

## Vichar Vimarsh Manch Discussion Papers

Yemuna Sunny, Eklavya Hoshangbad 2008

A

### UDAN - SOME REFLECTIONS

Udan, a low-profile magazine, which initially began for children and later made space for youth as well, has been regularly published for more than a decade now. Initially cyclostyled and later printed, the magazine has its inspiration, material generation and utilisation in and around eighteen villages of Hoshangabad district, Madhya Pradesh. The monthly magazine is one of the important components and reflectors of the processes involving youth and children in establishing out- of -school learning centres. This effort called '*Vichar Vimarsh Manch*' ( Discussion Forums, henceforth referred to as VVM) is coordinated from Eklavya, Hoshangabad.

It is not as though we do exercises of correcting (language) and editing with the individual writers face to face. But we see definite improvements in writing through the medium of Udan. Improvements need to be discussed not simply in terms of correctness of language etc (though these also show marked changes), but in terms of frameworks of expression.

Recently a workshop was held for children who come to our library largely from the neighbourhood in Malakhedi where Eklavya campus is situated. We held a story writing session and it was revealing that the stories from this crowd and the ones we get from VVM were qualitatively different.

The stories from Malakhedi largely contained traits of folk and oral traditions with their quota of rough, 'violent' humour etc. These are reflections of story concepts that exist in the cultural ethos. It was intriguing that though these children were exposed to various children's books in our library almost on a regular basis, the stories they narrated did not show any influences of those. Instead, almost all the stories we obtained had a characteristic and homogenous format inclined very much towards the oral and the folk.

And this reminded me of the initial phases of writings that used to come to us in VVM.

But today the difference in writings from VVM lies in the fact that very original imaginations have come to predominate their stories. Such changes are also reported from a research study being currently done at Hoshangabad on interactions and talks with children in classrooms.

Such change in the framework of children's expressions must be taking place on the basis of their realisations and experiences of what gets legitimised and the sort of spaces seen available for expression. The above-mentioned folk traditions existing in the cultural milieu are often seen to be replaced by the 'Nibandh' tradition in schools. But neither of these provides much scope to children for expressing their own thoughts and imagination for which writing can be an important medium.

That children and youth develop this ability for self-reflection and expression in VVM is evident from their writings in Udan. It is important to understand the process through which this happens. What gives the confidence to these children and youth that their own thoughts and reflections are worth writing about and they can actually do it? Enhancement of their ability and legitimisation of their thought process are brought about through various means. Perhaps all the activities under the programme add to this, be it reading, discussions or theatre, and Udan becomes an important supporting platform. At the village level, the VVM volunteers become important agents of this legitimisation. They encourage children and youths

to express themselves through drawing and writings, but dissuade them from producing carbon-copied drawings and copied writings from books and magazines. That is why over time, we have seen the numbers of such papers coming to us for Udan have dwindled. We usually see that imaginations of children are not given much encouragement by adults; instead these often get dumped as 'lies'. But as some children's flights of fancy get published, it prompts more persons to express themselves.

But the processes of enhancing expressions and creativity are often very subtle. They are guided by a number of encouraging factors like listening, giving space while guiding, and mutual respect which gives quality to adult-child interactions or adult-adult interactions. In many out-of-school or out-of-curriculum efforts, 'activities' are often seen to become mechanical, as ends to be achieved, where processes and their subtle potentials are sadly lost. That is one of the reasons why a magazine like Udan becomes so useful for the volunteers who run VVM in the villages.

Outside the geographical areas of VVM, Udan has been subscribed and used by organisations and groups in and out of MP that work with children and youth. However, we also realise that most often it is the final products of creative processes that are gathered in Udan and the processes themselves go unrevealed. With frequent turnover of volunteers, a clear understanding of these processes becomes even more crucial.

This brings us to new ideas for improving Udan. At least one or two detailed pieces on the creative processes themselves in each issue could be very useful for promoting quality writing among children and youth. Several such write-ups have been prepared for the coming issues of Udan; a very small piece is illustrated here to underline this point.

*Kuttu is 8 years old. He narrated a story, which was told to him some time back by his grandmother. But the narration was not exactly in tune with the 'original' because he changed it here and there and added new dimensions. Thus the new version contained his imaginations as well. In some places, he forgot the original, but the story had to go on. So he became not only the narrator, but partly the author as well.*

*Kuttu can write, that is, he is beginning to write. But he felt that writing such a 'full' story was not his cup of tea. So he drew pictures and told me the story all over again. I could listen and write it all, he said. And so the story was told and written. He was happy to see the story written down alongside his pictures.*

*"It is like a book," he said.*

(This is to be published along with the story he narrated.)

***Yemuna Sunny***

## **B**

### **Vichar Vimarsh Manch Workshops**

#### **THEATRE IN EDUCATION- SOME REFLECTIONS**

Several years of working in theatre with youth through Vichar Vimarsh Manch has provided rich experience especially in the context of pedagogy of theatre. This experience included important experiments in social education of youth.

Some valuable highlights are mentioned below:

#### **How was theatre used to educate youth?**

This can best be understood from the four plays done so far:

**1. *Sudama ke chaval*** – A play based on Harishankar Parsai's story, performed thrice including once at the Prithvi theatre, Mumbai–.

**2. *Sookhi padi gang phir se hari ho uthegi*** – A theatre response to the pathetic killings in Gujarat in 2002. This was a collage using the reports of actual incidents, writings of Harishankar Parsai, poems of O.N.V.Kurup, Kaifi Azmi, Kabir's *dohas*(couplets) etc.

**3. *Sawa ser gehun*** – Based on a story by Premchand, the storyline revolving around a 'sahukar' (money lender) and bonded labour

**4. *Sadgati*** – Based on another story by Premchand, the storyline revolving around caste system's oppression leading to the death of a man of low caste.

What were the **processes, which define pedagogy of theatre** ?

What makes these experiences stand out from the normal practices of theatre, which are only production oriented? Every workshop had discussions, writing, reading etc. as integral parts of the process. Hence theatre was seen not simply as production and presentation of plays, but also as a process where the issues dealt with were explored by the participants.

Nature of **script**: Instead of memorising a given script local dialect was used to create the script once the central idea was imbibed. The development of script in the workshop always remained an important process in which different ways were used.

Moreover the skills of theatre can be learned or developed in many ways. One way is for a more experienced person to demonstrate the role and the learner **mimics** that. Another way which is more creative and lasting is to enable the learner to create and improvise the role through his/ her own imagination. For this one needs to develop the body language, voice and expression. It is this method that we have tried to use. The demonstration-mimic method, which perhaps requires the rigidity and discipline of a typical classroom, would have been difficult and inadvisable, especially as we were working with youths belonging to marginalised social groups to evolve a creative environment with them. Our rather intuitive and flexible approach was not simply a matter of feasibility, but also seemed good pedagogy.

It is true that in many instances the exact dialogue as written by the playwright needs to be delivered in theatre. But our emphasis was on the situation and characters of the play with flexibility in dialogue. Even when we experimented with stories of such writers as Parsai and Premchand, the flexibility of dialogues never created any problem. In fact, it was felt that it only lent richness to the play and confidence to the characters.

The pedagogy we tried could not be delinked from the reality that our participants were from the most deprived sections of society. For instance, let us examine the experiences of body language, an important aspect of theatre. Used to subordinate and marginalised situations in life, it requires some effort from such people to effectively express certain forms of body language, especially those of assertiveness. How can such effectiveness be brought about? That is where the importance of conceptualising the theme/ the issues plays an important role. As the participants understand the characters and the matters they are involved in along with the issues of the play, we see an attempt made by them to take the acting process beyond 'dialogue- delivery'. The nature of this process helps to create a long- lasting impact in learning, which gradually gives the participants confidence to face the trials of theatre. At the same time this transforms theatre from a mere display to the internalisation of the issue and the subject matter at hand. Moreover, every play provides learning through a process of moulding yourself creatively to communicate something in the particular context.

Our experiences with **music in theatre**: Music in the lives of our participants largely revolves around mandlis of the villages (other than the usual listening to film songs etc) of which they are often a part. Some persons have acquired some familiarity with instruments like flute, drum and harmonium. Their practice is mostly associated with Ramlila, Mahabharat, programmes associated with Ganpati pooja etc. Music has generally been an area of constraint in our work. Though some efforts have been continuously

made, much more need to be done. With no exposure to other music, most of them are stuck with the familiar mandli style.

### **Balance of art and content**

We have found this balance to be of crucial importance in theatre. On the one hand we had street theatre, where we had to make quick productions in response to socio- political situations. Obviously aesthetics had to be sacrificed in such situations. On the other hand, we had sophisticated stage performances with attention on art forms and resources etc. It was a bridge between these two that we looked upon as good theatre. Use of imaginative choreography, humour and the usage of body as property etc were hallmarks of innovations in our theatre experiments.

Thus the balance between 'manch' and street was found to be most effective. The visual formations and art sense – both in style and music etc was of the manch variety, but other aspects like venue, length of play, methods of propoganda etc. remained in street style. Costumes were often a compromise with predominance of kurta- pyjama. However, we made efforts to procure costumes and dresses for the prominent characters. Sometimes, even a topi, a dhoti etc made a marked visual effect for such characters.

The last 6 to 7 years saw a sustained effort in theatre among youth in 'Vichar Vimarsh Manch'. It was visualised as a continuous process in the same way as writing, reading, discussion etc. Of course, theatre needs a more collective effort than reading and writing. The process was marked by one or two workshops every year where youth in charge of 'Balsamoo' in the villages gathered for 8 days or so. In each of these workshops a play was prepared, which included making the script, improvising on dialogues and body language, designing costumes (though they were never elaborate), propoganda of shows through posters, rally and news in papers, staging the play in villages and in town, dialogues with audience etc. In the course of the workshop, the participants also discussed, read and wrote on the issue of the play, on the nature of the play as well as on their own experiences and reflections on the process.

Based on the experience of these workshops, the youth volunteers organised theatre activities in their villages, sometimes with children, but most often with their own peers in the village. In some places, this has taken the shape of a regular theatre group that stage shows at least 4-5

### **Some concluding thoughts**

, With the widespread presence of NGOs and funding dynamics these days, it has become a norm in most activities to evaluate every action we do because the usefulness of the money invested has to be accounted. It is true that accountability has to be cultivated and respected. But it is also true that in such circumstances as we are working in, a final product of great quality cannot be a measure of our endeavours. Where do we see such quality theatre? It comes mainly from groups who have been focused and professionally at it for years. Resources, background etc. play an important role here, and in places like MP, it is doubtful how many such groups can be listed from the rural areas.

Quality and aesthetics in theatre are things that we value a lot and our efforts have not been deficient in that direction. But we want to focus attention on the fact that we are attempting to utilise theatre as a learning medium for youth and our aim is to develop that process in as enhancing and creative a way as possible. It is this aspect on which we would evaluate theatre in Vichar Vimarsh Manch.

### **Note:**

The theatre thrusts of the programme owe much to Johny Kutty of Eklavya, Bhopal. The write-up was written in an effort to reflect on and plan future theatre activities in the programme.

## C

### **Vichar Vimarsh Manch Workshop**

#### **PUPPETS TELL STORIES**

**June 2007**

Around thirty-five persons were involved in puppet theatre in the last week of June 2007 in Hoshangabad. Some were seen working with 'plaster of Paris', making very expressive puppets that assumed life through movements of strings held by the puppeteers. Others were gluing paper over blown balloons that were to become faces of the characters of their story. Yet others were seen skillfully decorating their puppet characters with earrings and nose rings. And in a corner of the hall, sat Arju from Bhopal who seemed to be perpetually creating and enacting dialogues with a glove puppet.

On the lawn outside the hall, a makeshift stage was being made with PVC pipes; a screen was to cover it so that the puppets and not the puppeteers came into view. Still others were involved in fine-tuning their scripts, which they had put up on large card sheets on the wall.

There was an air of informality and ease with which thirty-five persons were working together, but on different aspects in the workshop. Help was provided for evolving scripts, making songs, making puppets and enacting them. Thus four puppet shows were born in the annual summer workshop of 'Vichar Vimarsh Manch' in Hoshangabad.

The shows were taken to several villages where youth and children were involved in VVM programme, which is basically an attempt to create out-of-school learning centres. Writing, reading (through libraries and the magazine, 'Udan', and local wall magazines), theatre, discussions and other activities for youth and children are the basic media of learning.

Attempts are also made to bring together other groups concerned with similar work. Thus Jeevodaya (Itarsi), working with platform children, Muskan (Bhopal), working with slum children, Sahmat (Kesla), working towards strengthening the outputs of formal education and Samavesh (Khatgaon) working on several community thrusts also took part in the workshop.

The team from Kesla was already familiar with puppet making. But as Rajeev, Shankar and Sunil remarked, it was the script making that was an entirely new experience for them. We had planned that the actual puppet making should begin only on the third day. The initial phases were taken up in visualising themes, issues and stories and in the making of scripts.

The participants listed several themes out and we finally trimmed them to three, as three teams of youth were to work on them. Interestingly the themes reflected some of the concerns with which their organisations were involved, like health, drug addictions among children etc. VVM member from Bairakhedi, Gayatri, voiced the struggles she had to go through even for participating in the Hoshangabad workshop. She felt that the restrictions imposed on girls and women could be a possible theme to be taken up. A fourth team (of children) was to weave in a story for their puppet show.

#### **Children's team**

The children were mostly from Bairakhedi and one each from Patlai khurd and Hoshangabad. They had all previously done some theatre in the villages. So we enquired into those experiences- what characters did they play?

"Birbal" said Mohini.

"Kallo" said Mahima.

And so the listing went on...

It would be interesting to keep the identities of the characters intact and make them interact to create a new story. This idea appealed to the children. It was interesting to see how popular stories crept into the new story line, for instance, the story of three axes (iron, silver, gold) that the river fairy brings in to test the honesty of the wood cutter. And of course we had Birbal in the new story making his famous 'khichdi' by the riverside.

#### **Team: Health**

The team was to initially work out their ideas on the theme. It was seen that some members of the team were familiar with the administration of tuberculosis medicines in the community; and the storyline took on a propaganda mode.

Each team presented their story outlines, which were then discussed by all participants. It was opined that instead of focusing the story on TB, it would be desirable to look into medical facilities in an overall sense. The team went back to work again and after several rounds, another storyline emerged.

The story was based on a real incident of death of a VVM volunteer of Pothia village. As no treatment facilities were available in the vicinity, he had to be taken to the nearest town, Hoshangabad, where he passed away. The story looked into how dubious 'treatments' by 'babas' in villages give hope in the absence of proper health facilities. There is conspicuous absence of health services in our rural areas.

#### **Team: Gender**

Gayatri who had raised the issue of gender was to coordinate the team. As each person could choose which theme to work with, it so happened that the largest team turned out to be the one on gender. But as the processes went on it was seen that the boys in the team made themselves so dominant that Gayatri's experiences and concern became a feeble voice that could be heard only on demand. We subtly pointed out that there was a paradox emerging from this team, between the theme and the working of the members.

The initial draft of the story was fully focused on the ill treatment meted out to girls after marriage in their 'sasural'. But with several suggestions from others, the story started from the parental home. The girl gets married but unable to bear the suffering at the in-laws and with the help of a neighbour and a doctor, she returns to her maiden home. The story then outlines the girl's quest for self-sufficiency. In the last scene she is seen teaching children at an Anganvadi.

#### **Team: Drug addiction**

The initial articulations of the team showed a young man being initiated into drinking by more experienced men. Later many of them are seen to turn up at a hospital with serious illness. The doctor gives a speech on the injurious sides of addictions like smoking, drinking and drugs. But the team went back to work on it as suggestions were given to alter the too simplistic and pamphlet-like nature of the plot.

We pointed out that the Jeevodaya team could provide very realistic insights into the dynamics of children being drawn into addictions. Such inputs changed the storyline with a drug agent who lures children as potential drug users. Addiction induces children to take money from home and ultimately, as the story line goes, the agent gets exposed and children get saved.

(Mainly Yemuna and Jitender from Eklavya helped the work on script).

#### **Puppets- their making and enactment**

With the skilled hands of Rajkumar from Kanpur as also of Umar from Eklavya, we had four types of puppets being made in the workshop, each team using one type of puppet. These were string puppet,

glove puppets (sock and ball), glove puppet (balloon) and stick puppet. As the stories were ready, the puppets were to be made, one for each character.

### **String puppets**

The faces and hands were made from 'plaster of Paris', dresses were long and elaborate and strings ran from the puppet's hands and head to a small wooden stick in the hands of the puppeteer. Their movements were elegant. The puppeteer stood behind the screen, unseen by the audience and the puppets played 'below'.

### **Glove puppets (sock and ball)**

This was made of sock into which the hand goes like a glove and a ball fixed inside the sock becomes the head of the puppet. Projection for the nose was made from inside the sock on the ball and the rest of the face was indicated from the outside. Ears and hair were also added and dresses donned as were suitable to the character. The puppeteer using the thumb and the middle finger moved hands made of card sheet; the forefinger moved the head.

### **Glove puppets (balloon)**

The balloon served as a huge face, which was maneuvered by the puppeteer's hands. The face dominates the character as compared to the other puppets mentioned. Several layers of paper were glued on to blown balloons and kept aside to dry. Faces were lent character with coloured paper and paint. The mouth could be opened and closed while talking, unlike the other puppets.

### **Stick puppets**

These were flat puppets made of cardboard. Characters like fairy, Birbal etc were drawn on the cardboard and cut out and then convincingly shaped into the characters by using coloured paper, ornaments etc. Sticks were attached from the backside with which the puppets were maneuvered.

Except for the string puppets, in all other cases the puppeteers sit behind the screen and the puppets move from 'above' with the movements of the puppeteer's hands or stick.

### **The shows**

All four shows were played in Bairakhedi, Amapura, Kotgaon and Bagda Tawa and responses from audience were fairly encouraging. It was revealing that puppets which have a largely traditional rural history in India seemed very 'new' to our audience. In terms of impressions caused by style of movements, the string puppets seemed most appealing.

In some places, where the stage allowed space, many people seemed as curious to know the happenings backstage as in the front. And thus in Amapura and Bagda Tawa, we had quite an audience for the backstage. In the middle of the show, rain showers came in Bagda Tawa, yet most of the audience remained in place. A 'barat' in the vicinity had stolen away a lot of our show time. But every thing seemed to have its 'other' side as well. There was a 'barat' in our show too and incidentally it coincided with the real life one on the road and our puppets danced to its tunes. Drama merged with the people and became true to life.

Both in Bagda Tawa and in Bairakhedi we had to make some arrangements for light as darkness crept in. Small torches were used to focus on the puppet characters. This highlighting provided its own aesthetics, which made it a very different experience from the daytime shows.

In Amapura, we had the grandmother of our volunteers (Neelam and Durgesh) singing along with the puppeteers and she would be disappointed as each song finished. Rajiv from Kesla had made beautiful lyrics and with Sunil's dholak and several others' voices, music gave an appealing boost to the shows.

In Bairakhedi we gave a small speech in support of the creative endeavour of the girls' team from the village. As the week long workshop ended it was heartening to see that everyone wanted to carry their puppets home, as though carrying with them what had become parts of themselves. And as everyone said goodbye, we watched ten-year-old Mohini, who had become known as Birbal, carrying her 'birbal' home to Patlai khurd.

Two months later as we did a 'balmela' in Jawli, Basant and friends from Kotgaon offered to stage a play. And this turned out to be the same play on health, played by them, not the puppets. And so things roll on, taking new shapes and new tracks...

*Yemuna Sunny*

**D**

**Yuva Samuh Discussions**  
**DRAWING AND PAINTING**  
**July 2007**

Good exposure to drawings and paintings yields all benefits of exposure to good books, cinema, theatre etc. So in the monthly meeting of July 2007, a number of books on drawings and paintings were gathered. But most of them were in English, in which the participants' reading fluency was very limited. Yet it was seen that the books were used, the pictures were admired and many inferences were made. One of the books had excellent landscape paintings and many fascinating ones on clouds.

Another book focused on drawings with pen and another was on calligraphy where again the pen and pointed nibs were used for writing. There was a book on 'Batik' in Hindi and some persons read that in detail and felt that it could be tried out sometime. Two books were instruction manuals for teachers. These could also, said some, be used with children back in the villages. For instance:

Draw a picture  
of yourself and  
your friend.

Some persons read a few pages of Devi Prasad and showed much interest in the book.

Neelam felt that sketching with a pen was easier in a relative sense. But Durgesh disagreed saying that he tried to draw a chair, inspired by the book, but it didn't come out as good and effective as he expected. 'So these things are not as easy as they look', he said.

We decided to try out drawings by using only the pencil; no colours were made available. It was also decided that no one would use the eraser. So, most of the persons made mild pencil drawings, which were later darkened through shading.

Then we made pictures, which did not use any drawing materials at all. All we had were coloured papers, glue and scissors. Paper was torn or cut into small pieces and these were glued on to a card sheet to create pictures. Persons made interesting tries - in one case perforations were made on a green paper and this was used as tree canopy. In another case very small paper cuttings were used to show the eyes and nose of a man.

It was pointed out that such pictures could be made with cloth cuttings as well. Cloth bits could be collected from tailors and used for picture - making.



A question was posed to the participants to find out whether they thought of art as a medium of beautification or a medium of some other functions, and if they thought the later then what these other functions could be.

Art undeniably had the quality of aesthetics, but there were other aspects to it as well. "If we want to say something, we can do it through a picture". Some one elaborated this point by taking the example of the drawing made by Umesh Gour of Mangvari village. This was the cover picture of a special issue of 'Udan', which focused on our play, 'Sadgati'. It showed a broken balance, which had rested on crutches. Lying down scattered on the ground were objects like a broom and basket and also an open book.

Neelam, who had played the lead role in the play, said that the picture depicted injustice, which was the core theme of Sadgati. The book of law was lying open, but the balance, which rested on crutches, could not extend justice to the holders of the broom and basket.

Could we also try to make pictures, which simultaneously reflected some thoughts as well as used skills and techniques of drawing? Two lists of themes were made:

A	B
Bazar	Anger
Traffic jam	Challenge
Village Melā	Pain
Rains have come	Love
& Sowing has begun	Deep thought

List A had concrete themes, but list B were abstractions. Whereas themes in the first list were immediately visualised, those in the second list demanded some discussions. Rajesh said that a drawing could perhaps show anger where a man is shown as taking hold of a woman's hair. Could there be other ways of representing it? He said 'challenge' could be shown as a number of ways spreading in front of you and presenting a dilemma of choice.

For these drawings we used watercolours and brush. We demonstrated the proper use of brush. It was also pointed out that several other objects could be used like paper, pen, stick, stones etc to paint. 'Paper batik' was also tried out in which paper balls were immersed into bowls of colour. When the paper ball was opened up, it showed colour in some parts only, creating patterns on the paper.

Some persons made elaborate paintings of mountains, fields etc. Children seemed to take up only list A and left out list B.

*Yemuna Sunny*

**Note:**

This is a report of part of a monthly meeting of Vichar Vimarsh Manch, Hoshangabad.

**Books used in the meeting:**

- Gita Wolf (1997), Picturing words and reading pictures, Tara Publishing, Chennai.
- Robert.W.Gill (1984), The Thames and Hudson manual of rendering with pen and ink, Thames and Hudson Ltd., London.
- Devi Prasad (1999), Shiksha ka vaahan: kala, NBT, India, New Delhi.
- R. K. Chopra (1992), Art and education, Teachers' handbook for class 2, NCERT, New Delhi.
- D.B.Bakshi (1993), Art education, Teachers handbook for classes 6-8, NCERT, New Delhi.
- Bodo. W. Jaxtheimer (1982), How to paint and draw, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London.
- Melvyn Petterson with Ian Kearey (2002), Drawing landscapes. David and Charles, Devon, UK.

Trudie Demoed (1994), Calligraphy for beginners, Bloomsbury Books, London.

Ivor Yushiyal (1997), Seekho aur banao bathik, Bal sahitya shodh sansthan, New Delhi.

Vinod Bharadwaj, Kalayen aaspaas, Lalit kala Academy, New Delhi.

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<sup>i</sup> Recently I received a letter from a child. It had 3-4 pages, one of which had free expressions of drawings and writing and the rest were 'nibandh' memorised from school titled 'Myself' and 'our festival'.