

## For 32 slum kids, theatre workshop is a revelation

They live in the Indian capital but had never heard of freedom fighter Bhagat Singh. Now an all-Muslim cast of 32 slum children is set to stage a play on the revolutionary - an effort that has changed their own lives in so many ways.

For the children, including eight girls, who have been taking theatre classes at the Dr Zakir Hussain Senior Secondary School in Zafarabad, a shantytown in east Delhi, it has meant battling ignorance, social stigma and gender discrimination.

'Getting to know about Bhagat Singh's life was an eye-opener for these children,' Urdu playwright Anees Azmi, who scripted the play, told IANS.

He said the theatre workshop started more than 20 days ago and has been a revelation for the kids who come from slums around Zafarabad even though all of them go to school.

'They did not know about Bhagat Singh's sacrifice. After becoming familiar with his life, they asked us 'how come he was so 'imandar' (honest)?'

'They used to wonder how he fought for the country without thinking about his own life. And one thing that really struck me was that they were making comparisons between Bhagat Singh and the leaders of today.'

The children will have their moment of glory June 30 when the play goes on stage at the Shri Ram Centre auditorium.

The Urdu Academy, which has been organising such theatre workshops annually for the past 20 years, is behind this initiative too.

'Though the participants in the play are more than eight years old, some of them had never even heard Bhagat Singh's name,' Urdu Academy's Nadeem Khan, who is directing the play, told IANS.

'When we told them about Bhagat Singh, many of them were surprised. Most of the children were shocked to know that the freedom fighter was hanged at the age of 23.'

All the children except one boy are acting for the first time, Khan said.

So not only was it a challenge to make the children understand how to enact Bhagat Singh's life, it was equally tough for Khan to change the outlook of their parents about theatre.

'When we spoke to people in Zafarabad about theatre, they looked down upon us. It was the toughest task in the past 20 years for the academy to organise a workshop in such an area. People here still carry the age-old thinking that actors and theatre personalities belong to immoral families,' Khan said.

Khan also revealed that they were short of female actors in the beginning, since parents were not ready to send their daughters to act, and more so with boys.

'Anees visited many houses in Zafarabad in order to convince the parents to let their daughters act in the play. Some girls did come to the workshop, but when their parents came to know that their daughters would be acting along with boys, they didn't allow them to attend the workshop.

'Subsequently, Anees visited many homes there and tried to convince the parents. After a lot of hard work, we managed to get eight girls,' he said.

For Khan, the workshop has been an achievement of sorts, as it has brought positive change in the lives of these children.

'Today they have the confidence to talk to anyone. They talk in proper Urdu language in a respectable manner. Their acting and level of knowledge has improved and a remarkable change has come around in their life.

'Initially, many children used to come looking untidy, with running noses, dirty clothes and body odour. But now everyone comes only after a bath wearing clean clothes!'

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