

Exploring Democracy Through Drama

Sanyukta Saha and Devika Bedi

Akbar, the great Mughal emperor, had become too big for his own good and had started believing that he owned everything that made up the world - every blade of grass, every mountain, brick, city, everything! On a walk one afternoon, he almost tripped and fell over something large. To his rage, it was an old sadhu in the middle of his very own courtyard. He was, of course, very angry and tried to kick this sadhu out. The sadhu, though, was not at all flustered, adding to the emperor's annoyance. The old man started speaking to him about how the world has been lived in by many, but never has anything been taken by them to the next life - everyone, including emperors, occupies this world only as a traveller and moves on. After much deliberation, when Akbar began to see light, the sadhu deftly gave away his masquerade to reveal his true identity - the much-admired courtier, Birbal, leaving the great emperor Akbar feeling embarrassed.

This story was woven by the theatre thespian, Safdar Hashmi into a poem called, *Duniya Sabki*, written for children and published in a collection of poems of the same name by the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT). This booklet has been the guide and foundation of the *Aagaaz* Theatre Trust which engages with children, adolescents, and adults through drama as a process and in performance. We look at citizenship as a process of questioning what is, probing what could be and taking action beyond the theatre stage.

Why Duniya Sabki?

A citizen is anyone who inhabits a nation and enjoys its rights and privileges, no matter what intersectionalities he or she belongs to. All citizens have the responsibility to actively hold the state accountable to uphold the values of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. This possibility of affirmative action in a society rife with diverse identities, perspectives and interests is not possible without dialogue. For effective dialogue to take place, spaces that nurture imagination, curiosity and critical thinking in individuals and collectives, need to exist. At *Aagaaz*, our overarching purpose

is to create such spaces through the language of theatre.

Duniya Sabki was the first play that we created in 2010, before *Aagaaz* was even conceived as a separate entity. In the years of performing the play as a repertory, each time it was a new play because the stories of the actors kept changing. Each time they brought their individual stories, relevant to their lives at that moment. The play then became a mode of understanding one's own voice and sharing it with others. This act of courage is an important step towards beginning dialogue as an active citizen. In the last few years, we have been taking this play to be co-created with many young people in various contexts. In these seven-to-ten-day-long workshops, many new performances of *Duniya Sabki* have emerged and many different stories of many different children have found expression.

In this article, we share two of our experiences: one, of working with forty children of classes VII-IX in the Delhi Public School, Srinagar (2017) and another of 18 members in the age group of 9-12, of the Community Library Project's Sheikh Sarai/ Khirki Village chapter (a densely populated urban settlement with primarily migrant population) in Delhi (2018).

Initiating the process

The group in Srinagar laid immense emphasis on the arts in their school. Here, we began the session by playing games together, even before names were exchanged. This led all of us shedding any inhibitions that we may have had about one other and paved the way for shared possibilities. On the other hand, members of the Community Library Project at Sheikh Sarai work with educational institutions with rudimentary arts infrastructure. Here, collectively clearing the narrow basement for all the games that we were to play established a sense of ownership of the workshop to follow.

To become present as a group, we began every session by forming a circle, which while creating a ritual, also created a way of bringing the group

together. A circle, where everybody can see each other and is himself/herself seen, becomes a container that holds everybody's presence. A circle is a reflection of a mutually held structure - no one is in front, middle or last and everyone's willingness gives it shape.

This sense of co-ownership was also reaffirmed by *Aagaaz's* repertory members, who have been facilitating these sessions since their adolescent years. When children/adolescents are co-facilitating a process with those who are close to their age, it changes the notions of *learners* and *teachers*. A common ground emerges, and there is a heightened possibility of accepting and building on ideas playfully, even while making mistakes in the process. The quality of engagement and the stories that are thus, discovered, also shift.

Stimulus for exploration

As a process, the drama uses various stimuli to move towards creation. In both Srinagar, as well as Sheikh Sarai, we used questions and text to negotiate the creative process. Both of these can create a framework for guided reflection on the connectedness of our experiences with those of others. This facilitates a curiosity/inquiry towards an understanding of the environment and allows for an imagination of possibilities beyond. This investigation creates a sensorial experience for the group.

To be able to respond to what is, it is essential to understand the existing reality and question its implications on the everyday lives of individuals and collectives. Understanding and questioning, in themselves, are integral to deepening each other. Open-ended questions facilitate participation because they create an opportunity for diverse perspectives and personal experiences. Active participation, instead of passive reception, lays the foundation for democratic practices. Children's roles in a democratic space are no different. Their questions, voices, and stories are more often than not unheard – their perspectives negated. The depth of their experiences is not valued by the adult world. Performing these stories creates a stage for their voices to reach diverse audiences.

The process of uncovering stories for us happens through the act of framing questions. These questions help us find our way into our own stories and are the bridges that connect them with the stories of others - through resonance, similarities, differences and disagreements.

The chosen text in this case, *Duniya Sabki*, raises a pertinent question - *does the world belong to everyone?* Each child's answer leads to a further train of enquiry - 'Why do you say it does/doesn't? Have you ever had an experience that made you feel this way?'

The poem becomes a *stimulus*, creating a space for personal stories to emerge. The experiences of children are diverse and the text, with its central questions, opens up the possibility for everyone's enquiry. Triggered from the same questions, these stories when shared, create a sense of community. Why does this sense of *community* emerge? Conversely, what are the larger systems at play that create the commonalities in experiences of not feeling a sense of belongingness in the world?

The poem is pivoted on the statement – '*ya to duniya sabki hai, ya nahi kisi ki, bhai*' (the world either belongs to all or to no one at all). It is either an effort towards asserting everyone's rights (*ya to duniya sabki hai*), or it is not a democratic process at all (*ya nahi kisi ki bhai*).

Collective space and voice

A collective framework only exists when all its members can add their voices toward repairing, rejecting and creating elements of the ways of co-existing. A system where one group's voices and expressions are silenced more than those of others, is straying away from this notion of the collective. The democratic ideal is not a destination, but a constant journey of push and pull between the State and its citizens. This push and pull between systemic issues and collectives emerges from the enquiry within every individual. This enquiry is an examination of the current reality, the imagination of future possibilities and the journey towards these futures. The expression of these many possibilities leads to dialogue, finding commonalities, voicing and working through conflicts. This is also the process of democratic nation-building.

Drama-based methodologies hinge on the impulse to push boundaries. The re-creation of even the most ordinary and mundane in the workshop space has a strangeness to it. Brushing one's teeth in front of an imaginary wash basin, holding an imaginary toothbrush, with an imaginary stream of water running from a tap that does not really exist, are not ordinary actions in this collective space. The vocabulary of the method carries within it a challenge. The challenge is not just in stretching individually, but also in its desire for doing so

collectively. The challenge to stretch exists not just for the group but also for the facilitator. They need to recognise their own position of power in the dynamics and create a space where the group can thrive both individually and collectively. The facilitator's role is to nudge softer voices into expression. This reinforces the possibility of expecting people in positions of power to create opportunities for collective growth, where everyone's voice is heard. Thus, Akbar's voice in the text stands almost as a *hidayat* (instruction) to the facilitator.

On stage and beyond

A dialogue between Akbar and Birbal becomes a much larger exchange amongst many individuals, groups and societies across two very different geographies, creating many different possibilities of transformation. In both Srinagar and Sheikh Sarai, parents and peers of the participants came in large numbers for the final sharing of the plays. It is a moment of reckoning for both the audience and the performers. In the leap of faith that the latter take in expressing their yet-untold stories, and the former in witnessing those known to them sharing their unheard voices. The audience as well as the performers enter into an unspoken contract of believing the stories that unfold on stage. They both discover the possibilities of new realities in this suspended moment of disbelief. Both are transformed in this exchange in small, sometimes imperceptible, ways. It is a democratic dialogue in progress.

At the Community Library Project, a mother who

saw her daughter onstage for the first time, acting out the gender roles she (the daughter) is expected to play, went back introspecting. In Delhi Public School, many students expressed resonance with the story on bullying, just another form of exclusion and show of inequalities in power and strength. The children in both workshops had gone on a journey to engage with their stories and how it had affected them. They had found the language of performance to tell these stories together. They had expressed on stage a desire to live different stories, different realities.

Conclusion

The act of being a citizen does not begin with the right to vote. It begins with the everyday life of every person and their engagement with these experiences. The conscious examination of one's identities and the single stories ascribed to them is the beginning of active citizenship. Conversations and words are often not enough to initiate this process. Children, who are developing their own identities, are already initiated into this exploration through play. They make meaning of complex realities through this act. In a child's world, stories are dynamic, and it is possible to keep changing them. Drama-based methodologies use play and guided discovery as tools to help children see beyond the facade of single stories. The process of creating stories reveals multitudes of perspectives. Ideas are activated on stage through performance, helping the performers imagine possibilities of deliberate action in everyday life. This action is the first step towards shaping the desired reality.



Sanyukta Saha is an applied theatre practitioner and the Founder of Aagaaz Theatre Trust. She is curious about looking at the relationship between theatre, activism and mental health and well-being. She can be contacted at sanyukta@aagaaztheatre.org



Devika Bedi is an arts educator and facilitator, living in Delhi. She works with children and young people in community and education settings. She is currently in the process of understanding how arts can be used in diverse spaces to facilitate a better awareness of the self, leading to more deliberate and conscious action. She can be contacted at devika@aagaaztheatre.org