

## When theatre teaches lessons from life

Bedraggled boys hawking magazines and trinkets at traffic crossings in the national capital would irritate nine-year-old Saumitra Khuller to no end. He never thought he would some day re-enact their lives on stage.

Today, Khuller, a class four student of Delhi Public School, Vasant Vihar, has a totally different insight - thanks to a theatre workshop he attended and where he reprised the role of a street child who begs for a livelihood.

His love for acting made him join a workshop for children in the 9-14 age group conducted by noted theatre director Arvind Gaur at the India Habitat Centre. The 10-day-long event earlier this month opened his eyes to the trials and tribulations of street children.

'I used to get irritated when they used to run after my car - but not any more,' Khuller told IANS.

He said the workshop, organised by NGO Katha, gave him a deep insight into the lives of street children. At its conclusion, Khuller along with 20 children from well-to-do families enacted the play 'Ansuni' (Those whose voices are unheeded) that was actually three playlets.

One depicted the manner in which a schoolteacher inspires a gang of street children to focus on educating themselves. The other highlighted the life of leprosy patients and the third was about a woman caught in a communal riot.

'I think everyone should help street children. No one should tease them or think bad about them just because they are illiterate and poor. They want to study but they are unable to. They just need a helping hand,' said Khuller, sounding wiser than his tender years.

During the workshop, he also realised that most of these children are runaways, mostly because their parents either ill-treated or physically abused them.

'Now whenever I see these street children, I feel sympathetic towards them. I think the government should help them by providing them with education and preventing them from taking drugs,' the young lad maintained.

'Every school should take up the education of some of these children,' Khuller said, pointing to the message of 'Ansuni'.

Another student whose perception has completely changed after the workshop is Sanjana Navani, an 11-year-old who essayed the role of a Muslim woman fighting for justice after her life is changed forever by a communal riot.

For the Sardar Patel Vidyalaya girl, who was praised for her immense talent, a communal riot previously meant just a skirmish.

'I had heard about communal riots but was unaware of their real meaning. I was surprised when we were told that the clashes are so horrible that people are tortured and even burnt and buses and other vehicles are set on fire,' she added.

The class six student was so horrified when she realised what a communal riot actually meant that she said she would not watch anything related to it on TV.

On another level, Navani said she would 'try to convince people that such things are wrong'.

For director Gaur, teaching the children the little nuances of theatre was a great experience and he felt that those who attended were at the right age to build confidence, team spirit and remove stage fright.

'Young children were chosen for the workshop because they don't have apprehensions. By familiarising children with the life of street children, communal riots and leprosy, an understanding and acceptance was created that street children are not children of a lesser god,' Gaur maintained.

'Initially, it was very sad to discover that though these children go to reputed public schools, their sensitivity about such issues was zero as they had very skewed views about street children,' said Gaur, who heads the theatre group 'Asmita'.

'Issues like communal riots and leprosy are very old and children should be acquainted with them. So, I decided that we could educate these children through theatre,' he added.

To go by his student's responses, Gaur succeeded to a considerable extent in achieving what he set out to do.

*Vidhu Aggarwal ( © IANS / India eNews)*