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A scene from a 'life skills' workshop held at the Concerned for Working Children (CWC) centre in Kundapura, Mangalore District :

Children (10 – 15 years of age) in the workshop are from nearby villages, staying at the CWC hostel. They have been/are, attending various government schools. The children are asked to discuss in groups of five and six, what their experiences are, of caste discrimination in the classroom; after which, each of the five groups has to choose one of their real-life experiences and enact it for the whole group. Further discussion, involving all the children, follows the enactments.

It is amazing, the varying shades of discrimination that the children depict: Between teacher and children; children and children and very perceptively, the teacher's differential behaviour to parents of higher and lower castes. This last is most unexpected and a good deal of discussion follows, moving from discrimination in the classroom to the many faces of discrimination in the wider community.

What is important is that, mostly unrecognised feelings and attitudes of the participants are uncovered – these are talked about and analysed, contributing to the understanding of their own selves and also of others in the larger community, layered as it is by different caste and class strata.

Enacting a situation, makes it come alive in the here and now, so that reactions and feelings are there for all to see and experience and respond to, in the urgency of 'now'.

Children are learning about their social environment and about their own particular positions in that environment – not through text-books and lectures but from living through their own experi-

ences. As are the adults present at the workshop - teachers, parents and other guardians of the children in their care.

“We never knew they understood so much!” is the astonished reaction of the adults. They even begin to evince respect for the children, albeit guardedly!

The children are not watching a drama; they are not enacting a given situation from a text-book – both not uncommon ways of using theatre in education. When children are living through the experience of the “issue” and then talking about it, in addition to understanding the subject with their heads, they are also doing so through the prism of their emotions, their values, their prejudices, etc. - all the ‘feeling’ things. Are they not likely to remember all this much

more and much longer than if it were a lesson? Also, it contributes to a widening of the horizons of the outside world, to a deepening of their own inner worlds and to the forming of an informed and hopefully, a liberal world-view. Which, otherwise, would have been bounded by the values, opinions, etc., of members of their families and of the immediate society they live in.





There are many such issues – a few will be touched upon, later in this paper. But first to place this form of ‘theatre’ in the larger perspective of theatre as a whole.

Theatre/Drama has been around for almost as long as human beings have existed. And over this long period of time, theatre has taken many a shape, in many a situation and with a variety of purposes.

- Ancient people appear to have used the depiction of a hunting incident sometimes as rehearsal - and sometimes as celebration - of a successful hunt. In either case, there are actors and there is an audience.
- Hinduism in the East and Christianity in the West are two prominent examples of the use of theatre to promote/popularise religion: depicting the life of Christ, various incidents from the Bible; dramatizing episodes from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana – well-loved and widely-known through theatrical performances, especially in pre-literate days; later, through cinema and television. Again, this involves performers and audience.
- From the Church to the State and to civil society, from religion to politics, theater became a powerful political tool for resistance movements – from political theatre to the ‘street theatre’ of today. In India, from the stage performances of IPTA to the strong statements of Safdar Hashmi, to the watered down awareness-building performances of many a sponsored group. Whether religious or political or awareness-building in orientation, all these performances involve performers and an audience.
- And then, of course, there is the vast body of theatre for entertainment – which can be thought-provoking, laughter-inducing, innovative, surrealistic, whatever..... from Bhasa to Shakespeare to now. Entertainers and the entertained; performers and the audience.

The ‘scene’ and it’s detailing, recounted earlier, is in the order of “by the people, of the people, for the people” - in the sense that there is no distinction between author/playwright, performer and audience.



All are one.

This type of theatre, is designed to further personal growth and inculcate ‘life skills’ - the confidence and self-esteem to enable one to negotiate the many-layered world around one. In all (or most of) other types of theatre, the primary objective is not personal growth - though this often does happen, in the course of ‘getting under the skin’ of different characters.

As stated earlier, in many a classroom nowadays, ‘theatre’ is used for making lessons come alive – this is a good way of consolidating memory. But that is the boundary – it does not go much further.

There are many workshop* instances(see ‘References’) of ‘theatre’ of the sort detailed at the start of this paper. To give a few more examples: these examples are from various workshops that were conducted, in different parts of the country, over a considerable period of time.

The following is what came out of the enactments, which are on the lines of the pattern described earlier – small group discussion; then the enactment, followed by a large group discussion.



The children at these workshops are mostly between the ages of 10 to 15; from government schools; largely from rural areas, some from urban areas. Teachers and mothers, other care-givers are often present. Similar workshops have also been held with adolescent girls and adult women, with some variations in reactions to the ‘issues’ involved.



Some enactment issues/situations

The situation: Stealing

- Students felt that stealing is bad in itself, but it is much worse when other people, especially peers, get to know of it. It frightens children to think that stealing at school will be reported at home – it is not the expected beating that is most frightening, but the responsibility for the loss of family izzat/maryada. If stealing has happened at home, it is never made public – to safeguard the name of the family.

Getting a Prize

- This always makes a child happy, but the happiness is somewhat dimmed when parents don’t make much of it (as often happens). In the thanks speech, the child invariably mentions the teacher and parents “but for whom I would never have won this prize.” There is a down-playing of individual success – to deflect ‘nazar’ and to prevent the child from getting too much ‘ego’. But children long for praise, which is not always forthcoming – for them, praise is more important than the prize.

A married daughter returns home

- In this enactment, the children who played fathers and brothers were very vociferously for the girl going back to her in-laws. Sisters and mothers were sympathetic, but also, were for the girl going back, voicing this more mutedly than the men. The girl herself was never asked what she would have liked to do.

When asked by us, in enactment after enactment, what she would like to do, she invariably replied that she would go back – she saw her identity as being tied in with the in-laws – “I am nothing at my mother’s place”.

Parents fighting

- Parents fighting disturbs children deeply – though they (specifically the boys) greatly enjoy enacting the fighting. Some of the groups change the reference – do not enact parents fighting – is it too threatening? Do they not want to expose delicate family matters? I don’t know. We do not pursue the subject. In practical, non-emotional terms, children say fighting disturbs their studies.

At a couple of workshops where there were no enactments, when participants were asked about their reactions to these and other situations, answers were uni-dimensional; never so rounded, earnest and in-depth as the answers that follow enactments and discussion thereof.

The ‘essence’ of all the enactments and discussions is pertinent to any strategies that might be visualised/evolved for future empowerment and growth of children – whether it be in the learning environment of school or in interactions with adults in the wider world. It is good to be able to understand where the child is coming from, so as to render any interaction with him/her, more meaningful.

- Preserving the **izzat/maryada** (honour) of the family is of primary importance, not only to all adults, but to the children as well. An example of

this is the unanimous verdict that a married girl's place is at her in-laws, no matter what.

- Following from this **'What will people say'** plays an important part in shaping attitude and behaviour.
- **Outward appearances** have to be maintained – as in the case of showing respect to elders. Some elders' qualities may not be 'good', but respect has to be shown – it is for the 'position', not so much for the 'person'.
- **Peer image** is next in importance. Co-students and friends laughing at one's downfall (being scolded, beaten and specially, being made to feel small) is very hard to bear and takes a long time to overcome. It would not be so bad if scolding, etc. were done when alone with teacher or parent – 'why must I be made to feel small always in front of others?' An important point for adults to note.
- **'Duty' rather than 'rights' orientation.** An example - during introductions, when asked to name one quality that they liked in themselves, invariably answers were – helping others, social-service minded, adjustable and more of the same. Also, following from this, praise is muted for any

success achieved – the child is cut down to size, so that he/she doesn't get too much 'ego'.

- **Adults and children alike see themselves as part of the family, the caste, the community, rather than as individuals.** First allegiance goes to the larger unit and promotion of the self is subservient to promotion of the family/larger unit. Adults and children are **'roles', not individuals.** This is a very important point to note – as in this competitive world of individual success, it becomes imperative to balance individual development with family values – how can this be done without too much mental and emotional anguish?

In conclusion, it bears repetition that adults - teachers, mothers and other care-givers were astounded at the maturity of analysis and the depth of understanding of these children. A sneaking feeling that children are human beings after all? And grudgingly stated, deserving of **'respect'**. Usually 'respect' flows from the younger to the older – it is all but revolutionary to think of 'respect' flowing from the elder to the child!

And indeed, isn't 'respect' of the essence, for a satisfactory and fulfilling interaction between any two human beings?





References

*Workshops have been conducted for children (boys and girls), adolescent girls and women, at various forums organised by: Concerned for Working Children, Child Fund India (formerly CCF), Women's Development Programme, Mahila Samakhya, Education Resource Unit. etc.

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LAKSHMI KRISHNAMURTY is an anthropologist by qualification and experience. A theatre enthusiast and practitioner, she combines these two abiding interests, in her work with economically and socially deprived groups of women and children. She started her research career (in 1960) at the Madras University and moved to Delhi in the 70s, where she and a friend, Tripurari Sharma, started an NGO – Alarippu (literally, the opening of a flower). Alarippu began with street theatre and went on to the use of theatre for promoting 'quality' education and for the up-grading of 'life-skills'. Alongside this, has been her ever-growing interest in and focus on the use of theatre for research into the lives, perceptions and world-views of all those involved in the research process - her special concern being to uncover the 'voice' of those being researched. She can be contacted at lakshmi33@gmail.com