



Sahyog Annual Programme

February 25th, 2007

Sahyog is managed by the Chehak Trust, which is registered under the Bombay Public Trusts Act, 1950 (Reg. No. E – 21112).

The annual programme is the high point of every school's year. It's no different with Sahyog. This time it was the Jari Mari team's turn to host



the programme. They had a tough task – to find an open space big enough to hold the function which was within walking distance and yet private enough to allow the girls to perform without harassment. They used every trick in the book, but without much success. It's surprising how difficult it was to find a place for free or for a minimal charge even for a few hours in Mumbai. When the municipal corporator promised the use of a local schoolroom, they felt confident enough to announce the date of the programme. There was panic at the last minute, when he backed out. The entire team fanned out into the neighbourhood, till they found a marriage ground, which was large enough, enclosed on three sides – and affordable! They also managed to cajole the contractor to put up the stage and backdrop for a marriage reception a day in advance – full marks for negotiation skills!

When nearly an audience of 250 people had gathered by 3 pm, it looked as if all the problems were over. The staff and students were really looking forward to showing off their work. They had faithfully followed the advice given to them last year – all the items were original productions, no copying film songs or dances. There were only group performances so that every girl in the school got a chance to participate. There was a compere (or actually two) to introduce each performance. With



this much planning, it was clear that this would be one of the most successful annual programmes held. The effort was apparent. Young Jyoti, our volunteer choreographer, stood half hidden behind the stage, anxiously monitoring her protégés' dancing. Inside the green room, Archana was furiously winding nine-yard sarees around half a dozen wriggly 12 year olds. Our younger teachers, Bilkis and Naseema were busy making up the faces of the next group on stage. While Farzana shuttled madly between green room and stage, relaying messages.



Sometimes, even more than the performance itself, it's fun to watch the goings on backstage. A bunch of lovely 16 year olds were practicing the perfect twirl in their heavily brocaded ghaghras, while a few of their peers looked shyly at each other dressed up as 'taporis' in their brothers' trousers. I was amused to see that this time, nearly half the girls had used the opportunity provided by the annual programme to turn up in trousers – always a source of fascination and forbidden pleasure. There were those who had essayed male roles, but also those who were in audience or part of the chorus. To think of it, just three years ago, it was difficult to persuade the older girls to take even plum male roles. Now they seemed to be falling over each other for them.

And so, for the programme itself... Well it started with a practical joke at my expense. I was called very ceremoniously to the center in front of the stage. Teachers Gazala and Sameena poured water from one bucket to another, looking all ready to empty it on my head. I watched

apprehensively and stopped looking as they unbent to fling something in my direction. Before I knew it, I was covered in a shower of rose petals! (Of course, I failed to photograph this memorable event because I was running for my life!)

Following this, the junior division girls of Jari Mari sang a welcome song and were joined by the tiny tots of Sahyog Stars (our bridge course programme) each one holding aloft a letter to make up the word 'welcome'. It's the simplest things that are the toughest to achieve. Teachers Sadaf and Rani had spent days training the little ones to wind through the girls' group and end up in the right formation. I am sure that by now, they knew ALL the possible ways in which 'welcome' can be misspelt!

It's said – a little learning is a dangerous thing. To my mind, a little technology is even more lethal. For



anyone who has been to public functions in a slum, they know that the most important guest is the sound system. I call it a guest because like a guest, it comes and goes. An ancient mike and an eccentric loudspeaker can

put paid to the efforts of the best actors and orators. The girls brought



their ingenuity into play, trying to figure out the exact position in which the mike relayed some sound, without making it feel like the beginning of World War III. However, soon the battle with the mikes came to a sudden end, as the power went off – not merely in Jari Mari, but as we were to learn later, in the whole of Maharashtra.

The Jari Mari Secondary girls put up a short skit on sexual harassment. For once, there were a couple of gutsy mothers who stood up for their daughters. The girls' fondest dream –



to see their brothers doing housework, was brought to life in this skit. Unlike their usual complaint about their mothers, there was a lot

of female bonding across generations and classes! The 'girls' in the play had the most dramatic dialogue, but the 'taporis' were also really good. They began nervously, obviously unused to appearing in public wearing men's clothes, but soon got into the spirit of the play. The eve-teasing scenes were very realistic, clearly drawn from personal experience. Good to see a sensitive topic dealt with in a public function. Although we all know that it is one of the most important reasons for girls not being able to go out, or even go to school, it has taken the



girls many years to be able to deal with the subject in public. And the appeal was to their mothers – to trust them, to support them and join with them in fighting prejudice against girls. It was a simple, but powerful appeal. We must repeat this skit at some of the women's meetings in the community.

Kaun banega hazaarpati. Spoof on the popular reality show. The girl playing the contestant, 'Rakhi' (of Sawant fame) was fabulous. She was really boisterous and loads of fun. Our 'Shahrukh' was quite overwhelmed and left speechless. Contrary to the real



superstar, this one was desperately trying to escape being embraced by the contestants! There were quite a few funny lines and some funny prizes as well. Instead of money, the prizes started with all the Hindi movie clichés - 'maa ka pyaar', 'jaadu ki jhappi' etc. My favourite joke - Rakhi calls her mother and has a long casual conversation on 'phone a friend'. Reason - instead of using it as a 'lifeline', she was just making use of the 'free talktime'!

In many ways, I think the staff of Sahyog was the real stars of the show. They worked so hard and let the kids take all the glory. Even as I watched the performances, I could see how carefully they had planned every item. The girls knew exactly



where they were supposed to be this time. There was hardly any break between the items. In order to make the programme memorable for all, a bunch of the shy ones had been thoughtfully put in the 'live audience'. This way, they got their chance to be on stage as well!

Junior and primary division, Jari Mari were in full form during the koli dance. The girls were looking really cute, decked up in nine-yard sarees. Archana's handiwork was pretty good, I must say. Nothing came undone. It was also a treat to see the girls



dancing to a song from a different language. Cultural diversity is always something to be cherished. This was the first dance of the afternoon. The girls were in full spirits, occasionally glancing sideways at their 'guru' Jyoti, who was biting her fingernails by then. It was great to see that they could keep their formation on stage, although they had never got to chance to rehearse outside the little Jari Mari schoolroom. There was only one 'boy', but the synchronization with the rest of the dancers was excellent. The makeshift stage was shaking under their energetic feet. They couldn't care less though. At last,

they broke the unwritten law that Sahyog's girls would not dance in public.



Rajasthani folk dance. The stage was a bit too small to bring out the full beauty of the choreography, but the girls adapted really well. The middle division, Jari Mari, was rather resplendent in the brocade and tinsel outfits. They were the unfortunate lot whose performance was interrupted by the power cut. Contrary to Bharti's fears (she thought that they would burst out crying), they did not lose their nerve. We all waited for a while and then decided to get on with it. We HAD to restart with the Rajasthani dance. The girls went back on stage and performed all over again sans loudspeakers. Our faithful battery



run tape recorder saved the day!

The smaller girls of Jari Mari school sang a medley of patriotic songs with each girl coming to the center to dance, while the others sang in chorus. The highpoint of this performance was a lively bhangra dance. This was the one group, which was unfazed by the power outage. Since they sang together, they could easily be heard without mikes. And the songs they had chosen lent themselves to a fair deal of storm and thunder. 'The power of unity'!

Two more groups came up to sing songs from the peace movement "mandir, masjid girijaghar mein baat liya Bhagwan ko" and the perennial



favourite 'beti hoon mein beti.' It such a simple song, but every girl in the audience was listening with eyes shining bright. As if they could really imagine themselves as all the beautiful things that the song spoke of – stars, flowers, butterflies and intrepid travelers.

For the final performance – a nautanki performed by the older girls from the Dindoshi school, the audience gathered around the stage and the girls performed in street theatre

style. To my mind, this was the most uninhibited and lively performance of the evening. It was a hilarious



Bhojpuri farce, with a social theme. It began in a filmly style, with the mother in law demanding a huge dowry at the wedding ceremony, threatening to take the baraat back.

But if I had expected any more Bollywood, I was completely mistaken. The bride had brought with her a gun in her dowry and, by god, she made her mother in law's life hell. She even sold her off to a 'kabadiwala', relenting only when the father in law pleaded with her not to make HIM a widow. The husband was shown as a real clown, stuck in the toilet when his parents summoned him to come their defence. The dialogue was absolutely crackling, in the true nautanki style, spontaneous and full of fun – which just goes to show that the girls still have their roots intact! The teachers told me that this play was directed completely by the girls themselves.

Just before sundown, the celebrations came to an end with the entire staff coming up on stage and felicitating each other with bouquets. A good day's work done!



About us

Sahyog works in two slum areas of Mumbai, Jari Mari. Kurla and Dindoshi, Goregaon. Sahyog's various activities are largely directed at improving the situation of healthcare and education in the community. Without attempting to duplicate existing efforts – both in the government and voluntary sector, Sahyog aims to improve access to these services, both by collaborating with existing organisations as well as increasing community awareness and mobilisation. The long-term objective of Sahyog is to create a secular, progressive and empowering space, which enables the development of a cadre of well-trained, socially committed young leaders.

Programmes

Sahyog - School Without Walls

Established in June 2000, this is an educational programme for girls who have dropped out of regular school. It includes girls of 11 years and above, regardless of their educational level. Sahyog offers the opportunity for girls to integrate with the formal system at the primary, upper primary and secondary level through the Open Schooling system.

Sahyog Sangharsh - Special Education Programme

Established in May 2003, a community based rehabilitation programme for disabled children and adolescents. The primary aim of Sahyog Sangharsh is to make the children self-reliant and equip them with adequate communication, vocational and academic skills to live an independent life.

Sahyog Ekta – Community Health Programme

Sahyog Ekta, established in June 2003, is a community health programme for girls and women. It includes a school health programme, tuberculosis control programme, a maternal and child health programme and a health education and life-skills training.

Sahyog Stars – Integrating out-of-school children

Community schools for out-of-school children between 6-14 years, started in Jari Mari as part of the Mahatma Phule Shikshan Hami Yojana of the Maharashtra government Primary Education Department, implemented in Mumbai by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai.

Trustees

1. Yasmin Chagla - M.A, B.Ed., Vice principal and teacher, Cumballa Hill High School.
2. Padma Deosthali - M.S.W, involved in counseling, training and research in domestic violence.
3. Mohan Deshpande - M.B.B.S, medical doctor, who is involved in developing health education material for children and training for schools in health.
4. Neha Madhiwalla - M.A in Social Work, involved in research and training in community health
5. Saramma Matthew - M.Com, L.L.B; administrator and financial manager.
6. Margaret Rodrigues - B.Sc., computer professional.
7. K Sriram - B.Tech, PGDM(M.B.A), who is involved in programme development and programme management in elementary education.

For more details, contact: Sahyog, C-107, C Wing, Patel Apartments, Next to Hari Masjid, Jari Mari, Andheri Kurla Road, Kurla (West), Mumbai 400072
Email: sahyog.chihak@rediffmail.com