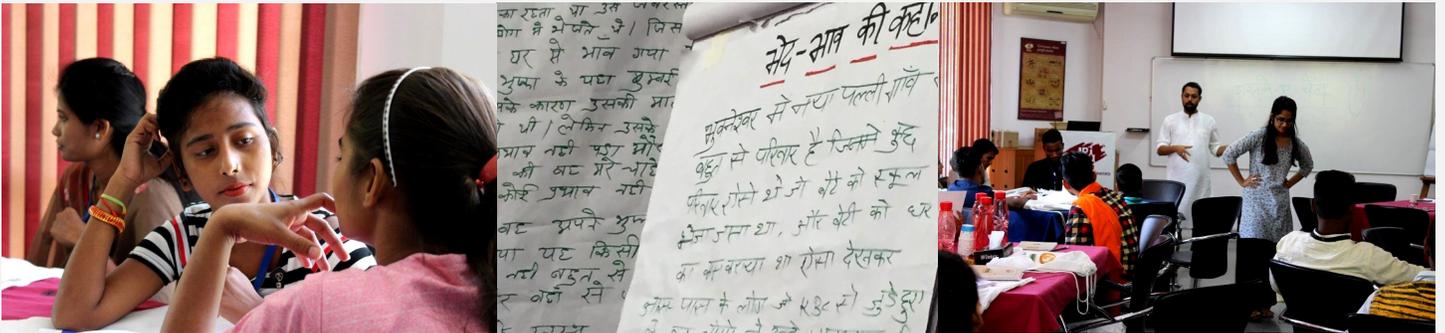


Dastan-e -Change!

A brief module on how to conduct a storytelling workshop for youth

~ by Nilanjana Bhattacharjee



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~ by *Nilanjana Bhattacharjee*

It was an exciting, reflective and stimulating opportunity to have facilitated the morning session along with Praatibh on using poetry for storytelling and advocacy, as a part of Antargoonj. Keeping in mind the focus of this year's National meet; deep reflections on the changed self and learning advocacy through alternative mediums, the session was meant to 'unbox' internal struggles of the self which impact the youth's politics.

The process of designing the workshop made me first question what my Dastan-e-change was, what were the stories that influence me, which were the stories I choose to tell and which ones remained silent within and why? Whose stories do we listen to and which ones do we ignore? Who are the storytellers of our country and are those stories representative? Do the fairy tales of heroes, villains and plot twists not resemble the lives we lead today?

This process led me to decide that the ultimate learning of the workshop should encourage the youth to understand how there is a "societal story" which is governed by certain dominant voices. These dominant voices and their stories of power dictate societal norms, practices and beliefs and resist subversion by the stories of the minority. I wanted the participants of this workshop to realise that unless and until the youth realised the power of stories, they would never create new stories to question the dominant ones. In a way, it was also going to reinstate and remind me of the same and so it did...

Praatibh and I began the session with an ice breaking memory game where all participants broke into pairs and were asked to exchange any kind of mundane or significant memory with each other. Each individual had to then share their partner's story briefly, and the idea was to get to know each other and also realise how stories are interpreted differently depending on the listener's social conditioning, biases, etc.

I noticed that despite the specific instruction of sharing stories, when participants recited their partner's memory introduction, it ended up being their names, where they came from and what they wanted to become in the future. While it broke the ice, the purpose of the activity, which was story oriented, was incomplete. I realised that the concept of 'stories' beyond childhood fairy tales and film plots was not something that the youth fully comprehended. While they all had multiple experiences to share, to consider them as stories embedded with deeper social meanings was not an easily understood concept.

The next two sessions covered the question of why stories are important (by me) and how are stories created (by Praatibh). We discussed how the stories that children grow up with have a lot to do with the times they were written in, the order of things and social customs and deciphered with examples such as the "Prince saving the Princess" or the "King destroying a village for the lack of taxes" as stories of how human communities used to and still function. The youth discussed and understood how power and love are the basis of most stories, and those conceptual relationships exist in our daily lives. We explained how one story can represent multiple stories of different people experiencing the same thing, and how contextual information can be added to real stories to make them powerful mediums of advocacy.

The youth then used stories they wrote as news reports in the previous session and reworked them to bring in contextual, emotional and narrative nuances. The usage of stories from the places the youth belonged to helped them see their settlements in a new light, they were able to narrate them in a way that was more relatable to people who came from different corners of India. What I noticed was that the use of emotive narrations was sincerely tried as an attempt. Some of the youth became so emotionally invested that they went another mile and wrote a few lines of their own poetry, narrating the realities of their communities. Violence against women was a common topic and I noticed that the ability to use certain words like “rape”, which are looked at as a matter of shame for the women in these communities emerged from the narrations. We used these instances to explain the need to break taboo by using words to depict reality as it is, that misguided shame on part of the victims was an enabler of hiding criminals.

The entire process was a process of unlearning for the youth and me. Some ideas, realities and logic which are common and natural to me were not natural at all to the youth and vice versa. It was a session where so many stories came together without many of us realising they were stories at all, and we all became storytellers for an afternoon.

While the hope was to turn these young participants into storytellers, I think they turned me into a better one by making me realise that stories take time to accept. But the youth is marching towards it and so will their advocacy.

S.No	Session	Facilitators	Material Required	Time
1	Activity - Memory game, describe your partner creatively	Nilanjana and Praatibh	Note pad - pen	10:00 to 10:30
2	<i>Kahani kaise banti hai?</i>	Praatibh	Projector	10:30 to 11:00
3	Why stories are important	Nilanjana		11:00 to 11:30
	Tea Break			11:30 to 12:00
4	<i>Meri kahani</i> – time for creative thinking	Nilanjana and Praatibh	Projector and flip charts	12:00 to 12:45
5	<i>Meri zubani</i> - time for sharing your thoughts	Nilanjana and Praatibh		12:45 to Lunch time

