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YOUNG HISTORIANS

*A documentary film by Deepa Dhanraj in Kannada with English Subtitles,
an Education Development Centre and DSERT, Bangalore Production*

Film Review – by Thangam George

After reciting a few couplets in Kannada, the teacher asked, “Why are you laughing?”. “Well we didn’t understand anything though it was Kannada”, replied the students listening to few lines of a famous poem in Kannada. “True, you wouldn’t understand it. It is archaic Kannada, you don’t use it now”, replied the teacher in an accepting tone. So take a guess - Was it to learn about history or literature? Connecting society, literature and culture with time and its evolution has been interwoven seamlessly in the film, ‘Yeleya Itihasigalu’ (Young Historian).

Storytelling is something which attracts everyone; then why has hi(s)-story been one of the most boring subjects among children? Perhaps it’s not put forth as His(/her)- story, but more as a bunch of events which followed a chronology which has to be learnt by heart even without a wee bit of heart to do so!

The film Yeleya Itihasigalu (Young Historian), catches attention as history is usually associated with old and ancient. So then what is Young Historians about? It is a short film with 20 students and a teacher trying to learn history in an innovative way. The attempt is to help students acknowledge the link of the present with the past. There is a need to step out of the classroom, look around, discuss with experts, observe and question.

Each snippet has been well thought out and methods adopted accordingly. For instance, to talk about Buddhism, the story of Buddha with emphasis of his childhood, followed by Jataka tales have been the point of introduction. Use of stories and animated pictures helped to hold the interest longer. The use of puppet to create an imagery of Huen Tsang’s travels and the reception given to such travelers those days in India was interesting. Reiteration of his travelogues being a rich source of information of history motivated the students to write their own travelogues of the places they have visited. They saw meaning in it and did it willingly. It is noteworthy that while sharing their travelogues, no additions or deletions were made by the teacher. They were given freedom to write in their own style.

The setting for each theme was selected aptly. For instance, to discuss about archaeology and sculptures dating back to early man and Stone Age, the students were taken to an archeological site. They also met with an archeologist who answered their queries. It was an impressive attempt to allow students to become archeologists. They were given antique artifacts then asked to think about who its owners would have been and think about their lives. Similarly, to learn about trade and history, coin collection and inferring history though it was brilliant.

This created room for discussion on aspects like the currency system, money value, language, political system, economic system, trade & commerce. To learn about sea routes, introduction to the different seas in the world and building curiosity on directions for sailing, opened up a whole new world of information about wind directions, constellations, compass, light house, need for sea routes and the spirit of adventure to sail on the seas. The awe of boat building was a big eye opener for them.

Vachanas - the revolutionary poems upholding human dignity - were sung by young artists of the same age. This steered a lot of discussion about the lives of the poets, society in those times, oppression and so on. This discussion by students also brought forth discrimination existing in present society. The connection between history, literature, social system and its influence to the current times has been addressed brilliantly. As part of understanding the Golden era of Kannada literature, a poem was recited in archaic Kannada. The students laughed out, as they did not understand it. It clearly shows the comfort level with the teacher. An interesting discussion about portraits of historical heroes, their features and their proximity to reality helped the students understand how art influences our imagination. Music and rhythm attracted them a lot.

As a method to transact history, this is an exemplary attempt. There is a clear plan for each topic. Crisp, interesting introduction, followed by fact finding, storytelling, team work, application of the new information, discussion, questioning has been in-built judiciously into each theme. For instance, to discuss trade & history, the story of chilly not being of Indian origin is shared. Something as ordinary as chillies,

a daily household item, immediately captures complete attention. Each topic has been thought through in detail. The lesson plan has taken into account the time available for each topic, interesting and appropriate methods to make the experience memorable and educative. It makes a child confident to think freely with a scientific temper. The need to touch and feel has been lavishly used in this approach. The attitude and warmth that the teacher shares with this group can be inferred by the patient response that the teacher gives to a chain of questions. Teacher is only a facilitator in the learning process. Creativity coupled with planning and networking has been done well. Each snippet ends with a simple conclusion and encourages teachers to attempt similar activities in their class.

It gives ample choices to a teacher; to be inspired to create new methods. If not all, if even one of them is attempted, it would make a difference. The possibility of various approaches to each topic is prudently illustrated. It is evident that students become interested to understand the influence of history in one's life, society, country, culture and customs.

Some obvious questions which come up while watching these methods could be:

Is it possible to do similar activities with larger groups?

How much time should one invest to teach one subject?

It would be interesting to know from the teacher about his/her preparation to make this happen; to know if this was his regular style of teaching.

The eight snippets in the film are of the following themes:

1. Our village history
2. Archeology and Sculptures
3. Jataka tales and Buddhism
4. Jainism and Gometeshwara
5. Learning history from inscriptions
6. Sea routes
7. Trade and History
8. Vachanas



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