

Project Report

NUKKAD NATAK: 'PADHNA KITNA ZAROORI' – STREET THEATRE WORKSHOP

In my ongoing engagement with the children of the Khirki community, I noticed that participating/performing in a natak—a play/theatre was something that drew excited yelps from all. Having participated in the earlier community theatre project – Ghummakad Toli undertaken last year, some children were nostalgic while sharing their joyous experiences around the stories enacted then. With the onset of summer holidays, the children once again expressed their wish to perform in a natak in their community.

To manifest and harness this creative enthusiasm, I collaborated with a team of professional actors, Mr. Saleem Zaidi – a member of the reputed theatre group, IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) Delhi and Mr. Siddharth, to conduct theatre workshops for children, leading to a performance in the community. Every evening, as I met children at the Khirki Village Park for our art workshop sessions that were now concluding, discussions about the theatre workshops began shaping up. Lists were drawn of children who were keen to participate and initially, about thirty children expressed their interest for participation in the theatre workshop. In our conversations, I communicated the significance of committing to daily rehearsals/ workshop sessions for the theatre with an objective to instill a sense of discipline, determination, and commitment to working hard towards bringing something to fruition.

The workshops were planned to be intensive, for about 2-3 hours daily for a duration of about three weeks, to be conducted at the KHOJ Studios. I, in consultation with Mr. Zaidi decided not to conduct auditions, but offer each one a chance to participate and express themselves in whatever capacity possible, if they demonstrated keenness to do so. The idea being that children who were truly interested and enjoyed engaging in the medium of theatre, would participate regularly in the workshop sessions and would thereby get an opportunity to showcase their talent without fear of rejection, performance or competition. This would enable them to reveal their creative selves freely and openly in a fun-filled and playful atmosphere while gaining in self-confidence. I invited Mr. Zaidi to the park one evening after an art workshop, for an introductory session to generate interest and orient the children to the theatre workshop. He spoke about the concept of a nukkad natak, its various elements, and facets and the significance of daily rehearsals to be able to step up the performance level in public.

Mr. Zaidi ascertained the children's willingness to participate, inspired and motivated them to join the workshop through enacting humorous parts and jokes, and inviting children to perform and engage in song and dance. Not only did the children enjoy their introduction to the first community nukkad natak, but the initiative also roused the curiosity and garnered much appreciation from parents and the elderly who were regular visitors in the park at evening and who also happily witnessed this session. Few parents eventually brought their young children for rehearsals following this introductory session. As planned, the sessions of the street theatre workshop commenced on the afternoon of 15th of July, at the KHOJ Studios. For the first day there was an overwhelming response with a total of 35 children who came in, some accompanied with their parents and a little one accompanied by her grandmother.

The first session conducted by Mr. Zaidi and Mr. Siddharth introduced some interesting and informal fun exercises. This helped them as well as others to get accustomed to the group and the individuals thereof while slowly allowing a sense of the collective to emerge. The workshop was defined as a space where the children could freely engage in activities that they are usually forbidden to do at home, schools and most places elsewhere (e.g. to be as loud, scream, make noise and express themselves freely and fearlessly in voice and body). In the beginning when asked to scream as loudly as they can, it was noticed, that many children, and mostly young girls were hardly able to do so. Not for lack of a loud voice or because they were too shy but simply owing to their conditioning to 'behave' and reflective of repressed environments that they were raised in, with fewer opportunities thereby showing itself in their faint meek voices lacking in self assurance and confidence. And although they took some time to adjust to this new sense of freedom, later, it was a sheer delight to see these children participate and perform with such innate talent.

In the month-long rigorous workshop, the children were taught about the intricacies of expression, dialogue delivery, posture, and timing with the help of several games and role playing exercises conducted by Mr. Zaidi. He also introduced the group to other co-facilitators who were brought in from time to time to assist him. As time went by some children were unable to continue or dropped out and eventually a core group of 16 remained well after the first week to continue right up to the performance. Barring some children who were forced to leave with their parents for summer vacations, only those stayed on whose fascination for the theatre grew by the day and who eagerly looked forward to their daily rehearsals that lasted for a couple of hours and yet asked for more! In the initial sessions, the children were given tasks to enact skits/ one act plays on their family dynamics. They were asked to observe their parents, and enact interpersonal relationships expressing their grievances, displeasure, expectations, and aspirations for their children.

Many of them enjoyed acting as their parents and depicting themselves in the plays presented. The final play was scripted, worked upon, and developed on one of these skits presented at one of the initial sessions based roughly around the significance of education and the expressed desire of children to learn. For the final performance, the nukkad natak was titled, 'padhna kitna zaroori' with the children bringing in the idea and the theme for it while Mr. Zaidi and Mr. Siddharth fine-tuning its script, structure and direction. The natak had three parts/acts and involved over dramatized, exaggerated, and humorous stances through which it emphasized the role of education. The first part depicted a scenario in which the husband is highly educated while his wife is illiterate; the second scenario depicted a household, which has a highly educated wife with an illiterate husband. Both parts exemplified the miscommunication between such couples, and its consequent confusions involving themselves and others.

The third and the last scenario depicted children who are forced onto the streets and are engaged in various activities (e.g. robbery, begging and rag picking) instead of studying in schools. At the end of the three scenarios, the sutradhaar/ narrator draws in the audience by posing questions as to who is responsible for the situations that these children find themselves in and are unable to extricate themselves from. Whether the responsibility lies only with the intermediaries and touts who are directly involved (in engaging children in nefarious activities for instance in the third scenario) or is the society largely and hence each one of us is indirectly responsible (for instance in the first two scenarios where the role of education is not given importance). This drives home the truth that we all play a significant role in perpetuating these larger issues through our complacency, indifference and unwillingness to affect a change.

The play ends with the children expressing their keen desire to study through a positive slogan and an inspiring song. Sunday, the 11th of July was decided to be the final date for the performance. The Khirki Village Park owing to its centrality and popularity amongst the residents as a neighbourhood meeting point was selected as the venue of the final performance, after consulting and seeking consent of few of the elderly women who regularly spend their leisure evenings at the Park. In line with the oral traditions of the nukkad natak, a crucial part of the street theatre performance was to announce, inform, and seek support of the community for the play. It was agreed that the children would rally through the lanes and streets of Khirki inviting/ requesting people in the community to come and watch their performance while announcing the date and time of the street play. This was undertaken on the evening before the final performance.

The announcement was not as successful as we envisioned. As for the children, it was their first attempt at announcing their play publicly. They were not as well prepared compared to their eagerness and excitement. At the Khirki Village Park the women felt that the children were loud and caused chaos, and consequently some elderly women were offended as their peaceful evening walk was disturbed. Overall, it indeed did turn out to be a bit chaotic as many other younger children from the community rallied with the troupe and were understandably being noisy and riotous in their fun and exuberance. The beating of drums initially intended to foster a festive spirit and to draw people's attention, only added to the chaos.

The purpose of the announcement - to create interest, garner community support and to gain self-confidence in performing outdoors and amongst crowds seemed lost as few elders at the park expressed their displeasure and irritability apparently at the method of our announcement. Nevertheless, apart from being annoyed by the chaotic situation, some of the reactions, for us, also reflected the prevalent class dynamics of the larger community in and around Khirki, as many children performing in the street play, came from the adjacent Panchsheel Vihar belonging to the communities with much weaker socio-economic background compared to the fairly middle-class residents of the Khirki Village area. This incident somewhere highlighted the class / caste dynamics and made us a bit apprehensive about performing at the same venue the following day. But, the next day foretold a different story.

On behalf of KHOJ, we had organized new costumes for the troupe. The performance was scheduled to start at 6 in the evening but on the day of the performance the children came in at KHOJ Studios by afternoon to try out their new costumes and for a final rehearsal. All the children were well rehearsed and ready and looked very impressive in their new costumes and around quarter to six, we headed to the park with basic props (organized by KHOJ). When the children stepped out and started walking towards the park, they garnered a lot of attention. On reaching the Khirki Village gates because of the displeasure of the women in the earlier day, Mr. Zaidi and I sort permission again from women for the performance while the children were waiting outside.

To our surprise, many were waiting eagerly for the performance and especially Maya ma stood by us and boosted the confidence of the children during the entire performance. As the play started a lot of people gathered from outside; a group of elderly men who usually sit at the further end of the park joined in, senior boys who practice sports also joined in, parents of the children performing and many regular park visitors mostly women and children from outside joined in for the performance. The audience enjoyed the performance and praised the children for their astounding performance. It almost felt that the tension, which was caused the day before, had temporarily disappeared and the children had won everybody's heart with their performance. There was a growing demand for more

performances for the children at different parts of the Khirki Village. Many children who were forced to opt out of the workshop also approached us to start another workshop soon.