

FROM STREET TO STAGE - Deprived of a childhood, Mumbai's children who live on the streets, might find a rebirth through theatre. Charmaine Carvalho talks to some NGOs to find out if this holds true.



Theatre has always been more than just a spectacle and NGOs in this city seem to have realised, that drama can be used as a form of therapy, a means of reaching out to street children and getting them to reach within themselves. They are putting up plays featuring street children and focusing on a variety of themes, largely social in nature.

"Drama is a powerful mechanism of opening the window of repressed memories, relating these to a fictional situation with the least damage and converting painful memories into harmless anecdotes," explains counselling psychiatrist Dr. Harish Shetty. "It also helps in improving and evolving problem solving skills for children with complex conflicts."

Little Ilias smiles endearingly and begins to speak, "Don't touch the wings. Do your work and let others do their work. Don't talk loudly." Six year old Reshma recites a poem. Two children face each other, mimicking each other's actions, while an enthusiastic boy does an impression of a monkey.



Just another hour in the life of children of the NGO Aseema, who have recently started drama classes. Twice a week the children traipse down to St. Joseph 's School, Bandra, for drama classes with Shashi Pankaj Madhukar, a graduate from the National School of Drama. Two months down the line, the children are more confident and of course, channelling their energy into staging a play, which will be performed in November. Madhukar says, "I used to look at children in the local trains and I saw talent in them. My idea was to form a Children's Repertory Company like the one Ratan Thiam started. I submitted a plan for working with the children for two years."

One of Madhukar's first sessions with the children was to have them act out their dreams. These, he said, were highly imaginative and revealed the potential of the kids. Working with street children was a challenge. "I had worked with children of IAS officers in Delhi , but they were disciplined. Here, the children react without restraint. Sometimes, I leave the sessions open, but I do have to discipline them."

Dilbur Parakh of Aseema says she noticed a marked difference in the children. "They are much more confident and in school, they willingly come forth and answer questions," she informs.

At Saathi, an NGO working with adolescents on the streets, theatre is more than just a tool to develop confidence - it is a therapeutic device. Altaf, one of the co-founders of Saathi said, the idea of using drama as a method of intervention with street youth took root as an alternative to simply giving children packaged solutions. "We wanted to work with individuals and allow them to discover something about themselves. What better way than theatre?" he says.

The next step was to rope in a professional to conduct the classes. "We didn't mind spending money on the drama programme, though initially sponsors were sceptical. Radha Chakravarthy conducts the programme for us. All the exercises are designed to get participants involved enough to discover something about themselves," Altaf explains.

After working with a group for six months, they are left to continue the process on their own, with occasional guidance. Saathi has presented three plays so far, with occasional guidance, the last one touching on the subject of Gujarat riots. Altaf says, "We wanted to touch upon the subject of religion because there is a myth that street children have no religion. This is not so. Over a period of four months, we had several discussions about what religion meant to them, how they feel about people of other religions, etc. the group then felt they wanted to present their views and that's how the play took shape."

Altaf believes that the programme is 100 percent successful in giving the youth a sense of self. "They think about where they come from and where they go from here, as well as achieve a level of confidence to deal with situations. This is relevant especially for boys on the street who are

always living in the shadow of something or someone," says Altaf, adding, "From Saathi's point of view, this programme is most effective because we are dealing with youth. We want to go beyond merely providing them with food and shelter, we want to teach them to face the world with or without the organisation.

Children love to learn, but hate to be taught - this is the philosophy behind the Vatsalya Foundation's theatre programme. The children from Vatsalya are minor celebrities in their own right, having performed at Prithvi under the banner of Vatsalya Darshan.

Swati Mukherjee of Vatsalya says, "Role play and improvisation exercises have been the intervention strategy." Themes cover social issues such as child labour, pollution and problems of the girl child. Mukherjee adds, "The children have performed at various occasions like the Vatsalya Foundation's in-house programmes and in prestigious theatres in Mumbai, under the banner of Vatsalya Darshan group. Two of their plays *Mumbai Meri Jaan* and *Hello Zindagi* have a censor certificate. Drama is not only a medium of expression, but also a means to give vent to pent up emotions. Thus, it helps in the development process of children."

Vatsalya Foundation strongly believes in the potential of its children, and thus it involves them in the process of the production of the play. The process is exhausting, but satisfying and a good learning experience for each and every individual be it the children, staff, volunteers and audience too."

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