



THE EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE FOUNDATION'S

INITIATIVE

BAL NATYA UTSAV

(A PROCESS REPORT)

BY

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SUPPORTED BY

CCVC, UNICEF, NGOS AND PRTHVI
THEATRE



Theatre should take itself seriously as a factory of thought, a prompter of conscience, an elucidator of social conduct, an armory against despair and dullness and a temple to the ascent of man.

---George Bernard Shaw

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FOREWORD

As a journalist and a creative writer I have written about various issues including the social ones. But when I encountered ETF's novel method of tackling social issues, during the course of my work, it really intrigued me immensely. So besides reporting about it I also started interacting with its founder member Manjul Bhardwaj, to know more about it. During this interaction, I got highly impressed by his dedication and hard work that was driven by a passion! I was in for a pleasant surprise when I discovered that the passion was entirely fuelled by pure conviction, which motivated me to take up the documentation of the process of Bal Natya Utsav.

Initially it did not excite me enough and seemed pale compared to both, the fictitious reel life characters of my tales and even the real life characters of my news stories. But this was only till I met the little street actors! Initially when they shared their experiences of theatre with me in an astonishingly articulate manner, I felt it was the result of efficient coaching as many of them already had a sufficient exposure to media. But as my interaction, with about 50 children belonging to seven different organizations, grew beyond the initial levels, I sensed their true confidence and understanding levels. My 8 years of teaching experience prior to my being a writer helped me to listen to what they were saying instead of mere hearing, and to feel instead of mere seeing and ultimately I was convinced of their true transformation.

What was more amazing was the fact that these children who belong to the weaker socio-economic section of the society were much more aware of their problems and the possible solutions which saw a unique kind of confidence in them, compared to even the children belonging to the well heeled section of the society.

Personally, I strongly feel that 'theatre of relevance' should not be limited only to solve the burning social issues concerning the vulnerable children supported by several NGOs but it should be introduced in all schools for all age groups for children to solve their emotional, physical, relationship-based, psychological and peer-pressure problems to bring about the subtle social changes. Most of these schools use theatre as a medium of entertainment to showcase the children's histrionic abilities limited only to the Annual Day Programs. 'Theatre of relevance' if applied on a regular basis can bring about amazing cathartic experiences to children helping them to be bolder and less fearful. The same holds true for the adults. ETF has already moved in that direction through its workshops on 'attitudinal changes through theatre', proving that theatre offers an immense potential to the society as a whole.

What is also commendable is the fact that ETF, does not only strive to bring about the social changes through theatre but also try to keep the factors, disturbing the change, at bay by getting involved at the grass root level through intervention and provision of necessary help.

Last but not the least, it has been a very rewarding experience working with ETF.

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AIM, OBJECTIVES AND EVOLUTION OF BAL NATYA UTSAV

AIM: Bal Natya Utsav is the manifestation of the philosophy of ‘theatre of relevance’ practiced by Experimental Theatre Foundation [ETF], which aims to bring about the social changes through theatre. It aims to provide a platform to as many children as possible’.

Aiming to reach maximum number of children in an organized manner, ETF launched the first Bal Natya Utsav [BNU] in the year 1999. The vulnerable little actors within the age group of 6 to 16, belonging to different NGOS perform several plays in the 2-day festival that are not removed from their existence. The stories are in fact straight lifted from their lives, scripted and sometimes even directed by the children, themselves, which provides them a platform for a collective expression. The process helps the children to fight their own circumstances by becoming aware of the problems in different situations and thereby enhancing their confidence and self-esteem .The Bal Natya Utsav promotes the performance of both, the stage & street plays, made possible through the networking among various NGOS and other related agencies.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To spread awareness in the society about the right of the children to participate and encourage the children to do so.
2. To provide a stand to children for a ‘ collective’ expression to let them feel the power of strength.
3. To equip NGOS with the theatrical skills to enable them to use theatre as a strategy for social change.
4. To sensitize the masses about the various issues affecting children in difficult situations by creating awareness.
5. To promote networking among NGOs and other concerned agents.

EVOLUTION OF BNU: In the year 1994, a play called ‘ **Mera Bachpan** ‘ brought about a revolutionary reform in a certain segment of the society in Mumbai. The play, conceived by Manjul Bhardwaj of ETF dealt with the issue of child laborers, which had a powerful impact on children as well as their parents. The staging of play all over the country witnessed about 747 children quitting their work to join school. ETF not only channelised the sensitivity of parents towards the children by encouraging them to send their children to school through awareness but also of the employers who discouraged the children below 18 from working. ETF has successfully managed to keep the socio-economic factors affecting the education of children at bay by intervention & counseling the adults.

Thus the path breaking intervention of theatre into child laborers lives brought about a revolutionary social change that led ETF to share its experience with other NGOs to motivate them to walk on the trodden path.

Many NGOS who have already been carrying out the outstanding welfare activities for vulnerable children extended their support whole-heartedly. Realizing the impact of theatre on children they not only welcomed it but also made a valuable contribution from their side without which the BNU would not be able to achieve its objectives.

PREPARATION FOR BNU

ETF, the organizer of BNU very diligently undertakes the preparation work required for BNU, which involves:

- ❖ **Initiating the dialogues** with the participating organizations consisting of the NGOs / Schools/ Institutions working for the holistic development of children.
- ❖ **Sharing of ideas:** New ideas by the organizations are welcomed and considered collectively.
- ❖ **Forming the children- groups** required for the performance out of those boys and girls who are associated with the organization on a regular basis, is undertaken. These children belong to the age group of 6 to 16.
- ❖ **Helping the children** to evolve the issues and develop the scripts. The participating groups are required to prepare the scripts of 30 to 40 minutes duration. The script lasting for 20 to 30 minutes are also considered. The scripts should be ready one and a half month in advance.
- ❖ **Provision of Professional Assistance *on script***–writing and theatrical performance is also provided by ETF, if necessary.
- ❖ **Screening of final plays** is undertaken to assure the quality.
- ❖ **Arrangement for auditoriums** required for staging the performance is also undertaken by ETF.

BNU REPORT

The first Bal Natya Utsav held at Karnataka Sangh- Matunga, Mumbai on the 13th and 14th July 1999 was a culmination of the joint efforts put in by the 5 non-profit organizations namely ETF, Meljol, Prerna, Sathi and Yuva. The Utsav witnessed the performance of seven plays in Hindi, focusing on the issues affecting and involving the children.

Issues like the harmful effect of Gutka on children, shelter, education and equal rights to them, were thrown light on. Mr. Mahavir Jain, Senior faculty member of V.V. Giri National Labour institute, NOIDA was the chief guest. The festival promoted a tremendous growth for the children at a personal level. According to Meljol, “ the experience enhanced the children’s confidence levels and speech. Prerna too reported a marked rise in the self-esteem and patience-levels, in the children.

About 100 children performed in 7 plays, who were appreciated and applauded by a huge audience running into 1000 people. The following plays were staged by different organizations:

- 1]Vidhya Dadati-Vinayam by ETF
- 2]Hamara Sach- by Meljol
- 3]Bekasur- by Saathi
- 4]Ek Khoj Apni Zindagi- by Yuva
- 5]Zimmeddar Kaun- by Prerna
- 6]Gutka - by Meljol
- 7]Mera Bachpan- by ETF

The second Bal Natya Utsav held at Prithvi Theatre and Karnataka Sangh Hall at, Mumbai from 12 January to 14th January saw about 200 children participants and two more NGOS –Vatsalya and Door Step School, which voluntarily extended their support. The 7 plays staged gave the message to the children that the only way to achieve freedom from a bondage is to educate oneself. The heart-warming news for the organizer and all the participating NGOs was the fact that about 2000 people witnessed the plays proving that the means of theatre was getting more popular drawing bigger crowds and thereby spreading awareness.

The process was not one-sided transmitting from the stage to the audience but it was also working vice-versa as stated by many children participants who showed markedly improvement in enthusiasm and confidence after hearing the applause. The process was also taking place at only the performer’s level as testified by Madan Sable, a child participant from ETF. Madan found a purpose to his life after being introduced to Bal Natya Utsav who decided to perform 4 to 5 plays every month besides his studies to educate other children and to spread awareness.

The following plays were performed:

- 1] Vidya Dadati Vinayam --by ETF---- at-----Prithvi theatre
- 2] Mumbai Meri Jaan ----by Vatsalya --- at ---Karnataka Sangh
- 3] Shiva Ki Maut ----by Yuva ----at—Karnataka Sangh
- 4) Anari ---- by Prerana ----- at- Karnataka Sangh
- 5] Pratigya ---by Door Step School –at—Karnataka Sangh
- 6] Mera Bachpan ---by ETF --at Karnataka Sangh
- 7) Padai se Hua Chamatkar—by YUVA -- at Karnataka Sangh

The third BNU that was held on January 18 to 20th at Prithvi theatre in Mumbai that witnessed the children directing and writing plays besides acting in them. The issues tackled were the sexual abuse of a child by the family members, the plight of runaway children, deforestation and over crowding in the cities that indirectly affect the children's lives. The eight plays performed all over Mumbai in different venues drew a lot of attention from the media and general public.

With the underlying theme being Children Rights, the plays dealt with various aspects and reflected some of the most pressing issues faced not only by the children but also by the society in general. The plays were performed in such prominent venues as the Prithvi Theatre, Karnataka Sangha and Bal Bhavan. Eight organizations took part in the entire event. They are Experimental Theatre Foundation (ETF), Shivai Vidya Mandir, Hamara Club, The Vatsalya Foundation, PSM Department KEM, Prerna, Door Step School and Pragati Bal Mandal (YUVA).

The fact that 300 children participated in 9 plays witnessed by about 3000 people provided the impetus needed to reach BNU through theatre to new heights. The following plays were performed at different venues:

1. B-7- -- Prithvi Theatre - Experimental Theatre Foundation
2. Hakk Balkancha --- Karnatak Sangha - Shivai Vidya Mandir.
3. Hanari Zindagi --- Karnatak Sangha - Hamara Club.
4. Hello Zindagi --- Prithvi Theatre -- The Vatsalya Foundation.
5. Nardachi Shikavan - Bal Bhavan -- PSM, KEM
6. Masum Bache -- Bal Bhavan --- Prerana
7. Nai Umang -- Bal Bhavan ---- Door Step School
8. Kareng Hum Dhamal - Bal Bhavan -- Yuva.
9. Mera Bachpan ----- Karnatak Sangh - ETF

Synopsis of the plays

❖ **B 7**

The play that has been performed internationally several times, addresses the issue of ruthless globalization affecting the life of a common man that indirectly affects a child's life, too. It is the story of seven birds whose livelihood is threatened and so they come together to tackle the issue. The play is a delightful display of talent, vision and a sense of mission.

❖ **Hak Balkancha**

The simplicity of the play is dazzling. The play is about the basic rights of children. It succeeds in driving home some of the issues easily overlooked and complacently accepted by the society. The issues dealt with are early marriage, lack of playin space, the encroachment of concrete jungles over the nature, etc..

❖ **Hamari Zindagi**

The thrills and pitfalls of life on the streets are captured brilliantly in a capsule. And what more! The street children themselves perform it.

❖ **Hello Zindagi**

And does life respond? The play is centered on the lives of children. But it raises the universal issues of utmost importance. Written and directed by Alam Mirza, one of the early BNU participants, the play is a visual pleasure with colorful costumes and light effects.

❖ **Naradachi Shikkavan**

Nutrition and health issues affecting the children are dealt with quite an élan.

❖ **Masoom Bachhe**

The play treats the sensitive issue of sexual abuse of children - especially girls - in a very mature manner.

❖ **NAI UMANG**

One more play to strike at the roots of issues. Child labour and lack of education are condemned in this play. Why do they always go together?

❖ **Karange Hum Damal**

It is a fun play with a challenge wherein the children unite to address the issues. It is a very appropriate play to highlight the issue of children's right to participation.

❖ **Mera Bhachpan**

A played that has been staged innumerable times all over the country still moves the viewer. The play addresses the issue of child labour in particular.

IMPACT OF BNU ON:

CHILDREN: In order to study the impact of theatre through the Bal Natya Utsav on children a meaningful interaction with about 50 children belonging to 7 different voluntary organizations was carried out. After having the detailed talks with many children belonging to the age group of 6 to 16 and observing them vis-à-vis their behavior and mannerism at a very close angle, one got a clear insight into the changing attitudes and lives of these children brought about by the influence of theatre.

Most of these children belong to a poor socio-economic section of the society who have run away from home or unfavorable circumstances, as they could not bear to be victimized by the society, which denied them a dignified living. These children have sought shelter in various organizations. Those who live with the families have ignorant families who are either not aware of their duties as parents or have succumbed to the pressures of survival, robbing their children of the basic rights and opportunities, due to them. Considering their background it was more astonishing to discover that today all the children seem to challenge their doomed fate with the new found knowledge and confidence achieved by the exposure through theatre.

Bal Natya Utsav has brought about a sea change in the understanding, capabilities and attitudes of the under privileged children by providing them a platform for expression through its Abhivyakti Manch which allows the children to express uninhibitedly on a daily basis. Every day at school the children get to gather to dance, sing, mime and even script. The sessions are so popular that no child wants to miss these sessions. Nitesh says, "I would do anything to attend the drama classes, even quarrel with my mother if the need be." The sessions also teach the children to emote freely. This method applied and propagated by ETF has been widely appreciated as besides entertaining the children and giving them a break from their daily struggle of existence, it educates them by constantly talking and acting about the issues affecting their lives.

Theatre has promoted a tremendous personal growth in the little performers by helping them to build their confidence, increase their awareness levels regarding their rights as well as the environment around them.

In certain cases as cited below, there has also been an improvement in their academic performance through theatre that has led to memory growth vis-à-vis dialogue memorizing. In certain cases an awareness of importance of correct sentence construction needed for the dialogues has led some children to pay more attention to Languages, leading to academic improvement. The following case studies would throw more light on the transformation process. It has been a fruitful task trying to get new insights from the children as most of the 50 children, on interaction kept on revealing the repeated facts. The ones that gave a new insight are cited below:

CASE STUDY

Alam Mirza a 9th std. Student has come a long way from his days of rag picking and loneliness who after running away from his home in Calcutta sought shelter in Mumbai. Of course his life changed after he sought shelter in Vatsalaya, a shelter home in Mumbai, which looked after his education and general welfare, but the radical change happened in his life after he was introduced to theater. “ I not only learnt to express myself but it also provoked me to think beyond the facts, question issues and introspect. Gradually my confidence level led me to script and direct a play all by myself that earned me a lot of applause. I am very happy today and I have a direction in life and that is to grow through theatre.” The professional help provided at different stages while directing, scripting and acting a play has taught him many valuable lessons about stage- performance.

Seema Gupta of Ekta Nagar has transformed from a timid and shy girl into a confident talker after being introduced to theatre. “ Before I could not utter a word in front of a crowd but now I have become so confident that I can talk about anything in front of even a very big crowd.”

Ajay Singh, a 5th std. Student belonging to Vatsalya Foundation, on the other hand developed the awareness regarding the importance of correct grammatical construction of a sentence in a language through the dialogue delivery. “ As I was asked to repeat the dialogues due to wrong sentence formation I became more conscious and started applying it to the languages taught to me in school which helped me to get better grades in those subjects”

Chandan who has participated in many plays says, “ I never knew being a child was so much fun before this.”

Sandip Kharwa, a slum child belonging to the Door Step School is 7 years old who had absolutely no inkling about the existence of drama and acting till he was asked to perform for BNU. ‘ I enjoyed myself thoroughly playing an important role of a fox where I learnt a lot about the animals, jungle and the transformation of man into devil and its effects’. The play that talks about the evolution of man and the resultant materialization and over crowding of the city killing the humane spirit has given Sandeep an insight into issues that would not have been possible through books and visuals only as he would be a passive taker and the impact would have had its limitations compared to the exposure through theatre where his direct involvement in the issues by thinking and enacting them has had a different impact altogether.

Sudha Mahikar feels that if not for theatre she would have never known about the sexual abuse as her parents and friends never talked about it. “ Seeing children dramatizing in the language I understand, the play on sexual abuse kept me absorbed in it with a lot of interest till the end after which the facts dawned on me and I understood the implications very clearly.”

Bunty Sheikh, a std. 5 student belonging to Door Step School, says, “ When I ran away from Calcutta to get out of the clutches of my mentally instable father I thought I will earn a living somehow and survive. After getting the shelter in Mumbai and being exposed today to so many issues through theatre I feel amazed! Today I know that it is my birthright to get education and a decent living, which I would have never been aware of! Also I feel that if I am determined many institutions will help me in realizing my goals. So I don’t feel lonely.”

Sheikh Yakub of Vatsalya Foundation experiences an ultimate high while performing on the stage and being applauded that boosts his confidence, improves the self-esteem and encourages him to reach his potential. “I feel like a king when I am on the stage and feel that the whole world is focusing on me. I enjoy every moment of it and feel that one day even I can earn the public adulation like Sachin Tendulkar and Hrithik Roshan.”

Jyoti Pendse feels that learning through drama is the most interesting way, which gets etched in the memory. “ I used to read and listen to a lot of jungle stories that fascinate me. But I always wondered how it actually would be, till I performed in a play that created the jungle ambience and I played a bird.”

Sohan of Ekta Nagar says, “ I could never concentrate in the class when I was being sermonized and so could never learn about different concepts and my teachers felt I was a dud. But when I got involved with theatre I started understanding everything as it was all so interesting, and involving.”

One of the very interesting cases is of **Krishna Patel of Vatsalya Foundation**, who enjoyed working in a factory quietly as he had not known any other world before. After being exposed to education and drama he showed a lot of resentment initially as he thought it was trying to be too smart that was not necessary. But gradually he started getting drawn to it and got involved. The way he started expressing on the stage amazed even himself.. He felt more amazed when he found out that he was actually enjoying it and feeling lighter after it. “ Before I used to be quiet but could not sleep peacefully and it was as if there was a stone placed on my chest. But after getting involved in the theatre I discovered a new me and I started sleeping peacefully.”

PARENTS: Thus BNU has offered a platform to the vulnerable children who would not have got such an opportunity otherwise. The impact is not only limited to the children but it has also affected their **parents**. The attitudes of many parents, who saw theatre as a mere medium of entertainment for the rich, changed their opinions after witnessing the growth in their children. The applause and the recognition earned by their children gave them a sense of belonging to the society. The issues focused on, in the plays helped them to see things in a new light and understand the needs of their children. The new awareness and confidence levels that the theatre has inspired in the families besides providing entertainment is very unique and novel

This medium is also the most effective one as it educates all and drives home the important points in a very simple but impact-packed manner through dramatization. The audience is able to relate to the issues instantly and carry with them the ever-lasting impressions forcing them to think and introspect. Thus the process of transformation that begins with the children trickles down to the society, convincing them to change and support change leading to a social revolution. Also the adult issues like alcoholism, violence etc. affecting the children's lives that are dealt with, in the plays are also big eye-openers for the adults that motivates them to reform themselves

CASE STUDY

Mrs. Patel a workingwoman in Mumbai prefers to keep his son Krishna Patel, 8, in the hostel as he has a tremendous scope to grow. "If he just attends the school then he will miss out on the activities like art, craft and especially dramatics that will do wonders to his personality."

Asha Gupta, who once was against her daughter's participation in the theatrical activities due to conservative attitudes today is a proud mother of the daughter who has traveled across the seven seas for performing, a fact that she could never even dare to dream of, considering her impoverished state.

The impact of theatre in the children's life is so remarkable that it has a reversed cardinal principal- parents now wish to be like their children. **Mangal Chauhan** of Gautam Nagar says, "I wish to be more confident and strong like my children."

Ratibai is very confident when she says, "only books and studies would not have brought the change in my son. I feel so happy when I see him beaming with confidence and clarity."

Mohan Patil says, "Before I used to think that theatre was a waste of time and so I used to tell my son to concentrate more on studies. But after watching him develop his personality, today theatre is on his priority list and even I have realized that what stage can do to one's confidence, academics can't."

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

BNU has been instrumental in sensitizing the masses and creating the child friendly social atmosphere to deal with children issues with child centered approach.

In the year 1994 a play called ‘ Mera Bachpan ‘ brought about a revolutionary reform in a certain segment of the society in Mumbai. The play, conceived by Manjul Bhardwaj of ETF dealt with the issue of child laborers, which had a powerful impact on the children as well as their parents. The staging of play all over the country witnessed about 400 children quitting their work to join school. ETF not only channelised the sensitivity of parents towards the children by encouraging them to send their children to school through awareness but also of the employers who discouraged the children below 18 from working. ETF has successfully managed to keep the socio-economic factors affecting the education of children at bay by intervention & counseling the adults.

Pramod Gupta, 8 year old boy who started working in a factory manufacturing pins at the age of 6 for a daily pittance of Rs. 25 slogged for 12 hours everyday till his mother witnessed the play staged in her colony which moved her to such an extent that she decided then and there to enroll Pramod in school. He also joined The Abhivyakti Manch with the help of ETF.

Naresh Chauhan of Gautam Nagar, who has staged 700 shows of ‘Mera Bachpan’ has become so courageous that, “ I always speak out whenever there is injustice”. Some of the elder children have also got so passionately involved in the issue driven by conviction that they keep on thinking of the ways to propagate it.”

Ranjit Wakde studying in Std 5 gets emotional while he says, “ As a journalist I would like you to spread the message that child labor is criminal and every child should be given an opportunity to study.”

Sheetal Rathod of Ekta Nagar also says, “ I tell all my friends and teachers to do something for those unfortunate children who have not been as lucky and are slogging it out,”

Thus the change brought about by staging of a play had a powerful impact on the children as well as parents that filtered down to the society gradually but surely. The medium of drama helped in conveying the message to all concerned very effectively which could not have been possible through any other medium in such a short time. The language and the ways understood by the masses bring about a conviction so strong that the transformation that takes place is from within and so for ever leading to a chain reaction bringing in many more social reforms.

ETF has successfully managed to channelise the sensitivity of the adults towards the children through various plays where even the serious issues like impact of globalization on the children are tackled in the simplest possible manner.

IMPACT ON NGOS: In order to have an objective perception to BNU, the following eminent personalities belonging to different organizations, who have been instrumental in taking BNU to its present status, were asked to express their views and share their observations. All of them have been involved in the welfare activities for the children in different capacities. All of them agree to a common fact that ETF is doing a unique job of mingling social activism with the theatre.

Mr. **Saji Thomas**, **Coordinator, CCVC** [Coordination Committee for the Vulnerable Children] has played a very important role in materialization of BNU. He says, “ **The U.N. convention of 1989 recognizes children’s right to participation. We have a long way to go in realizing it in actual terms.** We are striving to create awareness and promote the process through our various programs and BNU is one of the programs that would create an actual platform for demonstrating the practical implications of the CCVC process on Children's right to participation and therefore is of crucial significance to the process. According to him, theatre is a very powerful medium to achieve this end as it provides an effective platform to children to communicate to the society as advocates of their own rights. He says, “The BNU also has had a visibly positive impact on the member organizations. The manifold use of theatre as a tool for personal empowerment, social sensitization and social empowerment is being appreciated more and more by the organizations associated with CCVC. Discussions at the CCVC meetings have considered having theatrical activities on a regular basis.

10] CCVC- Co-ordination Committee for the Vulnerable Children is a forum that offers its net working, advocacy and coordinating services **for the realization of child rights.** It is playing a very important role in improving the quality of life for the vulnerable children. CCVC offers a forum to many NGOs involved in the welfare projects for children.. **It is also the CACL city Secretariat and works on the issue of child labor.. Presently it facilitates two processes at city level – on the issue of Girl Child and Children’s Right to Participation.** BNU has special relevance in the context of the process on Participation.

Mr. **Saji Thomas** the founder member of **CCVC** [Coordination Committee for the Vulnerable Children] has played a very important role in materialization of BNU. He says, “ The U.N. convention of 1989 recognized the children’s right to participation as a crucial one that is not yet recognized by many NGOS. We are striving to create awareness and promote the process through our various programs and BNU is one of the programs that would create an actual platform for demonstrating the practical implications of the CCVC process on Children's right to participation and therefore is of crucial significance to the process which was initiated much before the birth of BNU.”

According to him, theatre is a very powerful medium to achieve this end as it provides an effective platform to children to spread their message to the society by acting as advocates of their own rights. He says, “The BNU also has had a visibly positive impact on the member organizations. The manifold use of theatre as a tool for personal empowerment, social sensitization and social empowerment is being appreciated more and more by the organizations associated with CCVC. Discussions at the CCVC meetings have considered having theatrical activities on a regular basis. However not many NGOS have come forward to take part in BNU as they have other priorities in their list.”

Swati Mukhrji, the director of **Vatsalya Foundation** strongly feels that the personality of the children has developed tremendously through the theatre, as they are able to use a lot of their initiative.

Mr. Ravi Pednekar, from **YUVA**, a social activist working for the rights of street children, who has witnessed the growth in different children who participated in 3 consecutive BNU says, “Exposure to the theatre has helped these children to get rid of their inhibitions and turned them into capable extroverts. It has also offered them a good chance to interact with many other children at a very different level.”

According to **Mr. Viswas Dhumal** the, principal of **Shivai Vidya Mandir School**, “ the students realize their potential through such a participation where they get a chance to observe other better performers coming from the lower socio- economic section. As my students belong to the better strata of the society they realize being lucky and it boosts them to reach their potential through sheer hard work.” He feels that more schools should participate in BNU that could be held more than once a year, as it is a powerful tool for the growth of children’s personality.

Malati Pillai – the program officer for child rights and protection, working for **UNICEF**, Mumbai says, “ Theater is a very effective medium that provides a platform to the children to express and thereby encourage them to access their right to participation. The good thing about BNU is that it is open to vulnerable children. UNICEF is not just a funding agency or an NGO but it also gets involved in the children’s issues by extending its technical expertise.”

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Jyoti Wadekar , a senior executive working for **CRY** in the PWD department says, “ CRY has been involved with ETF right from its inception stage in all capacities including the financial and one thing is sure that, BNU has finally turned the concept of theatre of relevance into a reality that has sensitized the masses about the children’s issues to bring about the social reforms by offering a common platform to the children to build their confidence .”

IMPACT ON THEATRE:

The implementation and success of BNU has proved that theatre is gradually being accepted as a medium of change by the society. It is emerging out of the cocoon of entertainment to be used as a medium of expression for a common man. It is made accessible to masses through their participation. Also a new breed of talented young people will emerge who, in future would make an important contribution to the medium as they are being exposed to the fine nuances of theatre in the form of script writing, direction and acting. The important observations made by the people in the field of theatre are as follow:

Feroz Ashraf, an award winner Urdu journalist, a columnist and a scriptwriter, is also the founder of Vikas Adhyan Kendra that motivates the 200 school dropouts from the slums to go back to school. He observes, “ this is the right age for conditioning and training the young minds and theatre is a very interesting medium through which this can be achieved.” However he feels that the whole movement through the theatre should reach more people. He strongly advocates the staging of ‘Ram leela’ by the children in order to reach the masses quickly and effectively. He also expresses the

regret of not having enough space in Mumbai to be able to have the 'Manch' in all the areas, which would help in gaining the momentum for the theatre movement.

Mr. Vishwanath Sachdev, the editor of Nav Bharat Times, a Hindi daily, says, "when I saw the play, 'pryavaran', I was quite impressed and it was a refreshing change to see the children performing with total conviction that was a refreshing change from the professional actors who in spite of trying hard seem to carry their baggage. I think BNU is the beginning of a process for change that would take some time as change is a slow process but it deserves a pat on the back for taking an initiative."

Ramesh Rajhans: The writer of a Hindi book on theatre, titled, 'Natya Prastuti Ek Parichay' and an IPTA [Indian People theatre's Association] member says, "BNU is doing a wonderful job for the neglected section of the society that will surely leave its mark and sow a seed for the social reforms.. I think Manjul is very honest in his search and he does things by conviction rather than following any particular ideology" According to him theatre without doubt an effective medium . Citing the example of Gandhiji he says, "even Gandhiji was inspired to speak the truth after watching a play on 'Raja Harishchandra', and it is the theatre activists like these who are the true pioneers and harbingers of the society that stand apart from the mainstream commercial theatre."

Asif Balsara: a stage and T.V. actor who is also associated with the British group THALIA that is working for the children welfare says, "It was a very satisfying experience working with the slum children during the making of the BNU plays, 'Mumbai meri jaan' and 'Hello Zindagi' where I had a chance to interact with the kids. Initially I noticed that owing to their backgrounds and suffering that they might have gone they were very listless and had no drive to do anything. But gradually after motivating them, they got very interested and especially after performing they felt totally driven as if they were energized on the stage." Asif conducts workshops for children through theatre where the children are de-conditioned and released from their nagging problems and strongly feels that theatre activists should work for such noble causes. But he feels that sadly there are very few of them involved in such causes and a big noise must be made about the happenings so others are motivated to join.

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Parmod Pathak, an actor conducting workshops for THALIA with Asif says, "as a matter of fact I learnt a thing or two from the children that is very important in life. The most important thing that I learnt from the street children is how to say 'no' with an assertive mind which is totally unconditioned". He also feels that theatre will further harness this mental energy of the children and turn it into a very productive energy for the society.

Vibha Rani, an IOCL [Indian Oil Corporation Ltd.] employee and a writer feels that BNU is doing a great service to the society by providing a platform to the vulnerable children and besides she says, "theatre virus should be infected into the society that will bring about the social change and media should help spread the awareness on a regular basis."

Dhannanjay Kumar, a T.V. serial writer for many serials has written a play, ‘Vidya Dandt –‘ for the BNU that was a big success. He says, “ It was a wonderful experience working with children as I love them. But the slum children were a pleasant surprise as they were hardly conditioned and so spoke their minds out” He feels that though one can’t expect theatre to bring about the changes over-night it definitely brings about an awareness that helps.

Mr. **Philip Padachira**, the founder director of **CAMERA** [Cadre of Media, Resources and Actions] that supports organizations and individuals involved in the people’s struggle says, “ I was amazed at the theatrical skills of the street children which sometimes was even better than the professionals. The whole experiment is very novel, encouraging and promising for the new generation.” He feels that a new language has been given to the children for expressing and understanding.

IMPACT ON MEDIA

Most of the regional and English dailies reported about BNU and other new experiments carried out by the ETF. Following are some **excerpts**:

-Drama takes wings with street children

-Nukkad Nataks- creating awareness on common man’s woes

Indian Express

-The din of cars hooting along the seaside at Charni road was drowned by chirpy voices and giggles of little children who thronged the Bal Bhavan last weekend.

-Foreign returned slum kids have dreams to fulfill.

Bombay Times

In the early hours of January 19, the Prithvi theatre in Juhu was packed to capacity. Eager audiences had come to watch Hello Zindagi a play scripted directed and performed by over 300 street children.

Westside Plus, The Times of India

Prithvi theatre wore a child like look last morning. The hall reverberated with coos, caws and quacks. Children dressed as pigeons, cuckoos, sparrows, eagles peacocks and ducks were part of a play that highlighted issues of environmental pollution and man's contribution to it.

Mid Day

-Kandivali children work to play in new labor acts

-Taking education to the final frontiers

Asian Age

With the performance of these plays, which had one or the other message for all strata of society, the audience could not help but carry some of the warm feeling evoked by the very special performances.

The Press Journal

Perhaps all of them would bring in a new dawn in the world of issue-based theatre.

The Theatre of revolt--

The Free Press Journal

THE INVOLVED GROUPS:

Experimental Theatre Foundation [ETF]

Manjul Bhardwaj and a team of social workers founded Experimental Theatre Foundation [ETF], a Non Government Organization [NGO] in the year 1992 with a view to use theatre as a medium of change. Realizing the tremendous potential of theatre in bringing about the change in the individuals, groups, organizations and society as a whole, various activities were initiated by the founder member Manjul, who himself has been associated with theatre since last 20 years. The founder member Manjul Bhardwaj observes, " Theatre is the most impact ful medium to bring about the inner transformation leading to a lasting social reform.

ETF undertakes all its activities based on the practice of **Theatre of Relevance** initiated by the theatre activist, **Manjul Bhardwaj**. Which states that a theatre:

1. That is relevant to the context of the society and owes its social responsibility, not to Art just for the Art sake.
2. Which caters to human needs and provide itself as a platform for expression.
3. Which explores itself as a medium of change/development.
4. That comes out from the ' limits of entertainment ' to a way of living.
5. Which enhances itself from 'Art for the Art sake' to social concern and, become part of lives of the masses.

ACTIVITIES-The various activities conducted by ETF consist of:

I] Conducting various workshops on:

- Attitudinal changes through theatre
- Theatre as a career
- Street theatre
- Personality development through theatre.
- Theatre as a medium of change.

II. Performing Street and stage plays based on Original Hindi as well as adapted scripts.

III. Conducting Creative- capacity- building, training programs for the weaker section of the society.

IV. Providing formal education to vulnerable children, **especially child laborers.**

V.Documentation of scripts and theatrical process.

VI. Using theatre as a strategy to eliminate child labour.

The several **NGOS** that have been a part of the transformation brought about through the BNU conducted by ETF that propagates the theatre of relevance are:

1] **Meljol**: a charitable organization fighting for the causes of children that promote various welfare programs in the municipal and private schools to create awareness so that a new generation believing in equal rights, opportunity and respect for all, is born.

2] **Prerna**-A voluntary organization working in the red light area of Mumbai with the prostitutes and their children aiming to give them a better future.

3] **Saathi**: A voluntary organization working for the young people living on the streets without any family support and protection.

4] **Vatsalya**: An NGO that provides shelter to the street children and works for their welfare.

5] **Yuva**: A voluntary organization working on issues facing the urban poor focusing on their housing and livelihood problems. It also works with street children on their health, education, and shelter and offers crisis intervention as and when needed.

6] **Shivai Vidya Mandir**- A private school for normal children that is located in Bhandup is the only institution that is not working for the street children and that participated in the BNU to give its students a wider exposure.

7] **Hamara Club**_ A non-profitable organization that provides shelter to vulnerable children.

8] **Door Step School**- the institution looks after the needs of the slum children belonging to the A ward of Mumbai.

9] **K.E.M. hospital** –Dr. Vijaya Bhalerao has taken up the child-to-child project that has many eighth standard students from the slum and one of the ways to make them aware about the health issues is dramatics. She is of the opinion that one time exposure is fine and helps the children to grow but marginally as there is no continuity in terms of regular staging to drive home the various issues. Her group which has participated in the BNU only once is not introduced to Abhivyakti Manch yet which will solve the problem faced by her. She also feels that each problem- issue should be staged with a viable solution without which the process of change remains incomplete.

10] CCVC- Co-ordination Committee for the Vulnerable Children is a forum that offers its net working, advocacy and coordinating services for the children's right to participation. It is playing a very important role in improving the quality of life for the vulnerable children. CCVC offers a forum to many NGOs involved in the welfare projects for children.. It has recently undertaken a CACL [Campaign against the Child Labor] where it proposes to work at the grass root level to create awareness about issues related to a girl child. Theatre is one of the means through which it intends to achieve this.

11] **UNICEF:** the role played by UNICEF is very crucial that has helped the propagation of 'Theatre of relevance' by way of providing funds and extend technical expertise to promote the activities that support the children's right to participate.

12] **Prithvi theatre:** Prithvi theatre, owned by Miss Sanjana Kapoor, the daughter of veteran film actor Shashi Kapoor stands out in the Mumbai theatre circle for its unique auditorium and whole hearted support extended to the experimental theatre without resorting to commercialism. Even ETF is indebted to Prithvi for its support.

13] **CRY:** the association of ETF with CRY is about 5to 6 years old. CRY has not only played an important role by providing the financial assistance but also convinced by the ideology has been keenly involved with all the activities of ETF, including the BNU.

Worldwide acceptance of the concept

ETF has strongly believed in the concept of theatre of relevance and pursued it with conviction that has found acceptance in many other countries of the world. ETF took its first trip abroad [**Singapore**] in the year 1999. The play ' Mera Bachpan' was instrumental for this visit.

The second trip was to **Germany** that lasted from 5th sept. To 9 Th Oct. in the year 2000 where ‘ B-7’ was staged successfully by 7 little performers at 15 different venues. Besides the cultural exchange where the children spent some time with the German families and got a new perception to life, 8 workshops were conducted for the theatre performers and schools.

Mr. Paul Broom, from Thalia [U.K.] after participating in a works shop conducted by Experimental Theatre Foundation for BUILD observes, “ I realized the fact that the participants must come up with their own answers and form their own perceptions if they are truly to be involved. I also realized that I failed to communicate effectively with the group to enter into a real dialogue with them, due to my lack of clarity which was demonstrated very well n the workshop.”

Besides that the slum children experienced a stupendous personal growth with the world exposure giving them a new confidence and understanding. Sheetal Rathod who went to Germany shares, “ after observing the attitude of the German people over there who genuinely treated us at par and cared for us made me realize the difference in the attitudes of our own people who are sometimes superficial.” Like all the others Ranjit too was impressed with the cleanliness and orderliness and dreams of settling down in Germany one day.

After the success of first trip to Germany, **DIE VOLKSHOCHSCHULE** invited ETF to Germany for their second trip from 8th Nov. to 21st Nov. that was attended by 8 international theatre directors from different parts of Europe. In a weeklong workshop conducted for class 10 students proved that theatre could deal with any contemporary issues affecting the subject. It dealt with the issue of violence amongst the teen-agers that was a huge success.

One of the work-shops with the 10 th std. students where the need and importance of theatre of relevance was understood and implied by the students through the play, ‘ Life is not a super market’ scripted and enacted by the students themselves was a stupendous success which helped them to express their need for love and emotions which can’t be bought in a super market. As a result of a series of workshops on ‘ Theater of relevance’ in Germany, an adult school there has introduced the subject in their school curriculum.

FUTURE GOALS

- ❖ To reach the maximum number of vulnerable children by motivating and helping the many NGOs, social activists and other related agencies to enable them to participate in the BNU.

- ❖ To reach the school children belonging to the private schools to enable them to have a platform for expression by introducing it on a regular basis.

- ❖ To spread the concept of 'Theatre of relevance' far and wide.
- ❖ To build a strong networking to support the relevant activities.
- ❖ To reach to masses through theatre.
- ❖ To take BNU to national level.