

Worlds Of Difference

A paper by

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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes to delve into the process of learning, creating and doing theatre while dealing with and acknowledging and bringing to the fore the suppressed drama within. It will comprise of:

- An overview of ground realities with a brief mention of the assignment
- The process as it played out with the focus on process work and its interweave with emotions rather than just theatre techniques.
- The interactions and process interventions leading to empowerment through the process which for example gives an idea of how an inhibited child claims space, sheds fear, an underprivileged child accepts harsh reality but retains the dream, learns to ask for himself/herself etc.
- The challenges and turning points in the process

In a scenario where hope is a far off thing, it is in process work woven with theatre, that we see a palpable, noticeable yet immeasurable and unquantifiable difference in the children and adults who were exposed to it...a difference that strengthened them in the wake of futility, that softened them where callousness seemed to be the only shield they could use to protect themselves, that sensitised them to their own and others' need, that taught them to value themselves no matter what.

Points to be noted:

Names have been changed to protect identity

The paper delves into the flow of two assignments with

- children of government schools of Puttenhalli and Koramangala in Bengaluru
- children from slums in Chennai

The pre-rehearsal stage is where and when theatre and process work were used and it is these periods of time that are covered in the paper

In the final draft I had hoped to include data on where the children are currently and finding out what they think of the experience in retrospect if I can get to meet them- I was able to meet only three kids from the Puttenhalli school.

Follow Up: Koramangala Government School

We had no success in contacting the students as the people who worked with Akshaya Patra and the Government school then had left their jobs. The list I had was lost in the flood of 2017. The children have passed out of school.

Some snaps are included in the paper and provided separately too with video footage.

Online links: Akshaya Patra | Theatre for a Cause : Making A man of an Ass – YouTube

Performance by Puttenahalli Government School Children:

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&url=https://m.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3D-0bfzTSaxS4&ved=2ahUKEwiwnZ-7qrTAhUJrY8KHWe5DDYQtwlWBHoECAUQAQ&usg=AOvVaw065u4cieSgCQceNOo2h4WU>

<https://www.akshayapatra.org/events/akshaya-patra-hosts-the-2nd-edition-of-theatre-for-a-cause>

theakshayapatrafoundation.blogspot.com/2012/01/theatre-for-cause-in-aid-of-akshaya.html?m=1

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Overview

The ground reality of children in government schools is one that beckons and pleads for attention at the very least. On one hand is the reality of poverty which means both parents need to work but often it is the mother who works while the man of the house is without a steady job. Most often alcohol plays a huge role in the quality of life that the child experiences. The underprivileged child in my experience mostly grows up with fear and eventual reconciliation to the ever present violence at home. Add to this the subtle and often not so covert violence that pervades one's life in school. Kids do learn English in school but a child in the seventh standard in India, also struggles with reading even the simplest of words. English is aspired to by parents for their children as it seems to put them in the category of the haves rather than the have nots in some way atleast.

I was separated from my children from 2007, had lost custody and had called a halt to a bitter and ugly court battle in 2010 after seven years. The only way I could make any sense of life itself was by doing theatre for children. I could not give to my children all that I wished to as a mother. So when Akshaya Patra Foundation, renowned for its mid day meals supplied to government schools in India, approached me I did not think twice and took up the assignment that promised to go beyond the mechanics of doing theatre and allowed me to share of the mother within.

The schools were approached by Akshaya Patra Foundation through its initiative Theatre For a Cause and the work was done through the not for profit wing of Aantarya Film and Theatre House called Sarsayee Foundation for Theatre and Education. The schools wanted the programme but they were willing to allow us very little time with the kids. They offered us one period of 40 minutes at the end of the day or soon after lunch time. It is noteworthy that

they wanted the theatre programme but were sceptical about the element of process work, the shoulders of which it rode on. They however, bought into the idea of life skills being imparted through theatre.

In the last two decades of the 1900s people were just about beginning to hear of Process Work in India. It was only in the early years of the new millennium that schools began to wake up to the idea of it. It was yet to reach government schools in the way we see it now being included. It was in this climate of not so much openness coupled with an ambivalent eagerness in the government run schools that we embarked on making theatre and process work available to underprivileged children.

The Assignment and Ground Reality

When the assignment was taken up in collaboration with the Akshaya Patra Foundation it was made clear that though we were expected to put up a play at the end of three months, we would also be focussing on the emotional needs of the children, their readiness to learn and tailoring the piece the way they would like to see it emerge. We faced no resistance to this and work began. We worked with two schools; one in Puttenhalli from mid- October in 2010 to January 21st, 2011 and the other in Koramangala from mid-June to 8th October 2014.

The How of It - Rehearsal Schedule

We had a situation where we could neither negotiate school hours nor after school hours. Principal and parents could not give us either, had to have their way and all of us had to fall

in line or there would be no play! The kids were so keen that they decided to ask their parents for permission to report to school at 6-30AM and work till 9 AM before school started for a period of three months. We were glad the suggestion came from them and they got their parents to agree. As for me, I could not find a theatre assistant to co-facilitate with me... someone who would travel at 5-30 AM every morn for atleast two months in a row.

The only person doing that was the co-ordinator Sujatha of Akshaya Patra. But since she had other duties I was on my own with a bunch of kids with whom the passion for theatre was shared. The parents probably agreed to send the kids so early in the morning because the Akshaya Patra Foundation offered to organise breakfast for the children.

In November 2001 the Supreme Court directed every state government and Union Territory to implement the mid day meal scheme and since then classroom attendance in government schools has improved steadily. In a report filed in Business Today on Jan 6th 2013, 'nearly 72% of students at the primary and upper primary level were covered by the programme nationally'. According to this very report, 'oddly for a programme of this magnitude there has been no study to measure the nutrition levels or increase in enrolment, attendance and retention of the school children'. So much for statistics.

Coming back to our kids, we found that many children wanted to know why they were not in the play. Luckily, their teacher was right there and I passed the question on to her. She said they are willing but they will only disrupt your work like they do mine. I told her I was willing to take the risk and that if they were keen they could be in.

So the next day we had twenty five kids on our rolls but only fifteen in attendance.

On day six, end of week one the story was still the same. Illness, accidents, deaths were all real and rampant in their lives.

We had spent the first week doing nothing but warm up theatre exercises. The one process lab routine we followed consistently throughout was to sit in silence waiting for whoever would go first with sharing what stayed with the person from yesterday. Often it brought out more than just that.

Week 2

We realised the harsh realities of life were what kept the absenteeism in place. Sunil was a motherless child and labelled the naughty one. He had no problems with claiming space but it usually was with an unwholesome flooding of the space. As facilitator it demanded a firm holding of the space but with unconditional positive regard for this participant. The kids were told the story in Kannada and were asked to choose the roles they would prefer to play. Though the ass is the hero of the story nobody except Sunil wanted that role. I asked him why he wanted that role. He said it would be easy for him as that was the name he was called by at home; Katta in Kannada. Those of us who have been shamed for our inability to match up, for our inadequacies as defined by the world around us... by our families, our peers and even our friends...know how deeply ingrained such a nickname could get and how the cry of the heart could be regarded as just another bray by not just others but by oneself too.

The theatre exercises evolved with the intention of seeing what definitions of the Self are given to us by the world through a name, what it means to us and how we can redefine ourselves and our lives in wholesome ways.

Exercise 1- Announcing One's Self

Uttering one's own name

Saying one's name

Declaring one's name

The Struggle and Overcoming it- Challenges and Turning Points

Most often the declaration was with much diffidence and hardly a declaration at all. While one is used to being called out to, the child often has very little experience in uttering one's own name. It causes a certain discomfort and the child is eased into the process by inviting him/her to whisper the name first in the ear of the person standing next to him/her. This ensures every child knows the name of at least one other child in the group.

Discussions on this revealed that they found it strange and later funny too, once they felt at ease with it ofcourse. The purpose of the exercise was shared. The purpose is to become aware of the essence of one's name, of uttering it the way one likes to hear it, to feel the power it holds, to summon the Self, the person within to a level of focus and awareness required in the here and now. The children are usually amused with this and we explain that big people often have their minds wandering all over the place attending to other things, forgetting that they need to be attending to things at hand in the here and now.

This always brought up stories of how an elder would be preoccupied with other thoughts and it would lead to being ignored, pushed over, scolded, reprimanded for disturbing and in some cases even being beaten when the child asked for something to be attended to... her skirt which needed hemming, a button that needed fixing, his trousers that had gone short, a lost pencil, a torn shoe, wanting to go to play.

In fifteen years, I have never heard a child complain about not being told a story or being sung to. In my opinion this is because the child, most often, has not even known of such possibilities, leave alone asking for them. The children had no memory of being sung to or listening to a story at bed time.

In order to enable the individuals in the group to find the strength to declare one's name to the group, they were invited to utter their names together in unison. There is strength in numbers which children intuitively tune in to. They don't feel singled out and hence this almost always worked and the voice and volume would reach levels that swept across the playfield and right through the Principal's office close to the entrance of the school.

Week 3

Exercise 2- Calling to Another

The children take turns, according to their own readiness and will, to come to the centre from where they point to a chosen partner in the circle. This partner then turns his/her back and starts walking away and the child who has chosen this person has to call his/ her name loudly enough for the person to stop.

The Struggle and Overcoming it- Challenges and Turning Points

Most children in privileged urban settings have a hard time doing this. However, most children in the government schools seemed to have almost no problem with calling out. The children who did have a problem were finding it difficult because, as they articulated later, they were often told to keep quiet, they thought they would be breaking the rule, they felt pressure to get it right in the here and now. This would invariably lead us to discussions on right and wrong.

The idea that in nature and art, right and wrong were things that were hard to discern was considered. How does one compare apples and oranges? How does a tree drawn by one child become better than that drawn by another? One could like or dislike one or the other but deciding on right and wrong could not apply to art. In art the grass could be blue and the sky could be green and so very right for the artist no matter how unreal for most of the audience. Fantasy has its place in art. No matter how wrong a villain, he has his significant place in every story and so no matter how unacceptable one's action or creation, there always is a place for it in theatre... the playfield for stories to play out, where transformation, reformation and even redemption is possible. Theatre being a mirror of life, such a possibility existed in life too. We looked at how the rules were being bent to make possible this very endeavour of ours. The rules were being bent and school was being opened during non-school hours while the sun was just about rising at 6-30 AM in the winter of 2011 and with the sanction of the Principal and co-operation of the watchman. Their enthusiasm had been responded to by the system.

The ground of faith and trust was being built as we saw the children articulate their understanding of right and wrong... as stated below:

Harming another is wrong

Harming oneself is also wrong

We can make mistakes

We can change

We cannot take back the hurt caused but it can become lesser when we change

There is a time and place for everything

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Week 4 & 5

Warm Up exercise 3- Finding / Giving meaning to one's name

The child is given the task of finding out the meaning of one's name by asking those at home. The next day the child comes with the meaning and we look at what of the essence of the name is yet to be embraced by the child.

Challenges and Turning Points

Often the children came back saying they could not get the meaning from their parents. A book with meanings of names by Maneka Gandhi was provided. It had to be referred to like a dictionary and in this process the kids learnt how to find words in a dictionary too with hardly any effort put in apart from teaching them how to turn the pages of the book delicately and the order of the alphabets. There was a keenness to know and discover more about themselves as it were, to figure out what's in a name after all.

For example Velu, the serious, studious boy got perspectives and stories from the group of the naughty side of Krishna. It seemed to give him sanction to open himself to the idea of loosening up, to the way of being serious about academics and also being playful simultaneously, to giving up his time to shape himself according to the expectations of his elders but also claiming time and space to be child he was, where he could.

Lakshmi (Puttenhalli) knew her name was that of Lord Vishnu's wife. That was it. That she was the giver of boons, was unknown to her. She had been quiet and always hid behind other co-actors never letting her voice be heard, opting to be part of the chorus whenever she was given the choice to hold a significant location on her own or be a part of the crowd. She was sad that Lakshmi meant the Goddess of Wealth but she, in contrast to and contradiction of her name, was poor.

With this we launched into exploring riches beyond money through an improvisation. The brief given was:

Your friend has a problem that money cannot solve. What is it you cannot hold in your hand but can gift to another from the heart?

This often does, as it did then, bring out responses of kind words, offering solace, an arm slung around the friend's shoulder in solidarity, wiping of another's tears. And then there was a turning point. We had been looking for a song, a lullaby to be more specific, but nobody had heard one except for Lakshmi who had the good fortune of having a grandmother who lived with her. As part of her improvisation with her friend, who was scared of the dark and could not sleep, she sang the lullaby she knew. In that moment it was as if she had truly lived up to her name, offering the sleep deprived friend the boon of sleep, even if only for just then.

When we had absentee kids who turned up later, when we did not have the book of names, we explored how we thought of ourselves and sought meaning for the name from that exploration. We added on more meanings to our names depending on what we felt we needed to add on to our way of being, by drawing from what was already present, but waiting to be called upon from within the Self. So Lakshmi gifted herself her voice.

Week 6

The story had been told and we were splitting it up into scenes. The children explored what had to be said in Kannada and we worked out its equivalent in English. It was important that everybody knew the story well enough so they could tell it backwards if required.

The purpose of going over the story, over and over again, was so that the chronology of events through the story stayed in place. Even if little things were forgotten, the meat of the story would remain in place and the audience would get what was meant to be conveyed.

Challenges and Turning Points

Chaitanya (Puttenhalli) a little fellow with much promise suddenly stopped turning up for rehearsal. Chaitanya had jaundice and his family was moving as his uncle, his foster parent was a migrant construction worker. He would have to be replaced. Ketan was an adolescent and not quite with the rigour required for theatre. He did not display a memory for lines. Physique wise he was the perfect cast but was nowhere near being cast.

I was feeling helpless and expressed it. We then did improvisations of when we have felt most helpless. Here came the bit about 'being the crucible' as Shri Pulin Garg would probably have put it.

Placing the helplessness in the space was the only thing to be done if I was to uphold the integrity of one's self and honour the space. So that is what we did and all of us worked with it. The situations that came up were those of loss of a dear one, parent and/or grandparent, having an alcoholic parent/s, lack of financial resources and other basic needs, having to put up with foster parents and their expectations, being bullied and beaten both at home and in school among other social issues of caste and consequent non-inclusion, environmental issues of loss of trees.

The second part of the improvisation was to find a way of changing what could be changed.

Through this the children enacted and played through a new scenario that they visualised themselves with the facts of the situation remaining unchanged but their own way of dealing with it being different this time, if only apparently for now.

The children with torn shoes found ways to make them as good as new using junk, the girl whose skirt had grown short learnt to undo the hem, some boys planted saplings of vegetable creepers.

We took a close look at what made this possible. What of the Self was being drawn upon and brought to play. We found affirmations to the self such as:

I can do it

I can make a difference

I am hard working

I can manage

It is only this time that is tough, it is so only for now and not forever

I can wait

I will work towards changing it

I will persevere

I have other blessings

But this was not sufficient as what happens when that skirt with the opened out hem too grows short, which it was going to very soon?

This was the big one that was hard to accept...that it is okay to share one's helplessness... the world often has something to offer as a solution. Some kids used to be barefoot so we got chappals for those who had shoes and shoes for those who had chappals.

No matter how down and out, the children found it hard to ask for themselves. It was easy to take an extra banana or biscuit for a sibling back home, with or without asking. I have seen children eating only half their meal or just a morsel, hoping to carry the rest of it for a younger sibling at home but when it came to asking for oneself, it seemed unthinkable. We considered the helplessness I had shared. We examined what it meant to each one. At the outset the reactions to that were that I seemed to have the right to do anything since I was better off, in a position of authority and they would accept it. So we looked at how their own authority mattered too and how the two together could create something wonderful by

sharing our vulnerability, our helplessness. The idea being dealt with was that there were boundaries but that did not mean the kids had to be subservient or pretend to be strong when they were feeling helpless. They could emerge from a position of weakness by reaching out, asking for help, tapping into and counting on another's compassion without inflicting oneself with indignity. The idea took weeks to be accepted and we had to come back to it every time we could. We started with greeting each other with a Namaskara rather than them doing a salute saying Good morning Miss or Madam! Sharing things did not come easy. Fights often broke out over pencils and erasers. On the other hand though, they gave more easily of themselves to one another.

The third part of the improvisation was coping with what was at hand, accepting what cannot be changed, shaping life anew.

The children gave each of their enactments a new end and through that, their respective situations a new beginning and came and sat around Sunil, watching him, holding his hand, running their hands on his back, on his head and through his hair too. It is possible he had not experienced such kindness in a long time, as was evident from his tears. The touch exercise was happening without it being orchestrated.

With the death of a parent there were no words that could offer solace. Sunil (Puttenhalli) would have to grow up without his mother and that was a fact we could not change. He would often be found seeking attention and getting into trouble for it in school. It was here that he got to experience the wisdom and kindness of his peers. The words of other children that filled the room that day were...

I know how that feels

You have to be brave

I hope there will be someone who will take care of you

I will always be your friend

When you feel sad, you come to my house

Here's a safety pin... Pin up that shirt of yours... there goes the bell... come lets go eat.

Quite contrary to the usual pattern I did not find Sunil eating alone thereafter through the duration of creation of the play.

2014- Koramangala

Facilitated by Padmavati Rao

Assistant Director- Ajey Preetham- Theatre Director and Actor- State Award winner he was given the opportunity to learn of the process rather than just the technique of it.



Violence experienced at home

Kanta was a chubby child and oft ridiculed for her size by her schoolmates.

She gave them a thrashing every now and then. While I sometimes secretly said to myself 'Good for her' I did what I could to discourage the violence. It was during the sharing of helplessness and the related improvisations that we stumbled upon her realities. We might never have known had we been doing a theatre workshop which just looked at dealing with the script, its production and getting out of there every day after day of tedious rehearsal.

She had been quiet that day and her face looked a bit swollen and when teased about it she did not even bat an eye leave alone moving to thrash anyone.

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When asked what happened she said she had had a fall. On being asked where and how, it all became too much for her as she could not construct a fake fall convincingly. She then shared the truth. She had been hit at home. She had an alcoholic parent and said there did not need to be a reason on her part for her to be thrashed. She wished to say no more and we respected that. She did, however, respond to the brief given for the theatrical improvisation.

What seemed to become possible for her in the first step was to present the violence as it took place for no apparent reason. Not that any reason is ever justifiable but this defied any logic. It was a part of her life and seemed unchangeable.

What she could change as she said was to hide when she knew something was coming her way. The group offered her ways of moving away from the place.

In accepting what she could not change of her parent she drew upon her strength to say

I have to grow up soon... with a tone of desperation

But I must wait... with a tone of resignation

I pray that it will change but it hasn't yet... a tone of hope and disappointment

The affirmations that came from the group were as they were in the case of Sunil. The horror of losing a parent and having a violent one seemed to receive a similar response from the group. On my part I could promise her no bed of roses. We decided to look at her strengths that she could rely on to wade through and tide over life as it was now.

The group made visible that part of herself which was invisible to her. This child could cook, sing... tell stories. She had wit. She was talented and strong but she had to be patient for now. This was not a situation where her physical strength would work.

She would have to be tactful, careful and watchful at all times. But she could take heart for she was not alone. There were others who were in her boat and just as helpless.

We had to work on dreams seen and those as yet unseen. The time was ripe for it, for her as it was for another child Chandru who was shunned even by his teachers.

He loved doing cartwheels. The other kids were jealous and surprised he wasn't being pulled up for it. Instead we looked for a place to include it. Once we had that in place, his need to do it all the time seemed to vanish.

On closer observation we found Chandru had been drawing pictures of a God he worshipped. The first of the series was with the sword and all arms up, drawn not just in defence but also ready for committing offence. The second one after a couple of weeks was with the arms down completely. The third after another couple of weeks was with the arms in different positions, blessing and offering as it were. We were at this point of time ready to get the execution of sets going and we decided that Chandru's picture could be enlarged to become the backdrop for the town square in the play. That theatre offered itself to portrayals and representations that are larger than life was a boon for us. The children could not believe he was being appreciated for something at last. He looked upon his creation with awe, quiet joyful empowerment and much wonder.



Project with Evam and the kids from slums in Chennai

The kids had never seen a play. They had watched television shows but again had neither heard a story first hand nor a lullaby. Thoorika was my interpreter as I was working with kids who knew only Tamil.

This was only a week long workshop and the aim of the workshop was to get them to get past their blocks to expression. One of the powerful exercises was to own up the disowned. Cards with one quality articulated earlier, were strewn in a circle on the ground. In addition to mostly positive attributes there were cards with words like arrogant, stubborn, mischievous, etc. also. They were invited to choose one which they felt they did not have. They were then put in groups of four to come up with a situation that they thought up or took out of real life, enacting and using that quality they had chosen.

The group was astonished afterwards as they felt, that they did have that very quality they thought they did not at the start. It was an owning up of those aspects of themselves that they were distanced from and not in touch with.

The room we were working in was large but it had no fans and not enough light. On the last day of their presentation they used the darkness to create the atmosphere of a theatre though they had never been to one and used the windows to light their scenes placing their actors strategically to catch the light! This group emerged with amazing resourcefulness even though they had begun on a depressed note of being underprivileged, of not having enough of anything, happy or otherwise.

Common challenges

Fear of facing an audience thus often ending up with one's back to the audience

Walking backwards/rearing up every now and then, when with a co-actor or taking an exit

Close to nil projection of voice when it came to delivering dialogue

Forgetting giving and taking cues

Blank face

Stiffness of body

Smiling out of nervousness even when acting being angry

Chatting in the wings

Peeping out of and waving from the wings

Deep sadness on parents not turning up for the show

One of the exercises that was fun for the kids to do was to bundle up their fears in an imaginary cloth and run to the window and chuck it out imagining it being chucked and buried far far away by its own weight.

The exercise was impactful and did not have to be repeated often. A couple of other exercises that helped regain one's voice were

1. looking for and finding an invisible key for oneself to unlock one's voice and keeping the key safe on one's person in the form of an invisible tattoo that could be accessed whenever required to act the withheld. Children often expressed that they didn't feel so helpless anymore with this.

2. Playing by starting with standing erect and gradually taking the form of a limp rag on the floor to a count of 1-10 saying Yes loudly at 1 and gradually dropping volume to a whisper at 10 reaching and taking the chosen form of the rag in a comfortable position at 10. The reverse from 10-1 was done rising up gradually to a slow count saying No starting with a whisper and ending up with the loudest voice possible. Alternatively, the yes would be done while rising and the No while going down to the floor.

Children often said that when they went down with the No it felt very real for them, reminding them of many situations when they could not express their disagreement but had to fall in line without even a murmur.

The rising up with the No gave them the feeling of defiant confidence and the rising up with the Yes seemed a better option as it did not invite the trouble that the loud No could.

The Outcome

We had a play with actors who enjoyed doing it.

Follow Up: Puttenhalli School (Names Unchanged)

Sandip – 2nd year BA – works in the Govt. Veterinary Hospital- attends evening college- still wants to be a teacher. Has a way with birds and looks after dogs when their owners are away. He feels the play gave him the confidence to write scripts which he does for schools. In college he wrote 8 scripts on one subject for different groups to perform. He is a good cook and takes catering orders from time to time.

Yedunandan 2nd year Diploma in Mechanical Engineering- Welding Sheet metal. Still retains his interest in photography.

In 2017 he was sponsored by SFTE for a photography workshop conducted by award winning film maker Nikhil Virdhi and Charith Vijayapuram. He worked with Sarsayee Foundation on the Naatak Vaatak series of workshops in urban and rural Bangalore later that year.

Sabah Studied Nursing, Volunteer with Sri Sai Seva Ashram. Has done a beautician's course and earns from applying mehendi for brides. She feels being part of the play made her family more supportive for all that she wanted to explore later on too.

Yeshwanth Working

Venugopal Final year B Com

Daniel Working with a courier company

Kiran B Com

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Mallika Married – still doing BA

Varalakshmi Married

Mahadev Prasad No contact. Rumour has it that he has blood cancer

Sandip Wishes his sibling had not died and that he could have been part of the play. Works as a delivery boy.