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# Experiments with theatre & truth

**M**arc Hatzfeld is an anthropologist turned actor from France, Sandra Gomez is a Colombian dancer who tells stories with non-dance movements, Tiru Hembrom is a musician when not a farmer, Tibru Murmu tries his feet at fusing Santhal and contemporary dance when not tending to cows, Falguni Hansda is an actress when she's not cooking for children at a local school for a living. Together, they are a band of artistes from Paris, Bogota and Mexico to Calcutta and Borotalpada who have been bringing nights in the woods alive with a colourful and fascinating spectacle of theatre, dance and music.

**The journey**  
 On a Saturday morning last month, a mixed group of about 60 boarded a bus from Calcutta to travel 240km to Borotalpada, a Santhal village in West Midnapore and the stage for Night of Theatre No. 7.

It was a journey that most had voluntarily opted for and six hours later as the bus manoeuvred its way through dark, muddy and narrow roads, the Night of Theatre had already begun before most knew it. Women in red and white saris dancing to the rhythm of *dhamsa*, *madol* and *ghonta* played by men in dhotis ushered the guests into a spacious courtyard surrounded by mud huts, its walls and doorways decorated with *alpona* and lamps.

A 15-minute tea-*shingara-bondey* break later, the guests were once again led on by the heady beats and a procession of figures swinging in the dark in perfect sync to a makeshift structure tucked a little away on the sprawling green grounds. In the backdrop was a building of red clay as the rest of the ground, open on three sides, formed the stage where the actors took position. There was something magical about making one's way through the backwoods with torchlights and settling down on the ground under the open skies, feeling the caress of a wintry breeze and watching performances in the dark — imaginative and untamed. It took a few moments to realise that more than half the dialogues spoken were in an unfamiliar tongue.

**The performance**  
 Sandra told a Greek tale in Spanish, Marc reasoned in French, Raima Mondal argued in Santhali. Most of the lines could not be understood but the energy of the cast on stage gradually got the audience into the rhythm. "If sensations are important to you, finally you will ask yourself why you are feeling a certain way while watching the performance. That will be different from the way your neighbour feels and each one can dream and create their own story. Sometimes the audience come and narrate how they understood the story but actually there was no story," explained Jean-Frederic Chevaller, who is at the helm of the ambitious multilingual-multicultural project, Trimukhi Platform.

"It's meant to be a sensitive and not an intellectual experience." While the actors were remarkably easy and spontaneous, one of the most significant characters was the setting itself. Some paper here, a bucket of water there and props in the form of hats, toys, light bulbs, soil, woods and greens with not a fake tree in sight. It was all that was needed for the audience from Calcutta, the US, France and Poland and Santhalis from nearby villages to witness a night of *korom naach*,

## LANGUAGE NO BAR AS CULTURES & DREAMS MERGE



Jean-Frederic Chevaller, a Frenchman who has made India his home, with wife Sukla. Jean's is the mind behind the ambitious multilingual-multicultural project, Trimukhi Platform, and his wife from Morapai village in North 24-Parganas helps in organising and coordinating events

**J**ean  
**Trimukhi arises from a desire to create a platform from where to act in three different directions: social work, artistic creations and theoretical research**

**S**ukla  
**What I liked about Jean was the way he could adapt himself to any circumstance — from the food available to eating and sleeping on the floor. We think he's a foreigner but he doesn't believe that**



Santhal dancers lead the city audience into the woods at Borotalpada, a Santhal village in West Midnapore and the stage for Night of Theatre No. 7



Villagers rebuild the cultural centre that was struck down by Cyclone Phailin last October



Chumki Hansda dances during the rehearsal and (right) with Sandra Gomez, a contemporary dancer from Mexico, during the performance



The night began with *Per Ruptam Silvam*, a theatre and video creation in Spanish, French and Santhali with additional texts in the form of *Natyashastra* and a Greek tale. Artistes from three countries combined their respective worlds in the dark and mysterious setting of woods and grass

dance-theatre, sound installations, kathak and a screening of *Q's Tasher Desh*.

Singer-songwriter Neel Adhikari, who presented the film for which he had done the music, described his experience: "After the long journey our sense of disorientation was pushed to the limit with the experimental theatre but it was great. The way they used the existing nightscape of the village with a couple of lights and props as the stage was amazing-ly innovative. Quite abstract and there was a constant effort to tickle the senses..."

**The dream**  
 Jean is, as creative people are prone to be, an incorrigible dreamer-doer. "Trimukhi arises from a desire to create a platform from where to act in three different directions: social work, artistic creations and theoretical research," said the 40-year-old Frenchman from Paris, who lived in Mexico, directed stage works and taught theatre and contemporary philosophy at university before coming to India for the first time in 2007.

"I was working with Mallika Sarabhai who was producing a film. For two weeks we travelled around Ahmedabad, Delhi, Kerala, Calcutta and in July 2008 I decided to return to Calcutta and start living there," smiled Jean, sitting on a rolled-up mattress inside a mud hut offered to him by a village widow.

"There was something about Calcutta that I liked a lot. Can't point out what exactly. After returning I worked with the NGO Ankur Kala that works with women from the slums. With them I visited three villages and Borotalpada was the first one. In Mexico, I had been working with tribal villages from time to time so I thought why not try the same in Bengal," Jean said.

In August 2008, Jean had his first meeting with the villagers when he proposed

doing theatre together. "Not theatre you are used to nor what I am used to," he told the villagers, who agreed. Jean drew on the culture of Santhal *natak* and *jatra* in Bengali, Odiya and Santhali as well as Spanish and French literature and language to craft a new experiment for the stage that turned out to be very Indian yet not so Indian.

Two years later, Jean married Sukla from Morapai village in North 24-Parganas. "When Jean came for the first time and wanted to go around the villages, I was given the responsibility of taking him around. What I liked was the way he could adapt himself to any circumstance — from the food available to eating and sleeping on the floor. We think he's a foreigner but he doesn't believe that," smiled Sukla, who has been working with Jean since 2008 before they fell in love and got married in 2010.

Together, they came up with the idea of setting up a cultural centre. "The villagers wanted it. To present art exhibitions, musical concerts, films, workshops and stage works, given the culture of drama competitions in the surrounding villages. It's also a way to welcome guests under an art and research programme," Jean said. "We want to introduce other art forms to them as well as get others to learn their craft," added Sukla, who helps in organising and coordinating.

The construction of the cultural centre started in October 2011 after they zeroed in on a piece of land, cleared it and performed a Santhal ritual. Eighteen families with whom Trimukhi had been working became part of the organisation and the members spent all their free time working hands-on at the construction using their traditional knowledge. While the mud and bamboo was provided by them, the rest of the material as well as the food and fees for skilled profes-

sionals was collected through a donation campaign that Trimukhi organised in France, Germany, Spain, Mexico and later in India. "The idea of the project was to create a centre of culture on the periphery," Jean said.

Night of Theatre opened in Mexico 10 years ago, backed by the government. "We were trying to bring underprivileged people from different parts of Mexico as guests. Here we decided to do the opposite. Do things with remote people in a remote village and bring people from the city here."

Jean ended up producing something "very contemporary.... Maybe not very sober but something you don't get to see in the city. In the beginning performers did find it strange because they could not understand the language but it turned out to be a gradual process of discovering other performing arts. Of learning to retain their singularities and at the same time be enriched".

**The dreamers**

Fourteen families, including children, from the village are now members of Trimukhi and take part in Night of Theatre as well as in the collective decisions of the cultural centre. Dhananjay Hansda, 17, switches between being the light man for one performance and dancer in another. "I met Jon-da in 2008 and got the feeling that there must be something I can learn from him since he's come all the way to our village." Dhananjay's mother has been the lead actress in most of the productions at Borotalpada while his father accompanies on music.

Chumki Hansda, 22, has travelled with Jean to the city to perform. "At first I was a little afraid but today I feel brave. I can perform before any number of people. It comes from the joy of performing. I enjoy meeting people from places we never thought we would meet," said Chumki whose

husband cooks for guests on the nights of theatre.

And what about the guests? Marc, 68, on his second trip to the village, often pens stories for Jean's production "to participate in some way" and even tried his skills at acting this time around.

For Sandra, a contemporary dancer, her first visit to Borotalpada turned out to be "wonderful" but "not an easy one". "I was not used to this way of life... eating with hands, sleeping in places with mice and chicken running around and going to toilet in the fields but I'm glad I did it. It's an experience that will be useful in life. I worked with the villagers for only two weeks and it worked because people were very involved."

Disaster struck last October when Cyclone Phailin hit the village on the Odisha border and the roof of the cultural centre, and along with it their dreams, came crashing down. "We started rebuilding last month. I feel a bit tired because it's been a very long process. But the villagers are now into *natak* and dance and keep asking if I'll continue to come back. So, the dream today is no more just mine but of different people. *Dekhbo ki hoy, janina...*" said Jean in French-accented English interspersed with Bengali words.

Chandrai Murmu's hopes of a good life are linked to the future of the cultural centre. "Building the centre and holding on to it is what is most important to me at this point," said the 22-year-old, who takes care of the lights and sets during performances when not working on the field.

**The future**

The nights of theatre have cut across barriers of language and locale but whether the desire to produce more inventive and creative ways to think and act in their surrounding realities will find vent, time will tell.

Mohua Das

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