

A Report

Celebrating Joyful Learning through Theatre Performance by Rural Adolescents of Rajasthan

Organized by:

Rajasthan Bal AdhikaarSarkshanSajha Abhiyan Alliance

UNICEF

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Venue:

Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur

Contextual

As per the census 2011, Rajasthan has 43.6% population below 18 years of age, while 22.9% are adolescents (10-19 years of age), of which 23.4% of adolescents predominately reside in rural areas of the state.

Child abuse is rampant, indiscriminate and cut across class, geography, culture, sex and religion. Misfortunes that these children have to face and often blame destiny for their condition, seldom think and take a step ahead to provide a protective environment and legal remedy.

The present circumstances need a strong voice for the children in Rajasthan that can raise their problems on various forums, platforms & opportunities.

There is a crucial need to provide platforms for children and adolescents to raise their concerns and problems on the right platform. The platform facilitates the nourishment of childhood and experiencing joy with the surroundings than being trapped on the roads of ignorance.

Often a new path and then success tags along with opportunity. Opportunities give the wings, to fly higher and get to know about the person's true potential. It enhances knowledge both practically and theoretically. Therefore, it is important for one to realize that there is opportunity in everything and one needs to take it. Things will automatically fall into place once that first step of grabbing the opportunity is taken.

Art & culture has a unique possibility to capture winds of change and simultaneously impact the formation and development of societies and the people living there. It has the potential to perform and convey messages, ideas, and expressions where words fall short.

Thus, Theatre is a cultural phenomenon that demands that society examines itself in the mirror. It can connect directly to people's hearts and bodies, sometimes more than to the mind, which enables art to actually shift mindsets in a more profound way than other forms of communication. It is a medium to study societal problems and attempt to find solutions.

The preamble of Joyful Learning

As a strong network of about 170 NGOs, child rights activists, and individuals of the state, Rajasthan Bal Adhikar Sarkshan Sajha Abhiyan Alliance raises the collective voices and influences the policies related to issues of children & adolescents' rights, care, and protection at the state level. The alliance is working with a large number of children groups from across districts, to amplify their voices through regular interaction with stakeholders (government officials, influencers, and media). Also, actively involved in solution-based advocacy for influencing the children & adolescents centric policies at the state level.

Resource Institute for Human Rights (RIHR), continues to play an important role for the Alliance in convoking it at the state & national levels. Since, fourteen years, managing the Snehanagan (One Stop Crisis Management Centre for Children) for counseling, psychological, legal, and rehabilitation support to the children & adolescents of Jaipur. Developing the capacity & recreational activities for the children of Child Care Institutions including Government Juvenile Homes, Government Girls Shelter Home at Jaipur. Advocating for policy environment for advancing children's rights through

strategic engagement and also executing the activities for children & adolescents at the grass root level across the state.

Participation in art and cultural activities improves children's educational attainment and skill development including empowerment, contributing to overall well-being. The alliance jointly with the support of UNICEF and selected network NGO partners from the four districts (Ajmer, Bikaner, Jaipur & Jodhpur) provided learning labs to the adolescents for expressing and raising their issues through theatre & natak toli from June to October 2022.

When a group of such inspired adolescents have a story to tell, an issue to raise, a dream to disclose, and a love for theatre... they call themselves a 'NATAK TOLI'. The past six months led to the creation of four such Natak Toli's in far-flung villages of Rajasthan. The Toli's (groups) were constituted after a series of four immersive theatre- making workshops.

It has been observed that the children not only developed the ability to prepare, practice & enact the plays/natak but also realized & enhancing their voices against discrimination, crime, and violence under their capacity.

Strategy for the execution of joyful learning

As strategy tries to achieve synergy and balance between objectives, resources, and concepts to maximize the possibility of success and fruitful results, the plan of action designed by the alliance from selecting network NGO partners to imparting joyful learning at the district level till the final performances by the natak toli.

The process for planning, formalizing, and executing training for adolescents followed as per the details:

1. Selection of network partner NGOs
2. Imparting joyful learning in the districts
3. Workshops for children
4. Follow-up visits
5. Showcasing their talents through performances at Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur

1. Selection of network partner NGOs

The 33 districts of the state have been divided into 7 divisions, each division consisting of 4-6 districts. Therefore, with the aim of covering four divisions, the network NGO partners were selected on the basis of representation in the division, their reach out, proactive thought process, the experience of working at the grass root level, and working with children & adolescents with innovative approaches for decades. The brief details of NGOs selected included,

Doosra Dashak Bap Phalodi, Jodhpur

Late Shri Anil Bordia, an eminent educationist and Padma Bhushan awardee is the founder of the Foundation for Education and Development (FED) established in the year 2000. In June 2001, FED started its field program, Doosra Dashak, which literally means the second decade by focusing on

the education of young people of 11-20 years of age. Commenced work in two blocks of Rajasthan, namely Bap and Kishanganj in Jodhpur and Baran districts respectively, which is now expanded to the 9 blocks of 7 districts of Rajasthan. It is a decentralized, community-based, process-oriented, and participative project. It provides a value based, life skills oriented education to harness the leadership potential of youth and women for social transformation. It also looks at innovative ways to address the ever changing needs of young people, especially women and the underprivileged section in the most remote and backward rural areas of Rajasthan.

Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti, Ajmer

Established under the women's leadership & with the right-based approach in the year 2000 in the center part of Rajasthan. It works towards uniting and empowering women in Ajmer, Rajasthan through collective action for social transformation. We are working to address the vicious cycle of poverty, patriarchy, and ignorance that results in the exclusion of women from social, political, and economic spheres. We provide a space for everyone to come together and fight for gender equality and justice. We build confidence and self-sufficiency among girls and women through our various skill-based programs and organizing women's groups at the village and community levels.

Adhar Shodh Sansthan, Chaksu, Jaipur

Aadhar Shodh Sansthan" (Aadhar Research Institute) a grass root level voluntary organization was registered in late 1991 under Rajasthan Societies Registration Act 1958. The organization has started working with the support of the local community to promote all round development of rural society through an integrated development approach. "Aadhar's" main working area is Chaksu and Dausa blocks of Jaipur and Dausa districts respectively, the two neighbouring districts in the eastern part of Rajasthan.

Urmul Seemant Samiti, Bajju, Bikaner

With an undying faith in people's capacities and their understanding of progress and development, Urmul has been innovating means and ways of redefining survival and its realities in the desert. Established in 1984, focuses on the vulnerable and marginal sections of society- women, and children. Through health, livelihoods, education, governance, and advocacy interventions, Urmul has been actively working in the desert since 1987. Following a decentralized approach- twelve organizations have now off-shot in different areas in the region (Bikaner, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Nagaur, Churu, Ganganagar, etc, thematically specializing in their activities, with a common and unifying agenda- adaptive and deep-rooted development.

2. Imparting joyful learning in the districts

About 200 participant adolescents were selected by the partner NGOs that were associated directly with their programs and also their parents were associated through community outreach programs.

The participants, mostly girls, were school going adolescents from a diverse cross-section of rural society. Almost every participant had a story that spoke of issues like early marriage, school

dropouts, gender, caste, education, and livelihood gripping the rural citizens and their urban handling.

A child is already observing the environment, the society, the crowd, the teacher, the sarpanch, the goat, or the way a cloud rumbles. Theatre is the art that shows them that they can observe with awareness, assimilate it as a coherent whole and present it as a story to the world. For rural societies, all art forms are means of collective leisure or celebration. Theatre being inherently a group activity comes naturally to rural children. Seeing them make theatre one wonders whether they are on stage creating a play or in their fields for the sowing season. Such is their enthusiasm, teamwork, use of tools, and masterly sense of assigning roles according to capabilities.

The teaching mostly consisted of happily throwing the planned syllabus to the winds at every location and responding to the needs of their childhood. Even the day to day changes proved inadequate and pedagogy needed to be re-imagined almost every hour. Example- How could the trainers go on describing the scene composition of a play when the clouds arrived in the desert sky and children were stealing glances at the window! Yes, they all ran out and played kho-kho!

What the children have in mind is on their stage. That's why the Natak Toli sums up its philosophy in words 'mann se manch tak' (from the heart to stage).

3. Workshops for children

The past six months led to the creation of four such Natak Toli's in far-flung villages of Rajasthan. The Toli's (groups) were constituted after a series of four immersive theatre- making workshops held from June to October 2022. Locations were Radoli village, about fifty km south of Jaipur, Bajju in Bikaner, Phalodi, and Ajmer. The total participants, numbering around 150, came from around seventeen villages in all. All four workshops were named Semi rural-i, Semi rural-ii, Rural-i and Rural-ii.

a) Semi Rural-i (Radoli, Jaipur):

The group consisted of 47 mostly adolescent participants from five villages. As they were first time learners from a rural background and never exposed to any art form or its training in school or outside, therefore the workshop could proceed only with an initial plan of the sessions. The usual theatre training structure had to be improvised upon, rejigged, and often completely reversed throughout the ten days.

In the workshop, conducted activities that could make the children respond and ensured the participation of every single child despite their contrasting speeds of doing any activity. That helped in creating a bond and identifying their creative skills. For creating trust, provided a conducive environment for playing, saying, expressing, doing, and eating in their style & comfort that created a sense of mutuality among children & trainers.

A special activity called "Mere 24 Ghante" was designed in response to gender inhibitions, where children recalled, articulated, and discussed their daily routine which exhibited a deep gender bias.

The fundamental division of the day's session was into two parts -an initial PLAYFUL and half followed by a THOUGHTFUL half.

b) Semi Rural-ii (Bajju, Bikaner):

The group consisted of 31 adolescent participants of which 22 were girls from three villages studying in government schools. The villages are mostly talked about in the context of child marriages and most of the girls after passing many hurdles have become football players. The group appeared more mature than their age, they were attentive, expressive, and articulate in presenting their thoughts. To address this, besides theatrical sessions, introduced activities that rekindle joyful emotions and childhood.

They were more comfortable with conversation instead of written communication. They experienced life first hand and translated accurately the same into memory, which flowed beautifully wherever they expressed & acted. The teaching methods expanded the experimental processes into playful dramatic moments for sustainable learning. The emphasis was given to communicating the social issues aesthetically, expressing wordlessly and above all expressing like a child.

c) Rural-i (Phalodi):

Although the children were from extremely rural background but had been exposed to art training through workshops or summer camps by the network partner NGO.

The children loved expressing themselves whether it was through writing or sports or making scenes. Especially longed to talk about their village, markets temples, sand dunes, and dreams, so activities that involve writing were laid emphasis upon. They were enthusiastic in discussions that emanated from their own conversations and experiences so a major activity involving gender sensitization was conducted through writing as well as an informal debate.

The boys voluntarily decided to share some of their sisters' household chores, after the gender sensitization session. Praising them the next day upon compliance, they volunteer to do a few chores. A few children who were unruly or lacked attention during sessions became interested upon being given small responsibilities like writing names of group participants, pasting charts on notice boards, or collecting the colours, etc.

d) Rural-ii (Ajmer):

The group participating in the workshop consisted mostly of adolescent rural girls who had faced a break in their education due to various reasons ranging from practical ones like distances of schools to social, familial, and economic. But this factor did not seem to reflect in their thinking as well as expression. On the contrary, the long void of learning in their life seemed to increase their concentration and focus on acquiring new skills and qualities. Although the group was extremely

varied in terms of caste, religion, and marital status as there were few girls who were engaged and few young single mothers too who participated with their children.

One core philosophy of the training approach was to not interfere with their own dialect or accent or language. For them, a play was not an art form or entertainment but their own reality. Changing their words would have interfered with the flow of their thoughts and inserted a plastic element in their improvisations.

The overall playfulness of the theatre making emerged from the way teaching was taken as a friendly activity. The trainers refrained from doing anything that ate into the attention one gave to them and avoided using gadgets like headphones, speakers, etc during the training. To raise the comfort level of those who were less participatory, addressed by name, had conversations beyond the session timings, and the technical words introduced during sessions were made part of the conversation in interesting ways later.

Overall

These four workshops were a determination to decipher what children want to say and how they want to say it. Every day, the workshops would begin with a careful evaluation by trainers on whether to execute the planned sessions or to devise the day taking a cue from how the children are feeling.

All the workshops were filled with activities designed according to the location and interests of the children. Considering that adolescents should be able to know the subjects, speak their minds, discuss and make their own plays with the help of interesting games.

An energizer is a brief activity that is intended to increase energy in a group by engaging them in singing and physical activities. Energizers are great for team building and getting to know each other was included in all the workshops.

4. Follow-up Visits

After the completion of the workshops, the children had the energy of those 8 to 10 days. The purpose of these workshops was to create a self-sustaining NATAK TOLI (Theatre Group).

To connect regularly with children and to keep them engaged with theatre, follow up visits were continued, to work with the Natak Toli on the plays created by them, stay connected with them and also prepare them for the performance in Jaipur.

Regarding their upcoming performance in Jaipur, they were encouraged to rehearse themselves.

Children shared their happiness of meeting everyone and the memories of the workshop blossomed. In the midst of all this, online meetings were also held with the children so that the freshness of the workshop could be maintained among them, learning could go on continuously and a regular talk could be done about the subjects of the play.

Amazingly, most of the children were learning theatre for the first time. This was the first time they have been introduced to art, and they were so engrossed in the works of art as if they had been making plays for so long.

Also, the constant connection of children on social media their frequent phone calls to the trainers reflected how touching these workshops have been for them and going to carry this experience with them.

5. Showcasing talents through performances at Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur

During the workshops and follow-up visits, at least 15 plays were made by the adolescents on the topics conceived by them under the rich guidance of the state's eminent trainers. Out of that five plays were performed by newly formed theatre toli's at the Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur on November 16, 2022.

The majority of the adolescents visited Jaipur for the first time, which was an exciting experience, and performing at the state level in front of a large audience was an achievement for them.

An overwhelming response was received from the audience, about 300 people from different walks of society attended the joyful presentation in the theatre form by the adolescents on the stage. **The audience also included eminent personalities including -----.**

Inauguration of the joyful learning

The presence of knowledge removes ignorance, like how the presence of light removes the darkness around us. Hence, lighting up a lamp denotes the removal of ignorance in a person. Therefore, the program commenced with lamp lightening by the honourable Shri B.D Kalla- Education and Art & Culture Ministers, the Government of Rajasthan, Ms. Sangeeta Beniwal Chairman, Rajasthan State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (RSCPCR), Ms. Isabelle Bardem-Chief UNICEF Rajasthan, Trainers, Adolescents from different districts, and the organizers.

Resource Persons/Trainer's experience

A team of six trainers, experts, and professionals from Jaipur imparted playful training in theatre for raising their social issues as well. The trainers shared their experience of working continuously with adolescents for the last five months. They shared that as teachers we need have patients to understand the psychology of children and guide them in acting and bringing out their issues. Playful learning has its own significance and long-term impact. Children were never scolded or forced to abandon any activity and instead every instruction was followed with conversational reasoning. At the end of every day, resource persons sat down to recall the tiniest bit of experience/incident that can shed some light on how the participants were responding to the learning. Their inputs were used to formulate the next day's session and activities.

Interacting with the audience

Ms. Isabelle Bardem-Chief UNICEF Rajasthan emphasized that every child has a right to be heard. They have the right to have fun in the way they want to, whether by playing sports, watching films,

or doing something else. They have a right to rest too. Participation in art and cultural activities improves children's educational attainment and skill development including empowerment, contributing to overall well-being. Theatre brings joy to children. For children who are finding ways to communicate their thoughts and issues around them, theatre promises to give wings to their imaginations without taking joy away from the learning process. The 'Natak Toli'(Theatre group) formed of selected children who underwent proper training is an inclusive theatre lab that generates the issues and communicates through plays and dialogues.

Ms. Sangeeta Beniwal Chairman, Rajasthan State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (RSCPCR) appreciated all the network partner NGOs for providing such creative opportunities to the adolescents from the different districts of Rajasthan. Natak Toli, a form of art & culture helps in keeping such methods alive among young people. Since theatre promotes giving power to truth, taking risks, and advocating for new and diverse voices, adolescents would utilize the platform to raise their voices.

Keynote address

Shri B.D Kalla- Education and Art & Culture Ministers, the Government of Rajasthan shared that theatre is a language in which children can articulate and present their issues even better than words. The theatre making module devised for first-time learners is the first of its kind in the state. It was not about teaching children to act instead the immersive workshops made them self-sufficient in making a play entirely by themselves and communicating their thoughts. Natak is our tradition that helps in the articulation and presentation of our issues and voices. Even our system has planned to divert children from screen time to music, art, acting, and extra curriculum activities. In this context, GoR has initiated every Saturday as “No Bag Day” for promoting extra curriculum activities among children.

Releasing of Book on Pedagogy

The book-“Natak Toli, Mann se Manch Tak”, was released by the guests. It is an important resource and a detailed handbook for theatre practitioners, educators, and students. Pedagogy is entirely localized and was also modified as per their needs. The guiding principle of the book is 'what' the children learn is far less important than 'how' they learn it and their learning must be joyful. Skills must be an environment themselves and not an activity to be practiced in an instructional space. Pedagogy had an experiential synonym - Environment! Based on the individual's potential in direction or writing or imagination a toli of around 12-15 children was constituted at every location. This Natak Toli is free to choose an issue, make their own team, assign roles, include remaining children and make a play to perform at places they feel need that play.

It gives an idea of the group's coordination, observation, and understanding of the given situation and its expression.

Video on the journey and process of joyful learning

A short video was played to showcase the journey of five months of joyful learning in the interiors of the state. The hard work performed by the participants from day one till the rehearsal of their final plays and the efforts put in by the trainers and the network partner NGOs as well.

Theatre is the art that shows them that they can observe with awareness, assimilate it as a coherent whole, and present it as a story to the world.

Enactment of Plays on Stage

Overwhelmingly, five selected plays were performed by newly formed theatre toli's of adolescents from Jaipur, Bikaner, Jodhpur, and Ajmer.

Play 1: Mera Gaon

The story dealt with the present reality of the village, and its happenings concluding with the possibilities of how the villagers, especially the young minds, the children, want their village to be having good education facilities and be free of inequality and discrimination.

Play 2: Papyo Chalyo Shahar

Story of a village boy who lives in Bangalore for his higher studies and job and returns entirely transformed. His way of behaviour towards family and friends, dressing style, and language nothing shows any glimpse of the village he left behind. His Metropolitan fancy personality catches the attention of his mates in the village and fascinates them so much so that they start seeing dreams of going to the city and becoming like their shehri friend.

Play 3: Hamare Sapne

A small nonnarrative play about the real-life dreams and aspirations of girls who themselves performed in the play. Through this play, they expressed their desire to breathe in an open sky, fly high and achieve their dreams. Within it, they extended their support to each other with a thread of hope that their dreams can also come true. The play was weaved together through the Anthem of freedom and hopes "Bekhauf Azad Hai Jina Mujhe" which is sung by the girls beautifully.

Play 4: The City Girl

The City Girl was a story of a girl who had to face a lot of resistance from her surroundings when she decides to go to the city to pursue her dreams of higher education finally her parents come to her support and she works hard and returned to her village after becoming a district collector. Her success somehow changes the mindset of the people of her village.

Play 5: Journey of a footballer

This play depicted the journey of the girls from rural areas of Ajmer who explored their skills and fought the stereotypes to play football, breaking the glass ceiling and winning over the tournaments.

Towards the end of the program, the certificates were distributed to all the participants from all four districts followed by a group photograph.

Learning

Children have so much to say but somehow, they have a mistrust of grownups. They try to be in 'good books' with grownups by thinking/speaking/creating as grownups prefer. But even at the smallest hint of affection and patience towards them, they speak up their minds and hearts. Often

their views and ideas about a given situation are at par or even better than those offered by the elders.

- 12-15 years is a fruitful age group to work with to forge new ideas.
- Their opinions are not rigid and with rational conversation, they not only effortlessly but happily see the wiser perspective of an issue.
- Children learn better and more naturally in an affectionate workshop environment than in instruction and performance-based school environments.
- These children have an almost absolute and original understanding of the complex social fabric. More than being taught, they merely need their ways to be cleared of obstacles.
- They are hard-working and are aware of their responsibilities toward family and society. This keeps them from pandering to personal psychological issues.

Let the children play, let them create play playfully, their own play, they will astound us. By saving the ingenuity of children from the ostentation of performance, we have to encourage them to create as per their minds.

Theatre is a cultural phenomenon that demands that society examines itself in the mirror. Societal problems can be studied and attempts can be made to find their solutions.

Media Coverage

The program was well covered in the print and electronic media.

spotlight plus जेकेके में हुआ पांच नाटकों का मंचन

बच्चों की नाटक टोली ने अभिनय से बताई ग्रामीण क्षेत्रों की समस्या

पत्रिका plus रिपोर्टर

जयपुर. जवाहर कला केन्द्र में युनिसेफ राजस्थान और राजस्थान बाल अधिकार संरक्षण साइड अभियान की ओर से 'नाटक टोली-मन से मंच तक' के अन्तर्गत पांच नाटकों का मंचन किया गया। मुख्य अतिथि शिक्षामंत्री को.डी. करुणा और विशिष्ट अतिथि राजस्थान युनिसेफ की प्रमुख इमाबेल बर्डम रही। ग्रामीण क्षेत्रों से आए बच्चों ने अभिनय से मेरा गांव, पप्यो चलो शहर, हमारे सपने, द सिटी गर्ल और जर्नी ऑफ ए फुटबॉलर नाटक का मंचन किया। बच्चों ने ग्रामीण मुद्दों को शब्दों से भी बेहतर ढंग से व्यक्त किया।

'मेरा गांव' नाटक में बच्चों ने अभिनय से ग्रामीण क्षेत्रों से जुड़ी समस्याओं को उठाया। इसमें अशिक्षा, धूम्रपान, पारिवारिक समस्या, कम उम्र विवाह, पानी की समस्याओं को बताया। नाटक में सुखद है कि बच्चों अपने सामाजिक दायरों को तोड़कर थियेटर में प्रस्तुति दे रहे हैं। नाटक उस्ताह के साथ-साथ टीम वर्क और अनुशासन भी सिखाता है।

बालिकाएं अपने शिक्षा के अधिकार के लिए परिवार और अध्यापक से

150 से अधिक बच्चे हुए शामिल

समन्वयक किजय गौयल ने बताया कि 'नाटक टोली' ग्रामीण बच्चों के लिए थियेटर बनाने में कार्यशालाओं की एक श्रृंखला है। इसमें चाकसू, बज्जू, फलोदी सहित 17 गांवों के 150 से अधिक बच्चों को कार्यशालाओं के माध्यम से प्रशिक्षित किया। इसमें 15 नाटक तैयार किए गए। जिसमें जेकेके में पांच नाटकों का मंचन किया गया।

लड़ती नजर आई और स्कूल जाकर शिक्षा का महत्व बताया। छात्र राहुल ने 65 साल के वृद्ध आदमी और अंजली शर्मा ने 60 साल की वृद्ध महिला का किरदार निभाया, जिसकी दर्शकों सराहना की।