



Empowering Juveniles in Conflict with Law



An Expressive Arts Program on 'Freedom to Dream'

facilitated by

The Yuva Ekta Foundation

Rehabilitation is the core behind ‘Juvenile Law’. A lot has gone into creating a ‘child-friendly’ environment in all aspects related to the legal setup. The scrutiny under which the system has come post 2015, has urged an institutional reform that requires all stakeholders to come together and think about sustainable, long-term solutions.



The Yuva Ekta Foundation is a not-for-profit trust that has been working with the agenda of Youth Empowerment for well over 10 years now. Our experiences have allowed us to connect with vibrant, young minds and their insurmountable energy.

While students from privileged schools and communities enjoy opportunities and resources at their behest, we realise that **‘Juveniles in Conflict with Law’** fall under the category of **‘Youth At-Risk’**. It encompasses that section of the young dividend that hasn’t been able to find its way in their way in the ever growing economic disparity. As to what drives young children into a life of delinquency is a debatable issue, but once inside the Observation Home, you can begin to scratch the surface and dig deeper into issues of identity and self-respect.

The Foundation’s novelty in approach stems from the use of Expressive Arts to help engage young ones with self and society. In fact, this approach works best when you bring together young minds from different socio-economic backgrounds. Our program, **‘Threads of Humanity’** works with the intent of skill and talent sharing. Relating to one’s life by communicating through artistic expression can yield magical results.



“Bhaiya, yeh acting class hai?” (Is this an acting class?)

Although we’ve been working at the **‘Adharshila Observation Home for Boys’** for close to 9 years, each workshop is a new experience. Initial hesitation and inhibition is replaced with joy and enthusiasm. The journey of every workshop begins with “Ab Kya Karein?” (What do we do now?), as stiff bodies and minds try and engage with us for the first time. Many of them end up coming for our workshop because they think we’ll teach them how to act. Sure, it’s a part of the enterprise, but we always tell them on the first day what we’re in for.



The initial days are very quiet and intense as both, the participants and the facilitators try to explore the space they are a part of.

A lot of group based theatre and physical warm up is required to 'break the ice' between participants. These games and exercises allow participants to open up in emotinally as well.



Some basic rules have to be set to allow the space to become safe and expressive. It has to be enabling, free of all pre-conceived barriers and prejudices. It should be able to caress the participants and make them comfortable enough to share their inner most feelings and desires.

Freedom to Dream

Our workshops this time started with a rather sensitive theme. What does 'Freedom to Dream' mean to you? Given our current political scenario where spaces to express your views and opinions have been shrinking, the contours on which our dreams rest have to be cherished and realised. The historic judgement on Right to Privacy had not come out while our workshops were being held. We simply wanted to explore 'Freedom to Dream' on the occasion of our 70th Independence Day.



Once the initial hesitation is overcome, participants are eager to talk and express themselves. If the boys volunteer for activities and tasks, it is a sign that the workshops are headed in the right direction,

It becomes very to talk about freedom in a space that inverts the entire concept of liberty by curtailing ones right to live a normal life. But it doesn't stop us from taking the issue to the children. While it is true that most of our participants consider getting released from 'Adharshila' as their dream, but we urge them to go beyond that.

Dreams are what make us innocent. Dreams are our light. The workshop module is designed to aid participants in connecting with their light. Through a series of activities and exercises, we open them up to innumerable possibilities that can be difficult to imagine in the confines of the Home.

Dreams are simple and unique. The longing to meet your parents or completing your education, the dreams these boys inhabit come from a space of longing and desperation.

If not through words, the boys start expressing themselves through other means like dance, drawing and even writing, in some cases.



Through our discussion and interactions with the boys over the last few years, we have found that **socio-economic position** becomes the biggest hindrance in realising one's dream. This translates into more complex realities as most of them drop out from schools to support their family who isn't able to support them because of similar pressures. Getting caught in a cycle of crime and lacking any institutional support is a normalcy most of our participants deal with on an everyday basis.

It is very difficult to keep your dream alive in such circumstances.



It is only a matter of time before the boys start working together for scenes and tableaux that represent their lives and struggles. Once a scene has been presented by the boys, we ask them questions on their role play and begin to develop the play. It also gives us an opportunity to delve into issues that the boys face.

“Didi, wahan judge bhi honge?” (Will the magistrates be there?)

Somewhere in the middle of our workshops, we told the boys about our **session at the Delhi Judicial Academy**, where we intend to take the said performance. It almost adds an extra layer of incentive for the boys. The excitement level crosses the rooftop and they very politely ask, ‘Kya woh judge log humari baat sunenge?’ (Will the judges listen to what we have to say?’).



Such moments that you find between the hardcore exercises make your workshop experience more meaningful. By this time, participants have also opened up and become more receptive to us and each other

The opportunity to hold someone’s hand, look them in the eye and tell them their story is something that our participants cherish. We become a medium of providing that chance by exposing them to varying tools of creative expression.

Around the Independence Day, we decided to introduce more master practitioners into the frame. The journey of our participants from **“Ab Hum Kya Karein”** (What do we do now?) to **“Hum bhi dance karenge”** (We will dance as well) is what tells us about the efficacy of our workshop experience. From hesitant movers, a lot of boys from were now willing and enthused to show off their dancing skills which are a delight to behold.

The Body Movement and Dance workshop by our guest facilitator Ms. Ankita Dasgupta was enjoyed thoroughly by our participants. It just induced a new leash of life into our process.





We also conducted an Art Therapy workshop in a similar vein. Bani Malhotra, who is currently pursuing her Masters in Art Therapy used techniques of painting and drawing to uncover a little something about the boys. Using Jungian Archetypes we were able to bridge a gap between the boys' perceived dreams and barriers.

Through these ventures and more we are able to mould a performance from the experiences and scenes shown by the participants, reflective of their life and journey.

The workshop used the concept of 'bridges' as symbols that represent the challenges which participants have to face. In this photograph you can notice a boy drawing the bridge and characters that surround it.

Capacity Building

We were invited by the **Delhi Judicial Academy** to take a session in a capacity building seminar for stakeholders of 'Juvenile Law' on August 25, 2017.



From Magistrates and members of the Juvenile Justice Board, the audience also included members of the Child Welfare Committee and organisations like Haq. This was the second time in time we've worked with the boys, that they had stepped out of the home for a performance

Our play, titled '*Khwaabon Ke Par*' (Wings of Dreams) presented exactly what the workshop was aimed at. Presented with choices, this story is about three boys who have to decide the difference between right and wrong. They have to choose between fulfilling their wishes by any means possible, or biding their time and rely on themselves to sail through difficult circumstances. What path would they choose?

A scene from the play 'Khwaabon Ke Par' which shows the dream of one boy becoming a teacher and one of the students emulating a role model that ultimately doesn't go down well.

The only difference in the play and the real lives of boys was the element of magic that helped them make the right choice.

The performance, created in a span of 10 days was received with applause and admiration. The moorings of the theatre we practice, helps us keep our performance extra-ordinarily basic. From the time when the boys were shy of moving their bodies, they rely only on themselves and themselves only to carry the performance through. No props and no stage; just their lives and emotions folded together with a question that emerges from their inner turmoil.



Another still from our play in which one of the boys talks about what he went through after he accepted the truth that had haunted him.



Much the like last time we were invited in May, this play was followed by an

interactive session between the participants and members of the audience. Earlier, we made this possible through Playback Theatre, where the stories of the boys shown in the play, corresponded with stories from the audience that our team of actors performed for everyone. The idea was to help find a common ground for everyone to connect with the next time they come face to face.

This time we drew ideological inspiration from **'Theatre of the oppressed'** by collapsing the line between audience and the performers. An art-activity was created in a way that each group participating in the exercise had at least one of the stakeholders present in the room. What better way to lay down our issues and discuss them up front?



We asked each one of them to draw their dreams on a large paper. All dreams in one. It gave each of them a chance to connect with their inner innocent being and present their light, their core to one another. It is very important for all individuals involved to understand each other's perspectives and realities. One can only hope that such collaborations can go a long way in creating an empathetic environment.

Each group came up with their own styles of putting their ideas forward. The important point here was the demolition of hierarchies. Each dream was special and equal. While some managed to fulfil what they had drawn, many spoke about hurdles they were not able to cross. You could now see the cracks in the wall.

Looking Ahead

Our efforts have always left us in need of going back again. Each time we uncover a layer, we end up leaving ourselves exposed to issues that need to be touched next. Constraints of resources and the limited amount of time spent by the boys inside the home, means that our workshops can only do so much in the context of reformation.

We have seen our process reap some success stories and rewards, which only becomes an incentive for us to keep going back to Adharshila. What we are looking for now is to connect with like-minded individuals and organisations to help sustain this program.

In this edition of our Expressive Arts Program at Adharshila we worked towards a performance. But our ends are not why we undertake this process. It is for the beauty of the process itself. We ask the boys to present their lives to us and we present our lives to them. We realise the value of self-respect that all individuals strive for. Each time we come out of Adharshila, we end up wondering what more we could do in order to enhance the potential of these young ones.



*It is time for us to work collectively and help these young ones face the challenges in everyday life.
We could become that little piece of magic which the boys hoped they had.*