

Exploring Gandhian Values Through Theatre

Usha Prescilla Ambrose

During the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of Gandhiji, we planned to engage with school children and teachers creatively and give them the experience of how Gandhiji lived and the thoughts and values he deeply believed in. We decided to enact this on stage for an audience. Along with the field members of Azim Premji Foundation and members of Teachers' Theatre Group, Koppal, Nandish Kumar conceived this programme.

We first arranged a one-day workshop in schools to kindle the children's interest in learnings from Gandhiji's life. The selection of children to act in four short plays was unique. All the higher-primary school children were asked to assemble and we first engaged them in a few simple, fun games in which all the children could participate. Then, the drama groups were formed by taking the children's opinions.

Children would miss classes but would never miss drama rehearsals. They were competing with each other eagerly to play the role of Gandhi, ready even to shave their heads. They would throng the Teacher Learning Centre (TLC) for practice well before the school bell rang in the morning and were reluctant to leave the centre even after dusk. The teachers and all of us realised that the drama practice sessions for the *Gandhi Drama Festival* could provide an excellent opportunity for all children to work and learn together with great enjoyment. We mingled with them and interacted with affection which enabled them to express themselves naturally. We realised that theatre is an excellent learning medium to make children willingly and joyfully learn profound topics in the simplest manner and to inculcate sensitivity in them. Thus, the process of learning was not limited to the children; all of us who were working with them also learned new things from them.

We discussed the theme and context of the plays with the children. They shared the information they had about Gandhiji. When we told them about the relevance of Gandhiji in today's world and the work he did, the children were spellbound. They were surprised to hear that in South Africa,

a barber snubbed him and refused to cut a 'black man's' hair. As they listened to these incidents, the children recreated the dialogues of the plays in their day-to-day language.

We talked about how even though he was a barrister, Gandhiji would spin yarn to make cloth, eat simple food, dress in just two pieces of cloth and do all his work himself. He always used things made and produced in the country and had very few possessions. His message was to love everyone, be concerned about others, to forgive and never hurt anyone. His concern for our environment and cleanliness and many such details were enacted and conveyed by the children through their short plays.

Impact on children

Malaya, a little boy from the Government Higher Primary School (GHPS), Gabber who acted in a play, was until then, uninterested in his science projects. Taking part in the drama helped his self-esteem and he has started completing his class projects and showing them to his teachers. He has also started focussing more on understanding assignments and makes an effort to complete them. Similarly, Ratna, a very quiet girl, has now started sharing her opinion in class with confidence. Many children, including the quiet boy, Suhail, have started voicing their opinions confidently as a result of acting in the plays, especially, since they participated in the scenes from the freedom struggle.

Faizal, a student of class VIII was lagging behind in class due to a learning difficulty and preferred to stay away from all activities. He agreed to participate in the play after a lot of hesitation. After that, he also performed very well in a school play and the other children gladly included him in the school drama troupe.

Children who come to GHPS, Sardargalli from the *Sarkari Balakara Balamandira* (Boys' Home under the Government Department of Women and Child Development) would make fun of a child who was playing the role of a sweeper in the play. The boy was dismayed and refused to play the part. But as

the rehearsals progressed and he understood the role better, he realised the importance of the work and performed his role very well.

Two children from the GHPS, Sardargalli were competing for the role of Gandhiji. The director said, 'Whoever wants the role of Gandhiji should shave his head.' Both of them were ready for this. In the meantime, one of them remained absent for a few days. On the day of performance, both the boys arrived with shaven heads. One boy gave up the chance to allow the other to play the role. But the Director made sure that both of them got the opportunity to play the role of Gandhiji on stage in different scenes. Along with these two, the boy who played the role of a sweeper also got the opportunity to perform the role of Gandhi. In one single play, three different boys played the role of Gandhiji.

Teachers' reactions

Teachers supported the entire process of preparation for the plays with utmost interest and dedication. Boys from the Government *Balamandira* who attend GHPS, Sardargalli in Koppala town, were involved in the entire process of acting with full freedom. The wardens of the *Balamandira*, who normally did not let the children go anywhere without prior permission, allowed the children to go to the TLC as many times as we requested. They accompanied children to the rehearsals and were happy to see their children getting engrossed in acting. They brought all the children from the *Balamandira* on the day of the performance.

Dayanand Sagar, a science teacher in one of the schools and a dramatist himself, happily shared that class VII girls of his school who were earlier hesitant to go on stage for any event, were less nervous about doing so after participating in the play.

Mutturaj, a teacher of GHPS, Nilogipur remarked that the children who acted in the cleanliness scenes in the play are keen to keep their surroundings clean. In the same school, children enacted a skit about celebrating national holidays in a meaningful way. This made the teachers realise the importance of making children understand the background of each national holiday and birth anniversary of prominent people. As a result, they have abandoned the practice of just placing portraits of national leaders to pay homage on special days and have instead started having conversations with children about the significance of these days.

Pranesh Poojar from GHPS, Hanumanahalli remembers fondly how his school children had started coming forward willingly to do work such as watering the plants in the school premises and cleaning etc., often citing what they did in the Gandhi play and to replicate with enthusiasm, Gandhi's lessons, in their school. He remarked how, for days on end, children would walk around the school happily repeating dialogues from the play. Seeing so much positive change in the children, he also expressed his desire to initiate another drama performance by his students.

Other takeaways

During every rehearsal, though the scenes were the same, the dialogues by the children would change because they did not mug up the dialogues. Yet children did not speak out of context. The whole play was written introducing the scenes by eliciting the opinions of the children about the different scenes that should be for different life circumstances of Gandhiji. There were extensive discussions about visually depicting the different stages in Gandhiji's life such as his childhood, youth, education, his profession and struggle in South Africa, the *Satyagraha* and the values he believed in and lived for. Children had grasped the subtle firmness that was devoid of rudeness in Gandhiji's personality.

Children who had only seen Gandhiji's photographs in the school, in textbooks and currency notes and had heard that he 'brought independence to our country' in speeches delivered during national celebrations, could experience through the drama performance the true essence of Gandhiji life and work and could also communicate the same to the audience.

If anyone asked them why they were performing these plays, the children would reply that Gandhiji, through his life, has shown that it is possible to live a life with his ideals and everyone should be able to understand this and emulate him. Children were able to recognise that by washing toilets, by cutting his own hair, Gandhi demonstrated that no job is inferior or superior. And that the fight for our rights through non-violence is just as effective.

Some of the questions that students and teachers discussed were, what are the messages Gandhiji gave through his life? Which of these was their personal favourite? Is it difficult to bring about change? If yes, why?

The discussion about boys helping with household

chores was a little new to them causing some discomfort and surprise. It was particularly fascinating to note that children were able to recognise correctly the messages and values of Gandhiji. In this process, students and teachers

ruefully admitted that discrimination in the name of caste and gender still exists in our villages and were of the view that, in order to eradicate this, it is important that all of us should strive towards it.

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**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



Usha Prescilla Ambrose has been working with the Azim Premji Foundation for over a decade. She leads the District Team, Koppal. She has completed her Master's degree in Political Science and has rich experience working with vulnerable communities and empowering women. She enjoys creating art works. She also enjoys literature, music and travel. She can be contacted at usha.ambrose@azimpremjifoundation.org