection and docility, bringing about a revolutionary reform in society. Sima Ganguly's view reflects the desirability of a dialogic culture, when she says,

... I want the world to reach the point when it is literally not possible to make a decision without discussion and dialogue ... I have realized through my work that our work is about recognizing that the rays of the sun are made up of collective energy.¹⁹

The dialogism in JS reaches its highest level, when a person learns to introspect and analyse his/her own actions, just as a spectator observes an actor. It is the highest form of synergism, when the performance opens up possibilities of interaction among the various personas of a single individual. The individual here becomes a dialogical space, where there is a confrontation between the multiple consciousnesses of the same persona. During a performance²⁰ of *Shonar Meye*, impact on an audience (who was a regular beater of his wife) is so much, that he comes to Sima (role-playing the oppressed wife), and vows never to beat

¹⁹Sima Ganguly, "Either You Do This Work Out of Love, or Not at All" in *Scripting Power: Jana Sanskriti On and Offstage*, ed., Dia Da Costa, Kolkata: CAMP, 2012, 33-45, 45.

²⁰Ganguly, *Jana Sanskriti*, 30.

his wife again. There are possibilities of the transformation to be ephemeral, but JS attempts to give more and more exposure to this process, performing the same play to the same audience a number of times, which may increase the chances of longevity of the humanistic transformation.

5. Conclusion

Bringing about a dialogic amalgamation of the concepts of Boal, Brecht, Freire and Bakhtin, JS applies Boal’s concept and techniques in the Indian context, with great extensions and variations. TO techniques are explored on new grounds by JS, for instance, JS expands the legislative context of Brazilian TO to manifold political and social Indian contexts; it is more rustic and compassionate in its approach, by employing folk art forms of presentation, and staying with the rural people, where oppression prevails. In the line of Brecht, JS endeavours to encourage objective, analytical and critical perspectives in the audience towards issues, but as opposed to Brecht, it dwells on empathy. JS utilizes empathetic identification between actors and spectators for effective dialogic encounters. Freire’s study of monologic power structure in education is extended by Boal to legislative structures primarily, which is further widened by JS to what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*.²¹

The dialogic encounter within an individual leads to realization of self, to humanization, and eventually, to the betterment of society. The concept of dialogism permeates the whole process of operation of JS. In compliance to dialogism, JS questions the closed unitary centripetal approach, thereby, the theatrical space becomes multi-dimensional, and open to endless interpretations. The objective of this dialogism is to bring about a feasible change in society, which is possible only through the breaking of all types of barriers to communication as it is the

²¹Habitus is “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them.” Bourdieu Pierre and L. J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 18.

source of the evolution of new ideas. JS realizes that effective dialogism can be achieved not just by narrowing the economic gaps, but by diminishing the intellectual chasm between people, which can be achieved only through dialogic culture. The heterogeneous opinions finding a space to be voiced in JS helps in the collective intellectual growth and a sense of liberation from the imposition of authoritative powers. However, a challenge to this theatre is that as dialogism celebrates refusal to closure, this process is also open-ended, and so, does not attempt to resolve or provide some absolute solution to issues. But, it is important to realize that the success of this theatre lies not in resolving issues by resorting to some single solution, but in its capacity to prolong a dynamic and democratic communication, which has the capacity to change the perspectives of the people, their subjugated reality, as well as the society as a whole, building the capacity of fighting back against daily-life oppressions acting as a rehearsal for revolution. Another threat to this theatre is its exploitation by some groups motivated by propagandist and selfish motives, deviating from the original concept. Also, if not implemented properly, the multiple voices, with each one's autonomous opinions may lead to chaotic conflicts. So, the essence of dialogism must be realized and practised accordingly.

Dialogism is not all about expressing own opinion or deriving personal benefits; it is also about tolerating and accepting others' views. The success of this dialogic process depends on peaceful coexistence of different and even contradictory ideas, inducing more analytical logistics. JS helps in discovering the potential of dialogue by realizing our own potential as a human being, as an individual self, and also as a social being. Thus it can be proclaimed that dialogism bridges 'I' and 'We'.