



Umashankar Periodi

“We have to do something meaningful and sustainable”- declared my friend, quoting our community development lecturer. The result: We decided to conduct a creativity workshop for the children of our neighborhood - Attavara, a semi-slum area of Mangalore. We were six of us studying MSW course and stayed in that area. Keeping both the children's interest and our strengths and limitations we designed a 10-day workshop. The curriculum included theatre work, art work, clay modeling, puppetry, singing, storytelling and a lot of games. It was fun filled and the children enjoyed it thoroughly.

The workshop also produced a play by the children - “Kathale Rajya” (kingdom of darkness) – which was enacted in most of the parks of Mangalore city with the uninvited general public as the audience. It got extensive media coverage and elicited appreciation from the people.

Imagine our surprise when the Officers Club of Panambur invited us to conduct a similar workshop for the children of the port officers. We readily agreed. Based on our Attavara experience we hosted this workshop with a lot of enthusiasm. But we soon realised that Panambur children were not like Attavara participants. Nothing would work with the Panambur children. When asked to draw they would all come up with cup and saucer, hibiscus flower and Indian flag - all they had learnt in their drawing classes in school! The Attavara children had surprised us with a variety of drawings. They played with colours and enjoyed colouring their faces in the name of make-up. Sometimes, they would mix so many colours that the total effect would be just black.

Again, they would draw anything they saw around

them. A girl had drawn just a long line and beside it a small dot. What could it be, we tried to fathom. We struggled but finally gave up. We asked her to explain her drawing. The long line, she said, was her father and the dot was “me”! The hitherto meaningless picture suddenly became so meaningful. We had a peep into the feeling inside her.

Another boy had daubed some black paint and had superimposed a yellow stroke on that. Again we were foxed. What could it be? Anything abstract? We scratched our heads till the boy solved the mystery. “It is an autorickshaw,” he said and lo, we could see an autorickshaw now! Yet another artistic puzzled awaited us. A child had filled a white sheet with just colour dots and there was nothing else. Asked to explain the child said “It is bootharadhane”. He had only seen miniature lights from far in this festival and had successfully depicted it.

With these experiences of the slum children in the background we thought the officers' children would do something more interesting. But, our hopes had been belied. All that would emerge from this urban group was cup and saucers, hibiscus flowers and symmetrical designs.

The drama workshop was a big disappointment. We had shown a short film on neighbours and hoped for a debate. It was failure. When asked to display some acting talent they would come up on stage and repeat the clichéd line from Sholay - “Kithnegoli bakihaire Shambha!” or other filmy dialogues. We were clueless as to how to take this forward. The Attavara children would come up with all sorts of scenes they had seen in their surroundings - tiger dance during Dasara, Bootharadhane in the summer, the funeral



(they lived near a cemetery)..... They never ran out of ideas and were ever ready with something original, and something new!

To cut the long story short we were not able to produce a good drama in spite of all our effort at Panambur. We somehow managed and ended the workshop with a note of disappointment. It made us think. Where did we go wrong? But hours of discussion took us nowhere. This failure haunted me and I started discussing it with the experts. Was it something to do with their life styles? I started interacting with these kids and gradually I collected details of their day to day living. I found that the life of the officers' children was very well organised with a lot of space for their all-round development. But the poor Attavara children were unorganised and their parents had not lined up plans for their development.

Here is a juxtapose of the life styles of the two groups of children:

Morning:

Panambur: The officer's children are woken up in the morning and after ablutions they do homework and study, watched by either of the parents. After breakfast they are dropped at the school in a two-wheeler or a car by one of their parents just as the bell rings.

Attavara: They get up and rush to fetch milk from a nearby booth. There they meet their school/class mates who have come for the same errand. They chat and reach home late to be scolded by their parents. Then, they eat something and start for the school. They leave home early and leisurely walk to the school enjoying every moment on the way. They play as they walk, collect interesting things, climbing trees etc. They know of the different fruits they get at different season in different places and compounds! It will be eventful walk daily for them and reach the school late, almost daily. They are pulled up for late coming but, as children say, they are used to it.

Afternoon:

Panambur: The officer's children get their food from home. Either the maid or mother brings it or the father takes the child home and after lunch drops back.

Attavara: It is time to play. Food is secondary. They gulp whatever they have brought as fast as possible and run to play. They play to their heart's content.

Evening:

Panambur: Vehicle will be ready to take the children back home. They are asked to wash, fresh up and read. Some have regular tuition classes in math or science. They are allowed to play for an hour. Back home they have a wash and are at the desk for homework.

Attavar: It is playtime. Mothers seek their help to go to shop or fetch water, wood or kerosene. Just before dinner a majority of these children read and complete their homework.

Weekends:

Panambur: Majority of the officer's children are engaged in some extracurricular activities like dance or singing. Officers' children don't like their parents visiting friends or relatives houses because there will be no activity for them there.

Attavar: Their weekends are absolutely free with some exceptions. The Attavar children, when they visit relative's house with their parents, go out and play.

Looking closely at the two set of children, one could see a lot of difference in their lifestyles. From the discussion with the children, it was evident that the Attavara children were much happier. The officers' children felt they were being constantly watched by the parents. I tried to understand the phenomena. Slowly I understood their perception of freedom and control. The officers' children felt that their entire life



was being designed and controlled by their parents. The Attavara children experienced freedom and they had a space of their own.

Having “no space” or “having the space of their own” anything to do with the child’s creativity? How is it that the children of a semi-slum area with all their other limitations participate so actively and engage creatively in any situation? Do children need a world of their own where they can freely engage themselves with whatever they want to do? How is that the various opportunities provided by the officers for their children to grow are not yielding the desired results? Why do these opportunities provided with love and care ultimately irritate the children? Does “planned by the parents” itself limit the way the child sees these opportunities? Is this “space of their own” such a crucial thing in the creativity of a child?

I have stayed with these questions for long. But, they have given me some insights into what it means to say child-centric. It gives me some directions on what it is to be child friendly. Now, there is enough evidence to say that child learns best when it learns by itself; when it explores, experiments and from experience builds its own knowledge and from that the learning. But, this is the trickiest part for an adult who wants to be with the child. You have to be with the child as if you are not there. You have to design something for the child’s learning but the child should not feel that it is ‘your designs’ and the crux of this issue is you cannot fake with children! The million dollar question is do we want to give our children the space of their own? Without providing this minimum requirement how can we expect them to be creative, be original, be themselves?



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