AAGAAZ THEATRE TRUST

ANNUAL REPORT

2020-2021

INDEX

BACKGROUND

Aagaaz is an arts based organisation dedicated to creating inclusive learning spaces that nurture curiosity and critical thought while creating safe spaces for dialogue, in an attempt to weave a more equitable urban fabric. Engaging children and young adults at risk across social and geographical boundaries, we are committed to examining and questioning 'what is' to probe 'what could and should be' to learn ways of 'act-ing', with its dual meaning of taking action and performing on stage.

We strive to develop and nurture the ability to think critically, be curious, imagine that which may seem impossible, and follow these new possibilities with courage and integrity.

Aagaaz works towards closing gaps in learning, understanding the 'other', access, and dignity through engagement with arts practices.

AJAB GAJAB

Ajab Gajab is the spine of the practice that supports Aagaaz's belief in the power of the processes of arts and aesthetics. The arts, and in our case more specifically theatre, opens windows into complex and layered realities, creating opportunities to think critically, celebrate differences, take risks and seek justice. Our process based drama workshops focus on understanding and engaging with the self, the society and the world, through the lens of stories.

Thematic Engagements

These are short – term engagements with groups of students that can last for a duration of anywhere between 10 days to a year. We primarily use theatre to engage, explore and express specific themes with students.

Online Workshops - With the onset of the pandemic and the sudden halt to physical engagements, we imagined and created online paid thematic workshops. These sessions not only consolidated our collective of facilitators, but also generated the funds to support our long term community based initiatives.

TANA BANA - Community-based Long Term Engagement

Tana Bana has been the bedrock of Aagaaz. We have been working out of Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti for the last 12 years*. The need to work in the basti finds evidence in specific socio-economic indicators, some of which are as follows. -

- 2142 households
- Population: 11,000 FIXED
- Population Density:84502/sq. km; Delhi is 11320/sq. km
- Workforce participation rate: 50%, 79% male and 24% female
- Major occupation: Unorganised sector with increase in formal sector jobs

Aagaaz's sustained effort through multiple initiatives have borne results visible in the following numbers:

OUR SUCCESSES

PERCENTAGE OF STUDYING POPULATION (15- 25 YEARS) SCHOOL & COLLEGE

The Context

35% MALE

- **63.2%** complete upper primary school
- **44.8%** complete secondary school
- **25.1%** complete higher secondary school

28% FEMALE

- **54.2%** complete upper primary school
- **40.5%** complete secondary school
- **24.6%** complete higher secondary school

In 2013, in Nizamuddin Basti
- Only 9% of the women were part of the workforce
- Only 1% of the youth had access to skill training

In Aagaaz

100% FEMALE have either completed or are enrolled in HIGHER SECONDARY EDUCATION **90% MALE**

100% FEMALE Who have completed their school education have graduated from or are enrolled in DELHI UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS **75% MALE**

100% of Aagaaz's Members*

Are either trained or are being trained in vocations such as:

education, facilitation, community mobilisation, computer skills, English language, community-based research.

Some of them have also have experience working as:

sexual and reproductive health trainers, lights and sound technicians and designers for live performances & managers of performance venues.

*With scholarships by Aagaaz

workshops with children in the Nizamuddin Basti; 2020

In this year we recognized that we must take our commitment and initiatives to more children and communities.

This has become possible because of two primary reasons. While drama is at the centre of this initiative, there is a lot else that makes it sustainable. Building relationships with other stakeholders like the children's families, in some cases the other institutions that they access, and their teachers; getting to know the geographical context; engaging with the child's world outside of the drama class; and perhaps the most fundamental to this initiative is the commitment to "turn up", despite any challenges (and there may be many) that emerge.

Our collective of facilitators which began with just 1 person, has already grown into 24 practitioners. This team includes 12 young people from Nizamuddin, who were still in primary school when they started their journey at the onset of this community based initiative. They remained with the initiative through these years and are now working with children in communities.

This year, they began their 3 year long journey as young educators in training to work with 400 children across 4 different communities - Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti, Khirki Extension, Kotla Mubarakpur, and Begampur. The engagement, which began in April 2020 in Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti with a 100 children, is led by 5 of the young educators in training. This engagement has been pivotal as children lost their relationship with structured learning spaces like their schools due to the pandemic and a lack of access to the internet. Most of the work during this time happened with small groups of children from their homes.



workshops with children in the Nizamuddin Basti; 2020

Celebi Delhi Cargo Terminal Management Private Limited has supported us with the fellowship amounts for the training and development of the budding young educators. We have been supported by a team of volunteers who have been mentors as well as fundraisers for the other components of the programme.

With a commitment to our ground-up approach, we have now reflected and created a framework that can support these new long-term journeys. Through Critical and Creative Engagement in our pedagogical approaches as well as in our approach to challenges, we aim to co-create spaces with the participants, families, and educational institutions as collective stakeholders. The dream is that this process-based approach will effect shifts in the next many years.

Facilitators commit to a minimum of 5 years of consistent engagement with the children. We aim to stay with all groups of children for at least 10 years.

* Our Founder, Sanyukta started working in Nizamuddin Basti as a part of Aga Khan Foundation's Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative in 2009. She quit the job in early 2013, and continued working in the community. Aagaaz was registered in 2015.

Drama Jams
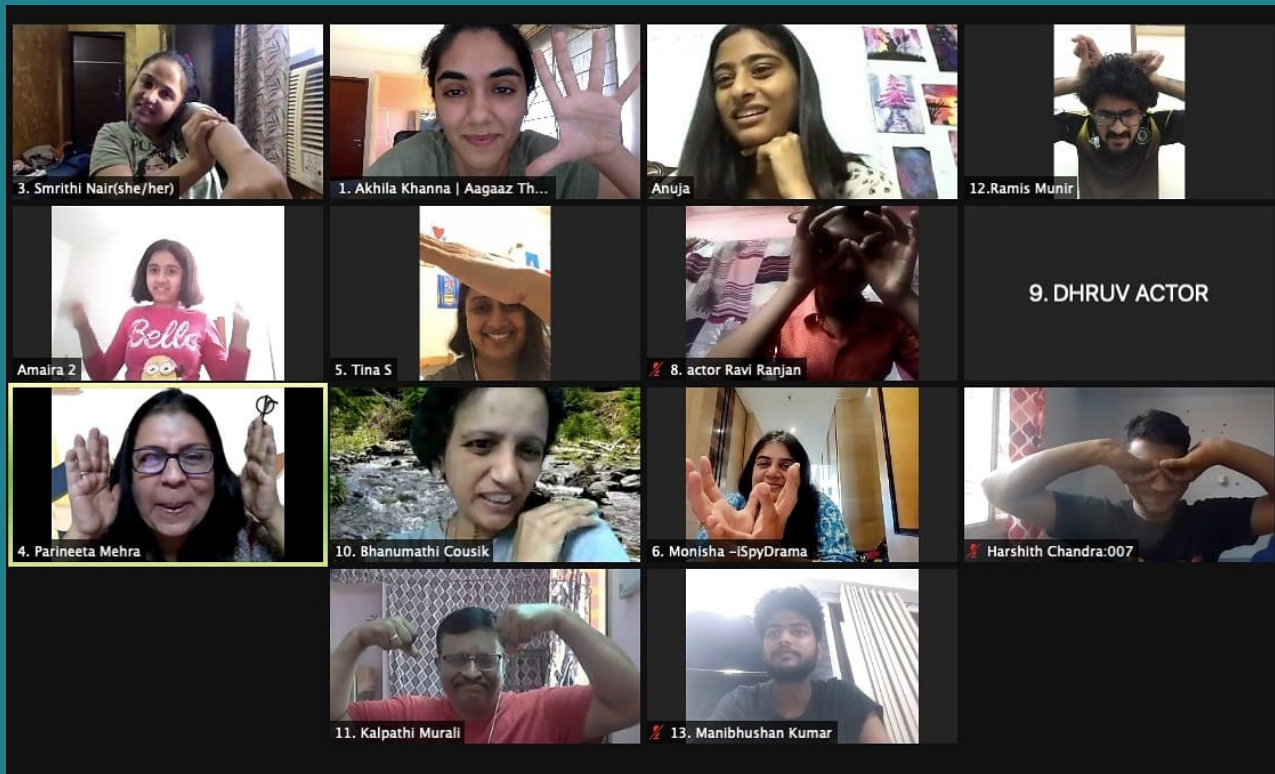
The Sunday Drama Jams started in 2017 as a weekly, free, peer sharing space for anyone who likes to play drama games, or works with people using drama. It brings practitioners and participants from diverse backgrounds together in a park in Nizamuddin. The attempt is to innovate new possibilities of play and to create a space that runs organically without a meta-facilitator, curated in-the-moment by only the people in the room. The Drama Jams are designed consciously to fuel both spontaneity and reflective practices, and to grow deeper in its possibility of creating dialogue between educators, artists, students, parents, CSO leaders and functionaries, academics, and policy makers.

<u>Online Drama Jams</u> – Since the lockdown in March 2020, the drama jams have moved into the online space. We began with hosting webinars and panel discussions by mental health professionals, artists, and educators. These Drama Jams - now onto their 30th week - attract a consistent flow of 100+ artists, teachers, parents, mental health professionals, corporate trainers, and children (of all ages) from across the country to play, connect and co-create. We now also have a documented repository of drama games (with instructions and reflections) that can be freely accessed and played online by all.

Facilitator's Collective

Over the years Aagaaz has built a pool of reflective facilitators who have come from diverse practices. They all share a desire to work with children, adolescents, and young people through arts based methodologies, and in so doing, also deepen their practice. Members of the collective regularly hold thematic workshops and will also be leading and facilitating the next phase of community based initiatives.

Weekly Meetings - We have created a regular space where the facilitators come together to read texts, dialogue on various themes, design drama based processes, and reflect and write on the challenges of access to the same. We also invite external facilitators to train us in different aspects of arts based practice while we also share our individual practices with each other.

PERFORMANCE ARTS

Creating, rehearsing, and performing is an extension of our process based work in Ajab Gajab. Our productions, co-created by the repertory and playwrights/directors from the city, raise questions that urge audiences to engage in dialogues with contemporary issues. 'Duniya Sabki' (2016) asks - who does our world belong to? 'Ravaan Aaya' (2017) questions who creates systematic hierarchical divisions; 'Bhagi Hui Ladkiyan' (2018) explores how gender identities are perceived within and beyond the communities of the repertory; 'Rihla' (2019) is an inquiry into imaginations of a dream country. Previously, our performances have played in more than 12 cities in schools, theatre festivals, and other public spaces across India.

We believe that in the process of ACTing, both the performer - (by being witnessed), and the audience (by witnessing), is transformed.

Our repertory members have all emerged from the first phase of community initiative in Nizamuddin. They are supported in developing their creative practice by a group of 4 respected artist-mentors.

Creative Practice

In September of 2020 the Aagaaz Repertory started working with their mentors - Ankit Pandey, Dhwani Vij, Neel Chaudhuri and Urvi Vora, at the Jangpura Metro Park. These socially distanced meetings began with the intention of returning to a weekly ritual of practice - of games, exercises, and group work - rituals that had suffered after months of isolation in the lockdown.

The repertory members and four mentors took turns to plan and lead these sessions in groups of 3. Each group chose to focus on specific aspects of imaginative play - working with the body, listening, sound, image making etc. Eventually we reached a moment of pause where we took stock, reviewed where the sessions had taken us, and expressed our desires for the future.

Creative Practice

WAY FORWARD

The second phase of our long term community engagement (Tana Bana) in Nizamuddin Basti started in April 2020. Alongside this, the facilitators from the basti will be in the second year of the Young Educators Incubation Program where they will receive training and mentorship to take forward the work and make it sustainable. We are also beginning extensive work with our facilitators on safety practices and mental health support with the help of experts in these fields. We are working towards taking Tana Bana to two new communities in Delhi once we have set up the program in Nizamuddin.

With the repertory, our mentors are taking forward the process of designing the next step of their journey and creative practice. With the Drama Jams, we are looking at sustaining the bi-monthly jams online until physical jams are safe and possible, and in the meanwhile our collective of facilitators will also continue their learning sessions online, preparing for the summer when our thematic workshops will happen.

ANNEXURE

Blog Articles

Catalysts for Transformation

August 31, 2020

Paolo Freire, the Brazilian educator and author, in his **"*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*"** says *"****People develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves. They come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.****"*

I personally find that this idea of a teacher or a facilitator **not presenting something finished but instead inviting people to join this always on-going and evolving process**, is one of the reasons I feel constantly challenged and motivated in this field. **Regardless of the amount of knowledge one has, academic as well as experiential, one is always working towards something**, and that any session or workshop I am facilitating or am a part of should ideally **embody this attitude of being dynamic, even after we've achieved our set goals.**

During lockdown, I chanced upon the wondrous opportunity of working with a handful of other people who are now called Aagaaz Facilitators (on whatsapp) who feel similarly, and actually so much more that their levels of feelings are now aspirational for me, and suddenly I feel a sense of home, of validation and solidarity that I haven't felt for really long now.

Each week we meet, **we dig deep into our dreams and find pieces to share with each other and synchronously reflect together**. While most of the team has been working together for years, some of us are about a month old in this new set up, and yet the process that has been entirely democratic, has skillfully tied us all together in ways that we can't even see yet.

This week, we discussed who a facilitator is, what are the qualities one aspires to have as a facilitator. We remembered people in our experiences, and reimagined things about them and then reflected thoroughly on how we work with this concept of facilitating.

In my head, the facilitator was merely a catalyst that enters an on-going chemical reaction between different thoughts and ideas and culminates in a product. But I started realising that we actually never leave this reaction unchanged, do we? We end up becoming a part of this reaction (only if we allow for this to happen of course), sometimes without even knowing we emerge a little different from our earlier selves.

So how do we BE ourselves and yet find ways to allow ourselves to change, how we give to the process as well as take from it? When do we learn to stop apologising (or apologise lesser) for things that are not in our hands, for things that are not our fault and yet are things that we feel somehow responsible and apologetic for. How do we create spaces for exploration and exchange while ensuring the process continues even after we remove ourselves from it? How do we find the perfect balance of pride in our work, and humility?

Somewhere this chain of questions led me back to the idea of a **"reality in transformation",** and once I embrace that, all these questions turn from niggling doubts to empowering assertions, assertions that will ideally remain interrogative in some way for a long time to come.

Subhadra aka Subu is a musician, theatre practitioner and facilitator, who has been working with young people using music and theatre (and whatever else she can lay her hands on) for the past decade or so. She eats and sleeps like a monster and loves cats and dogs and birds and other such cute creatures.

Illustrations by Devika

"Is it too late to say I AM NOT SORRY?!"

September 21, 2020

Reflections on a non-exhaustive list of apologies while facilitating online spaces

In our last Facilitator's Collective meeting Subu raised an important question — **how can we as facilitators BE ourselves and find ways to remain open to changes in a workshop?**

This question led me to another one — **what does it even mean to 'be myself' as a facilitator? That too right now when workshop walls have collapsed into workshop screens?** My personal space — a room where I used to relax after long hours of standing and engaging with participants — is now suddenly transformed into that very same interactive space. When online sessions are over, it takes me a few seconds to readjust to my room that was only a few seconds ago filled with the voices of so many people and so many homes. Suddenly with a click of a button, that chatter and energy is dissipated into thin air (or as I like to imagine — into the wires of my laptop charger).The gradual easing out of a workshop, the small talk, the ritualistic gathering of flipcharts, markers, props, speakers and scarves is replaced by my cursor hovering over a red 'End this Meeting' button.

This **blurring of intimate and interactive spaces** has also brought to my awareness a peculiar habit of mine. This habit was very apparent when one day my laptop lost its charge in the middle of a session and I began profusely apologizing…to a blank screen.

When I shared this discovery at the Facilitator's Collective, I realized I wasn't alone. Infact, many of us even began our meetings by apologizing for things beyond our control!

So, just for fun, I began curating a non-exhaustive list of items I had apologized for during online workshops. Each time I caught myself saying "I am so sorry for…." "Please excuse me for…" or a version of the same I jotted it down and the collective added to it. So here goes from Sanyukta, Akhila, Mudita, Devika and Subu:

"Sorry…

1. *my net is slow*
2. *my dog is barking*
3. *I need to get the door*
4. *l need to make dinner*
5. *my microphone isn't working*
6. *my headphone wires are entangled*
7. *I can't figure out the zoom features*

8. *my partner just walked in*
9. *the traffic outside is loud*
10. *electricity issues! Sorry my face is not better lit!*
11. *I need to drink water*
12. *I need to go to the bathroom*
13. *I got an urgent call in the middle*
14. *my fan is too fast*
15. *there is construction happening outside*
16. *my stomach is grumbling*
17. *I will need to eat during the session*
18. *I am too energetic right now*
19. *I am too sensitive right now*
20. *I am too tired and exhausted right now*
21. *my cats are being talkative*
22. *the sun is shifting bringing a shadow to my face*
23. *I am late I was on a call*
24. *I am early I was in the Waiting Room*
25. *for the posters in my background*
26. *I am taking time to type*
27. *I can't hear you. Everyone is talking at the same time*
28. *for talking too much*
29. *for not talking enough*

Why do we, almost automatically, begin our sentences with an apology? Is it because we have become so accustomed to saying 'sorry' that we don't even question it? Or maybe it's because we are hiding how we are feeling? Are we embarrassed of appearing a certain way? Are we conscious of what our participants might think about us? Are we worried we are wasting their time? Or is this our way of claiming power — by apologizing for things before others point it out for us? Or are we scared? Scared of appearing too confident? Or too dishevelled? Who are we scared of? Ourselves? Our participants? Our jobs? Our computers? Our pets? The pandemic?

Maybe the answers are a combination of all of the above, but these spiraling questions led me to another thought — if I am aware that I have this voice of apology, how do I tune it down?

I conducted a short exercise to explore this idea with the collective. We all closed our eyes and envisioned a workshop space where each of us felt like we were completely in our element. We pictured those surroundings, the people who were there and those who were not.

We then filled our drawing sheets with scribbles of feelings that were coming up — comfort, confidence, co-creation, connection, oneness, flow and ease being a few. Examples of some drawings are below:
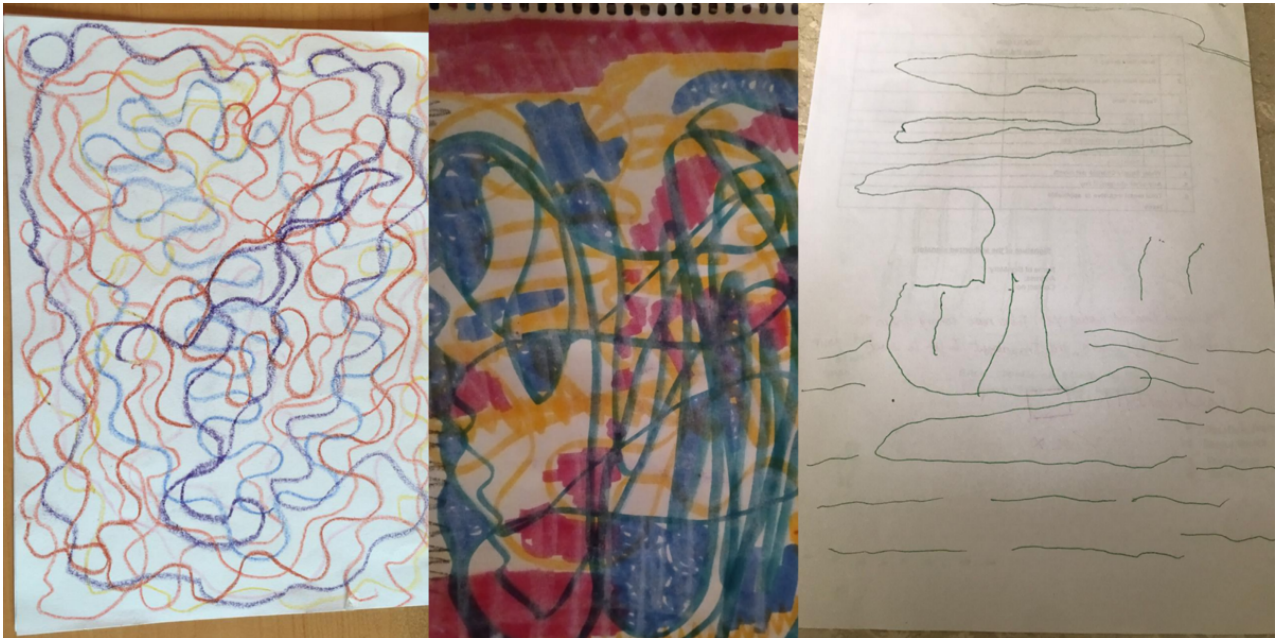
Inspired by these images, we drew another image with details of that space, the people and the dialogues. We then placed ourselves in our own drawings.
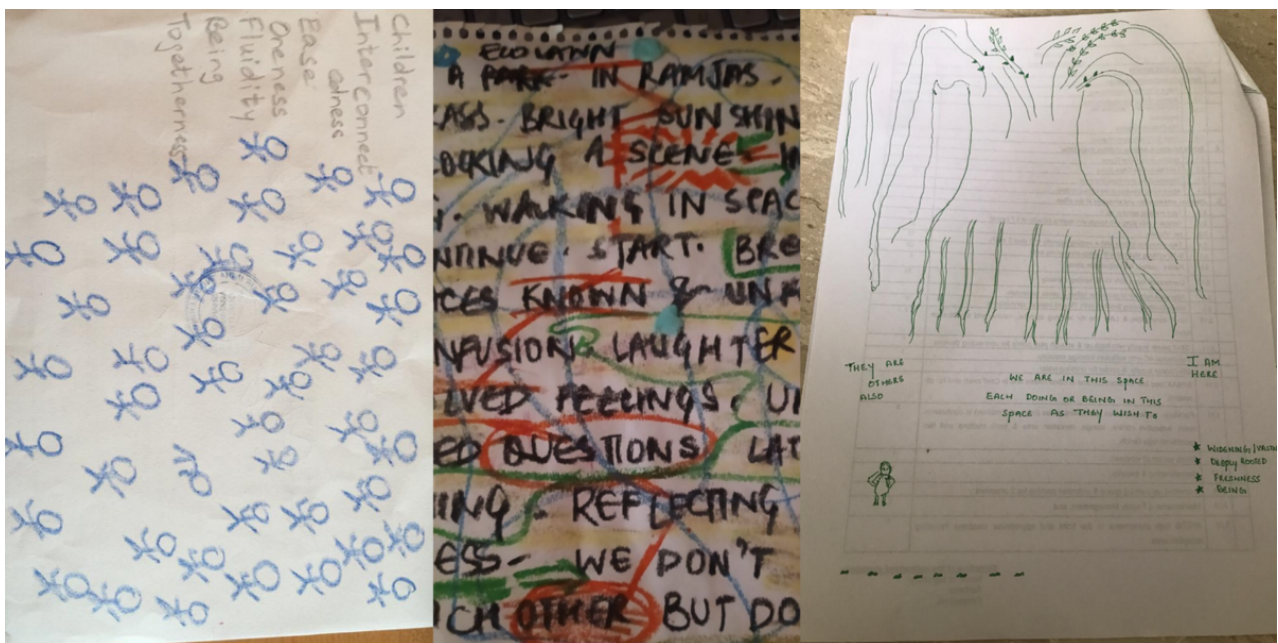
As we sat in silence colouring in the details of a world that we very clearly were not living right now, the reality of our current context dawned on me. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a 'facilitator' is a person who helps somebody do something more easily. The world is not easy right now. The spaces that we are each facilitating — be it with children, with young adults, with older adults, are not easy. In that context, of course, these voices of apology are playing out. But **does apologizing for that messy world make this facilitation process easier?** Where does 'ease' come from?

As we shared our drawings I asked the collective if it was possible to bring some of the 'ease' emerging from our drawings into our current spaces. Not just with our participants but also with ourselves. Our zoom screens might not look like the open-air amphitheatres where we feel comfortable facilitating, but can we ground our bodies in the confidence

that those spaces offer us? I**s it possible to "be" present in that state even when the computer dies, when the wifi crashes and the cat stomps across the keyboard?** Oh and not apologize for any of those things?

Paolo Freire, the Brazilian educator and author that Subu also mentioned in her last blog post, talks about the importance of reflection and action for a pedagog in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. While I feel it is important to constantly reflect on our roles as facilitators, I am realizing the importance of reflecting on things I can control — like my being — rather than those that I cannot. The blurring of private and public spaces (read: screens) has made this delineation challenging, but all the more important so I can act accordingly — **with forgiveness towards myself, my participants and to the world.** What does this forgiveness look like? Hard to say, but right now it's looking to me like a shorter apology list.

Akhila is an applied theatre practitioner from Delhi. With a passion for playing a game whenever possible, she designs and facilitates theatre-based interventions for corporates, government bodies, non-profits, schools and universities in India and the U.S. Akhila's practice — which she <u>blogs</u> about like a mad person — stems from her training in the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology.

Processing Dramas: And the Possibilities of Online Play with Pre-Primary Children

October 20, 2020

The dramatic space often resembles the world of pretend play that children indulge in when left to themselves. However, the structures created around a facilitated "class", especially on an online platform can make 'pretending' a little more challenging. Entering a space of imagination is only possible when all the players consent to it. **What role could we as facilitators play in the virtual space that encourages children to play along?**

We (Devika and Akhila) launche into a month-long Process Drama with 6 bubbly 5-year-olds to explore this question. Process Drama is a mode of learning that allows learners of any age to use imagined roles to explore issues, events, and relationships.[1]

A glimpse into our Lesson Plan

Week 1: Meet Flippy the Farmer who needs our help to plant seeds.

Week 2: We head to the market where Suri the Seller needs to sell fruits and vegetables.

Week 3: We enter the community kitchen where Bobby the Bavarchi is plating dishes.

Week 4: It's a Food Mela! Flippy, Suri and Bobby are coming with their friends to visit our stalls and taste the different food items we have prepared.

Cecily O'Neill, an international authority on Process Drama, suggests that **the adult should participate 'from within the creative process, as co-artist with his/her pupils, rather than remain on the outside of the world as facilitator or manipulator**.' [2] Therefore, we consciously decided to use Teacher-in-Role — a strategy that allows both the participants and the facilitators to play a role in the drama. While Akhila always played the Teacher-in-Role, switching between Flippy, Suri and Bobby, Devika was the constant auxiliary role, joining the children as farmers, sellers, and chefs

as they weaved through the imagined drama. In both roles, we were **constantly reflecting and acting with the children on the real-time problems of the drama**.

In Week 2 when we switched on our videos and 'entered' the market, Suri the Seller peered into the camera:

"Oh wow, I see many more customers than we had expected," claimed Suri with surprise, her face magnified on the screen.

"Yes, the customers are in my room! I see them!" shouted Manya, one of our most poised (or relatively composed) 5 year olds, exaggerating her facial expressions.

"What do we do now?" asked Devika, also peering into the camera.

"We have to sell our fruits and vegetables, Manya" advised Shrishti, reminding Manya of the rules of the game.

"Yes, and how do we do that? There are so many customers and only a few of us." said Suri.

"Let's call them," said Kanika, crossing her arms, as if she knew the answer all along.

That our **characters were well defined and served a very specific function** opened up the window of imaginative play. **Each character represented real-life situations, problems and emotions.** At the beginning of every session, the **objective was clear**. For example, at the beginning of Week 2 — the children knew that we were about to sell the fruits and vegetables we had grown at the farm. Suri's claim about the customers in the market **problematized the predictability of this narrative and also existed within the realm of possibility.** The Teacher-in-Role thus carried the responsibility of making the Process Drama convincing. Once the children saw us taking the drama seriously, involving ourselves in the problem-solving, **their own seriousness became reinforced**.[3] When Suri the Seller displayed her anxiety around the arrival of the customers in the market, Manya mirrored that emotional response declaring that the customers had already arrived and were "in her room". Somehow, the limitations of being in separate spaces disappeared temporarily and the elements of 'make-believe' came alive.

This pushed us to reflect on the dominant reactions offered by the Teacher-in-Role and its implications in this virtual Process Drama. One possible implication could be that because Manya mirrored the anxiety of Suri, Shrishti took on the role of the advisor, reassuring the group of the task at hand and Kanika became the problem solver. **These roles were assumed and responsibility felt and shared in a matter of seconds.** Moreover, Shrishti referred to Manya by her name when giving advice. In this manner, the Process Drama was also facilitating **listening and connection building on a medium where there was no physical connection.**

The collective acknowledgement of a problem led to a collective solution. Each of us proceeded to create our own 'calls' to attract many customers. We created an action and a tune for our call. Kanika's was a personal favourite as she got up, stuck her hips out towards her camera and yelled: "Papaya Le Lo, Papaya Le Lo!" (*buy the Papaya, buy the Papaya).*

In retrospect, we realised that **transitioning in and out of the role in front of the children, acted as a metaphor to enter and exit the realm of imagination and absurdity.** At the end of Week 2, Shrishti asked, "Where is Suri the Seller?", subtly declaring her desire to engage with the fictional character and their world. **Maybe some comfort was derived in the familiarity that was offered by the arrival of someone she expected?** Devika as the auxiliary role added an element of consistency and re-affirmed the fact that their facilitator was only 'acting' and eliminated any scope for deception. We believe this enabled an understanding that **they could partially control the flow of events**.

The Teacher-in-Role continued to feed the virtual drama through off-line activities. Following week 2, Suri the Seller sent **Whatsapp audio notes** to the parents asking the children to make bowls with dough because they would need that in Bobby's kitchen the following weekend. Thus the Teacher-in-Role methodology allowed us to **reference other roles and build the suspense and excitement for the next setting.**

While Zoom and Whatsapp aided the drama and their imagination, they also limited equal participation from all the children. The Teacher-in Role lent itself to collective problem-solving but on Zoom **only one person can talk at a time**. Devika was constantly juggling between muting and unmuting the children when they wanted to talk. As soon as the stakes of the drama were raised (like when Suri claimed that there were many customers in the market) everyone had a reaction but as facilitators, we only heard a few. As part of the drama, we incorporated a hand signal (5 fingers squeezing together).

This action functioned as a **visual cue** each time anyone wanted to speak but it also **slowed down the pace of the drama and interrupted an active contribution from each child.**

As facilitators, our overarching objective of the session was to impart certain drama skills like embodiment, articulation, critical thinking and creativity. While we struggled to always facilitate these learnings in a structured flow, through the Process Drama and Teacher-in-Role, **the group arrived at these discoveries and actions in an improvised manner.** The questions we are left with now are — how do we sustain these improvisations for the pre-primary age group, such that they continue to be more playful than instructional? How can we facilitate connections for children on Zoom without them feeling 'facilitated'? How can we as facilitators continue to unlearn our patterns and embrace more such possibilities of this virtual, unfamiliar social space?

(The names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the children.)

References:

[1]Schneider, Jenifer Jasinski, Thomas P. Crumpler, and Theresa Rogers. "Process drama and multiple literacies." *Portsmouth, NH* (2006).

[2]Neelands, J. (2008). Structure and Spontaneity: The Process Drama of Cecily O'Neill- edited by Philip Taylor and Chris Warner.

[3]"Drama, Teacher in role guide — Arts-POP." http://artspop.org.au/drama-teacher_in_role_guide/.

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Devika is an arts practitioner, educator and facilitator, living in Delhi. She works with children and young people in community and education settings, with the intention of exploring, understanding and creating compassionate spaces. She is interested in understanding how arts pedagogy can be used in diverse spaces to facilitate a better awareness of self, leading to more deliberate and conscious action.

Illustration by Devika.

Facilitating Care: Democracy & Difference

November 22, 2020
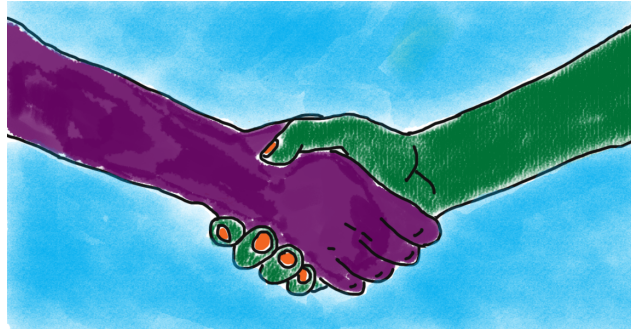
The facilitators' collective met to discuss and imagine the possibilities of various themes that emerged from the reading of the two articles: 'Meeting Otherness' and 'The Path to Practice'. The discussion was a space of ideating, listening, imagining and acknowledging. Amongst the various topics that were spoken of, key highlights that I could gather were on the themes of: 'other-ing and otherness', 'care' and the way we, as facilitators, can be self-aware for every diverse group that we interact with.

As a new member to aspace, I was curious to hear everyone in the group, waiting in anticipation of what each member contributes. This anticipation was met with warm and comforting greetings from everyone, to everyone. The form of the discussion was democratic and the approach was to unfurl the two texts as the participants shared their interaction with the text. I was surprised, initially, for I anticipated that we would start with a magnifying lens into the text and swim to the deepest of points through the crutches of guiding questions. Luckily, the discussion was steered by the group with their own experiences and dilemmas, leading to the unfurl approach that I felt.

We realised that 'Meeting Otherness' is a topic that doesn't have demarcated borders in reality, even if it does in a book called dictionary. The definition of such a term meets a fork on the road from which one must select what path they wish to walk. To give an example, I felt a part of the group in this exercise and by the end of the discussion, I felt connected to the group. Yet, just before entering this space, I was the 'other' — by gender, by being new to the facilitators' group, etc. Here stood a shift of my definition of feeling as the other and soon watching that label disappear. How does it even come to be that we consider each other strangers?[1]

Meeting such questions along with our explorations as facilitators brings to front the need to address an important question.

How can we be facilitators and not explicators; where the former is meeting the other/otherness and the latter showcases the othering? The need to holistically engage a group with our practice, while simultaneously reflecting on the actions of the self, allowed

me to think of the ways in which I can work towards creating a fertile and comfortable ground for the people that we work with.

The thought of this question makes my mind turn into an onion with multiple layers to peel before I get to anything. The practice of facilitating involves chalking out of roles and responsibilities, not only for the self but for the judgement of the group. How then can the facilitator reveal the information that must be hidden till the end of the activity? And if she/he hides it, what sort of autonomy does this brain hold? Who gets to decide what is a wrong concept and not an alternative concept? I believe these are the ways we can nurture the seeds of becoming and extending the space to become democratic deliberators. "Democratic deliberators are individuals who are well-informed, willing to revise their opinion in light of reasonable arguments and evidence, and capable of listening to and learning from diverse perspectives."[2]

This 'Let's Read a Little' email and discussion was truly exciting to be able to understand the nature of work and the path to practice that we as facilitators wish to carry out, not just as Aagaaz but as the practice that we wish to create, observe and also engage with.

[1]Mukunda, Keerthi, 2019. 'Meeting Otherness'. Journal of the Krishnamurthy School, Issue 23

[2]Dhammachakra Aditi, 2018. 'The Path to Practice'. Teacher Plus, Archive January 2018

Kanishk *is an applied arts practitioner, facilitator, and educator. Integrating social, emotional, and political fragments through his practice, he envisions to build emancipatory spaces of exploration and learning. He wishes to craft safe and creative spaces while nurturing the diverse skills that the interactions in his journey bring along.*

Illustrations by Devika

Do games facilitate themselves?

December 21, 2020

On facilitation in unfacilitated spaces by Akhila Khanna

I love knowing. Knowing what game I will facilitate when, gives me a great amount of comfort, joy and confidence in spaces where I otherwise feel intimidated. With the pandemic, I felt as if my desire to know had met the face of a child sticking its tongue out and yelling "I don't know aannnyyythinggg!". This metaphorical child was running around my room turning tables and chairs upside down and I was desperately trying to scold it, to get it to calm down, to force it to behave in a way that was familiar, predictable and within my control.

My love for knowing hasn't emerged from thin air. I studied and worked for 5 years in the U.S. where I learnt to thrive within contracts and academic frameworks. These defined systems quickly created predictable patterns within which I was facilitating different spaces. For example — very often I would be asked to submit workshop designs with clear objectives, weeks before actually meeting the target participant group. This prepared way of working became my automatic expectation of myself and the schools where I would teach.

When I returned back to India and attended Aagaaz's Drama Jams I (now literally) met children in a park who were running around loudly yelling *"Tota! Pinjra! Toofan!"* (Parrot! Cage! Storm!) I was trying to identify the facilitator of this game but instead I saw a flipchart filled with names of exercises in different handwritings. These were a few activities that the participants had mutually decided to play and were divided into three sections: tune-in, engagement and reflections. As I joined in, I witnessed the games facilitating themselves, each game whispering into the ears of the next and energizing the bodies that were playing it. I was itching to lead, to speak, to structure and to facilitate but somehow the games stopped me in my tracks so I played along. **How was this line between structure and spontaneity emerging?** More importantly — **who was drawing it?**

When the pandemic hit, I found myself asking similar questions — **who is facilitating this strange time that we are (willingly or unwillingly) participating in? What games is our environment playing with us?** My desire to know within the unknown was raging. I needed a familiar setting so I re-joined Aagaaz's Drama Jams that were now taking place online. I was curious to understand how that same spontaneity which I had experienced in the park would translate to Zoom. Would there still be no facilitator? What would a virtual flip-chart of mutually decided games look like? What happens when someone's internet crashes in between a game? Does every game then need to have a back-up game? Who decides what that back-up game is?

As part of Aagaaz's Facilitators' Collective we are reading chapters from *Theatre for Change, Social Action and Therapy*. At the beginning of the book, drama therapist Robert J. Landy claims that posing questions in various educational settings establishes dramatic contexts and deepens the students' capacity to reflect on the experience.[1] While Landy's claim is rooted in the student-teacher relationship (unlike the Drama Jams where such hierarchies are blurred) he expands on the value of inquiry in creating spaces for the unknown. After all — why would participants be compelled to ask

questions if the dramatic space was familiar or predictable? Maybe that's the magic of the Drama Jams. There is a sense of unpredictability in each Jam because the games emerge out of the participants present. The participants change every time. Glitchy internet connections add to the unpredictability online. **Since none of the players really know what is going to happen next, the games lend themselves to purposeful inquiry which is then answered or further questioned by the next game.**

For example — in Aagaaz's last online Drama Jam, Kritika — a drama teacher from Chennai suggested a game called 'Fortunately-Unfortunately.' In this game all of us recounted our learnings over the past year beginning our sentences with "Fortunately in 2020…" followed by "Unfortunately in 2020…." After this activity our brains and bodies were full of stored memories of the year. "Why don't we shake our bodies?" suggested another participant. This request led to us dancing our favorite lockdown gestures on Zoom. At this moment I wondered — **are the games facilitating us? Or are we facilitating the games? How are these games so effortlessly posing questions whose collective inquiry is emerging out of the process of playing them?** Had I pre-planned or facilitated this session, would this level of inquiry even emerge?

The online Drama Jams are not all spontaneous play. **There is the invisible hand of a design that is supporting this collective inquiry.** Arts-in-education expert Cecily O'Neil claims that "'Process Drama is a **structured improvisational activity** in which teachers and students jointly contract to an imaginary world. It is structured so that participants take on multiple roles, not just one character throughout the drama experience. It is framed this way to allow participants to consider multiple perspectives. At the same time, Process Drama is a methodology that empowers students to take ownership in the meaning they make of any given topic. As the drama is developed, it takes on a reflective component that impacts the unfolding action, moving it more clearly into a conception of praxis.[2]"
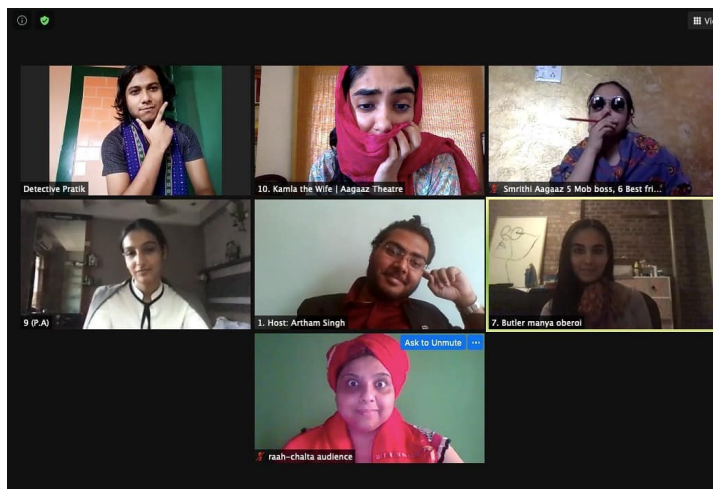
where members from our drama jam community took part in an elaborate ,
working in and out of roles.

In O'Neil's explanation of Process Drama, structures like role-playing aid students and teachers to take on a shared responsibility of the drama. (Devika and I wrote about this in more detail in our last post). The design of the Jams — tune-in, engagement and reflection — is a similar structure that aids the spontaneity within and beyond it. The flip-chart of games, which online translates to a running google document, makes the space feel held and safe to play within. The last 30 minutes of the Jam are always spent on reflecting on our experiences of each game. Each of these 'structures' allow for a reflexive praxis which O'Neil mentions above. For Aagaaz I clearly see, **this reflexive praxis is defined in a critical and creative pedagogy that rests on democratic values of inclusion.**

So if structure and spontaneity are co-existing (and in fact supporting one another), how do I cohabitate with the rambunctious child that is 2020 without facilitating it? **What then does 'facilitation' mean especially when I don't know who is facilitating whom?** I guess I'll never know, despite all my efforts to blog my way towards an answer. Maybe that's okay.

References:

Landy, Robert, and David T. Montgomery. *Theatre for change: Education, social action and therapy.* Macmillan International Higher Education, 2012.

***Akhila** is an applied theatre practitioner from Delhi. With a passion for playing a game whenever possible, she designs and facilitates theatre-based interventions for corporates, government bodies, non-profits, schools and universities in India and the U.S. Akhila's practice — which she <u>blogs</u> about like a mad person — stems from her training in the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology.*

Illustration by Devika

"Laddu Daddu"

aagaaz-theatre.medium.com/laddu-daddu-401e888de97c

The thing that stayed with me most in the first few weeks of working with the core team of Aagaaz inthe park was that no one knew the names of things but everyone knew how to make them up. We were introduced to games that seemed to have bizarre names: something about a chicken, something about spotting, something about laddus. These games themselves were familiar that I had perhaps played as a kid or in some theatre workshop, but the names had betrayed my understanding of them. Dog and the bone but not quite. Gol spot was Ghum ghum stop. That one I recognised.

But working with this group is always quite like this: a familiar sensation, the warmth of a playground, and an invitation to a microcosm of its own. I think I'm the only person who hasn't worked with everyone closely before. So I'm still discovering the little shared gestures, the common jokes, the slight indications that someone wants control, the glance that says I am bored. But each time I find some pieces of the puzzle, and it'll probably come together eventually.

I've realised I really like being led. Three sessions out of four in a month are sessions where I get to be a participant, to be led. To be asked to run and jump. I am far more nervous about the sessions I need to plan for. I normally begin by thinking about exercises that I am comfortable leading and then about how a bunch of them can come together. I usually find myself grouped with two people who seem fairly confident about where their activities fit in the session, how much time they will take, and why they fit in the overall focus of that day. Sometimes I come across a ridiculous name and I resist asking so I get the chance to discover what that is during the session. Laddu Daddu was worth the wait. Sometimes, one of them will say I've invented something that lasts twenty minutes and sometimes, while everything would've been planned, one of them will invent something at that very moment.

Perhaps that's how you build a good microcosm: you experiment, you add and remove things, but somehow, it makes sense in that space. The narratives, tangents, and arcs keep moving but that world remains consistent. It's what makes you trust it, invites you in and convinces you it will be there even if you look away. I'm learning that if you believe in a fictional world strongly enough, you can trust that your actions will fit right in. I'm learning that even if I am scared to lead an activity one day, I can begin by giving it a ridiculous name.

Urvi Vora is a performing artist based in New Delhi. Following her training in philosophy and dance anthropology, she has created works that have toured India and Europe, notably S.K.U.M. Manifesto (India, 2019) and This Is How You Move Them (Europe, 2018). Her work exists somewhere in the overlaps between dance and theatre, with a focus on the body, the body in politics, and intimacy. She remains fascinated by what the body can do.

Parallels from a space of co-creation

aagaaz-theatre.medium.com/parallels-from-a-space-of-co-creation-920a272c29ee

"Co-creation" That is the new word which I find myself intrigued by. It tempts me to unravel its layers. The word has a feel of togetherness and of coming together. It speaks to me about love, acceptance, shared pride in a task completed. And it alludes to the personal kept aside for the collective- personal egos/targets/credit.

What better example of a space of co-creation than 'Theatre'!

For, even a theatrical piece that ay be a monologue is put together by a team comprising several individuals. It is an exhibition of the expertise, skills, ideas and thoughts of each member of that team. **And of how successfully were they able to keep aside the personal agenda and stay focused on the collective team effort.**

'Co-creation' is the word that drew me to Aagaaz. I wanted to experience for myself how a simple workshop for children was brainstormed over and put together as a meaningful experience for its participants. **I wanted to experience co-creation in practice. I write today about one such session when I could join the dots to make linkages for myself.**

That was the name of the story through which we opened our module on the theme of 'Friendship' with our batch of 7–8 year olds.

The story revolves around the friendship of Mary Sangma and Josana Marak, neighbours and best friends who like to spend time together, co-creating toys using wood.

All the same, one day when Josana shows Mary a waistband that she has spent several days making, Mary is critical of it. Josana is upset with her response and stops talking to her friend. She refuses to acknowledge Mary's presence for many days.

An important observation to make here is that while the 2 friends have co-created several toys together, it was a piece created individually by Josana that Mary expresses a dislike for. Could a feeling of having been left out of the process of creation been at play in Mary's mind? How does Mary get their friendship back on track?

The promise of co-creating something new again has Josana let go of her upset. And the 2 friends bridge their differences, literally. More power to Co-creation!

How did our 7–8 year old friends take to the story?

While all of them commented on the need for a quick apology from Mary's side, one child displayed co-creation in practice. He happily combined the names chosen by him and his partner to give a new name to the story, 'The Gold Computer Patch-up'. **The joy in his voice while sharing this was simple and potent, a joy laced with love and acceptance.**

The next thumbnail in this piece on co-creation exposes my view on theatrically approaching the topic of 'Friendship'. While I held the view of first exploring the rituals of a healthy friendship before having the children dive into a conflicting situation, another view was to arrive at the layers of a healthy relationship by first gaping at the unpleasant.

What had me keep my personal thought aside and take on the fellow view was **an urge to experience another perspective, submit myself to the flow** and embrace the unfamiliar so to say.

Did I do it graciously? I don't think so! I did make a discovery though. That you learn something new only when you embrace the unfamiliar.

References:

G, Karthika. The Grand Patch Up. Pratham Books, 2018.

***Mudita** is a pre-primary teacher at Shikshantar School, Gurgaon. She is passionate about story narration and likes exploring available content in the genre of children's literature.*

She believes in the use of theatre as a teaching aid in the classroom, which led her to pursue the course 'Theatre in Education and Social Transformation' from Shiv Nadar University. Currently, she is interested in helping children expand their capacities to express/speak, through their bodies.

A Summary by an Almost 10-year-old

February 11, 2021

Yes, I am turning 10 in 6 days and yes, I am a part of extraordinary online jam sessions on Saturday nights America time for me and Sunday mornings India time- with participants from all walks of life! So this is how it started...and is still going on!

Week One: My mom asked me to join an online 'jam session' just when I was about to go to bed. Strange! Normally she forces me to sleep early but that day she was extra nice and extra polite and asked me to check out '*Aagaaz*'. It was my first time and I was pretty confused and clueless. I joined the Zoom meeting and introduced myself to Akhila and the others -they were all very welcoming. I was yawning initially as it was past 11 pm, Arizona time; however, I felt a positive vibe in all this! Then, I was wide awake! That night, the first game we played was 'Fortunately-Unfortunately in 2020'. It took a while but I got the hang of it very fast! This was fun. We did dialogues, gestures, dance etc. Everyone welcomed me with open arms and helped me adjust to this concept. I loved that we ended the class with music and dance like no one was watching! Now, I was looking forward to the class next week.

Week Two: This week, I was more enthusiastic than sleepy! I proposed a game and named it "*Do*" which in Hindi means 'two'. The game was supposed to be played in pairs- hence the name '*Do*'. This game was to be played by two people-focusing on facial expressions where two people would talk using one word and emphasized it repeatedly to start a conversation and continue the conversation with the same word. It was all about voice modulation and facial expressions. It felt great to introduce YOUR GAME to the others. Now I was getting used to interacting with familiar faces and voices. I now understood completely how these jam sessions worked. I was really happy to contribute my bit that day.

Week Three: This was by far the most *fun jam of all*. We took a lemon and massaged it on our bodies then dipped it in paint. We rolled the lemon on a piece of paper and it made a very messy picture. Next, we took that picture and made gestures and observations about it! Everyone had a different and unique story to tell.

LEMON MASSAGE

Week Four: This week, we thought of a title for a book and we asked other people to give the first line of the beginning, middle and end. Next, we asked people to act out what the story was all about. Then, we did an activity called the Human Library. In this game, we asked people questions and learnt as much as we could about their book.

I am enjoying these sessions and let's see how it works out in future- Thank you Team Aagaaz for these interactive fun-filled online sessions-especially in these tough times-where almost 10 years olds like me are looking for *that bond and re- connection...once more.*

Amaira who just celebrated her first double-digit birthday — is a student of Grade 4-currently living in Phoenix, Arizona. She is open to new ideas and likes to connect with people from different walks of life to understand their POV regarding current affairs. She is passionate about climate change and has also organized a successful campaign in her school for the protection of Sea Turtles (eventually saving more than 600 hatchlings). She is part of her school's 'Production Club' and loves to paint, experiment and explore unchartered territories. She is currently fascinated by Theatre at School and Aagaaz, public speaking forums and trekking in the desert.

Illustrations by Devika

Miles apart…Yet, connected for a cause. It's just the beginning- Aagaaz!

What started a casual conversation, years ago, has become a very integral part of family now. Let me rewind a few years back-

Location: Dehradun. Event: Workshop for Senior Doctors on Leadership and Teamwork.

As an HR Coordinator, I got an opportunity to work with Sanyukta, ho was spearheading this workshop and I got to know about Aagaaz. It stayed with me even after I left the Indian Sub-Continent. Somewhere at the back of my mind, I kept on thinking if I could have joined this exciting adventure in some role or the other-Gurgaon to Nizamuddin was doable for me but I felt like I had missed the bus after relocating to Chicago…Over the years, I kept on reading about the accomplishments of Aagaaz through Social media updates. Wonderful Initiatives!

And then the pandemic happened.

We had just moved to Arizona and suddenly, everyone and everything came to a standstill but Aagaaz kept its journey alive. Online JAMS with Akhila and Music/Theatre Sessions with Subhadra became Breakfast/ Primetime topics at our Family Dinner Table. My young daughter suddenly developed this deep interest in creating online games for her weekly JAMS— my husband and I were supposed to do Demos till a game was created and it finally came to life- to roll into action for the final workshop with Smrithi and Rochan. Pots, Pans and spoons were creating music. Saturday Late Nights in Phoenix desert land suddenly became more active with a theatrical/musical buzz in the house. It's been a great journey so far and Aagaaz is spreading its roots/footprint. There is no age gender location bar!

Over the years, Aagaaz has conducted workshops with kids/teens/adults of all strata of society in various formats and have a team of experts joining every month in various capacities. My family and friends are contributing in whatever way they can...join the bandwagon and get ready for this ride of a lifetime! The Pandemic has got us all together one more time and taught us the value of being there for one another holistically. Honoured to be a part of this noble and honest journey- for myself and for the others.

Tina has dabbled in a variety of jobs over the past two decades of her professional life. She started out as a physician in a government hospital in Delhi, and now works at an IT Company in Arizona. She is also an avid movie buff, and loves exploring different cuisines in the kitchen.

Illustrations by Jasmine