

**INDIA FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS
BANGALORE**

Memorandum

To : The Trustees

September 9, 2013

Via : Arundhati Ghosh

Arts Education

From : Aruna Krishnamurthy and Anupama Prakash

Subject: Gururaj L (2012-0-002), Prajna Hegde (2012-0-003), Madhukar M L (2012-0-004) and Chitra V (2012-0-005): Grant Monitoring

The four grants made under the Arts Education programme support Kali-Kalisku teachers' projects that explore the potential of regional art forms and practices for sensitising the school and community about local issues, and for building networks of common artistic interests. Grant funds will pay for professional fee for resource persons, conducting meetings, workshops, materials, travel, printing costs, documentation and an honorarium for the grantee.

The great excitement regarding Gururaj's proposal was its potential to create excitement among his disadvantaged students in rural Karnataka about their own culture and community. Set within the schooling context, this renewal of interest was to be routed through engagements with curricular material. This project then was about bringing together fast-disappearing folk art traditions (janapada), adaptable textual material from curriculum, and a rudimentary training in theatre pedagogies to create performances that would spark off wide-ranging interest regarding the *local* within the schooling community and beyond. Against the backdrop of a migrant youth whose contact with

culture is limited to the distant strains of tinny popular culture, the project is both ambitious and challenging. During our conversations with Gururaj during his visit to the IFA office, we attempted to steer him away from a revivalist mode to a more engaged approach, where students take charge of identifying and documenting local traditions such as the sobanepada, muharram pada, and others, as well as developing their own script and performance based on their findings. The idea was to place the onus on students, rather than the teacher or resource persons, for brokering the exchange between syllabic material and art forms to throw open the variegated possibilities of marrying the two.

Gururaj has termed the project "hejjegalu" which means "footsteps." As with all the other government school grants, this project too started off with an elaborate inaugural ceremony where local honchos such as the SDMC president and school administrators were feted. Though this flies in the face of our process-oriented approach, such ceremonies work well for building stakeholdership and creating sustainability for the projects. The inaugural included performances of hejje-kunita, kolata, sobane-pada and hanti-pada and many others by members of the local and student communities. The project began with students gathering a set of stories from their homes, and exchanging them in the classroom for comments and opinions. Through a process of exchange and critical commentary, four scripts have taken shape and are in the process of revision for performance. Students have created images for

the chosen scripts; Gururaj affirms that getting children to make masks from mud has re-introduced them to their land and has helped inculcate a sense of discovery. Further, theatre activities have lightened their moods and readied their bodies for theatre. The workshops have also enabled an intermixing of boys and girls. The visual arts training, however, evidenced from the school walls are not as satisfactory, with repetition of motifs and images.

The exploratory process of storytelling has created a sense of initiative and self-discovery among students. To further enable this process, Gururaj has kept a steady stream of resource people (including the school peon) to perform and teach sobanepada and local artists to introduce hejjekunita and muharrampada in the after school hours. Local villagers, such as the postman Shri Reddy, who are familiar with these forms have also been actively participating in these trainings and validating Gururaj's efforts. School alumni have been active in the workshops too. Gururaj says that students are now in the process of shaping a dramatic form to the stories, and that he has left it up to them to make artistic choices. His main challenge is that of time management, given the exam schedule in the school. His next steps are to work on the performance of the chosen scripts with the help of resource persons. Gururaj has been extensively documenting his efforts on his blog site called "Hejjegalu." He will also be working on building an archive of songs.

Chitra's project responds to the varying levels of proficiency in her classroom, and aims to use the arts to address the gap between the high and low performing students. The programme was inaugurated in November, with the presence of Prakash Garud, SDMC members, and school administrators. After getting students to conduct the programme, there was a discussion with SDMC members about the details of the project. The project began in December with a series of storytelling activities, where students were exposed to diverse stories and given a platform for narrating them. Some of the stories they were exposed to include 'Angula Huluvina Parakaya Pravesha', 'Mangagala Upavasa', 'Bannada Tagadina Tuttoori', 'Nariya Garvabhanga', and 'Tirukana Kanasu'. The first part of the project was based on gauging the reading and speaking proficiencies of the students. Chitra reports that though they had some difficulties in the beginning, the children made efforts to read and understand, but faced great challenges in communication. Upon noticing this hurdle, the primary activity of the project has shifted to improving their communication and literacy skills, before exposing them to arts-based activities.

Chitra strongly feels that unless some headway is made on these fronts, the visits and workshops by resource people would not yield much. Working with language teachers and focusing on stories and songs, Chitra has organised students into groups to narrate the stories they had heard or their own stories in a good presentational style. Each group picked one story and small presentations were made in the classroom. She has given them poems and arranged for sharing of experiences, building great energy and motivation among students, and a sense of belonging and identification with the teacher. Chitra says that these sustained activities have tremendously improved the reading skills of students, something also attested by our reviewer Ashoke Chatterjee. He has also praised the ability of her students to put up an impromptu performance of sections from the Mahabharata, complete with devising costumes from found materials such as newspaper, brooms, twigs etc. He also witnessed a learning disabled student take on a recitation of Keats without the least hesitation. One of Chitra's main challenges has been to get the involvement of her peers, without which the project may not have an afterlife beyond the grant process.

Pragna's project was ambitious and innovative, where she would adapt a specific art form—the Sannata—to a specific text within the curriculum, to create performance pieces with her students. What was interesting about this project was Pragna's approach towards this exercise: rather than using the arts in a transactional mode as a handmaiden to reinforce the authority of the text, the project aims to engage the polyvocal form of Sannata to open out the text to multiple meanings and valences. When we visited the Government Secondary High School, Mantagi, we met with the school principal and some faculty, along with students. The principal appeared to endorse the project, though was not too vocal in her support. The Block Education Officer had been invited to the inauguration and spoke a few words on the importance of preservation of culture. During the course of the visit, we witnessed a very raw and amateur performance of Sannata by local villagers. It appeared that they were quite disconnected from the form of Sannata and had put together something for the sake of the project. Pragna too appeared quite disappointed with their performance, and said that she would be getting trained performers from nearby villages for the project. One valuable moment in the inauguration was when Prakash Garud explained the history and form of Sannata to students; given his vast knowledge on the subject, we suggested that Pragna enlist him as a mentor for the programme.

The project had some initial hiccups: Pragna was at first overwhelmed by the task of adapting a school text to the idiom of the Sannata, but managed to gain her foothold after finding appropriate resource people to help with the various components of the project. The project now appears to be on track. Some of the activities include training students in Dollu-Kunita and exposing students to the play 'Jayantha mama', translated by K V Subbanna, a play about industrialization, the ill effects of dams, etc. Students are also looking at learning Sannata songs through Ranga-geethe (theatre songs), and constructing poems that talk of how waste can be up cycled and recycled. Pragna has drawn lines of connection between Sannata and environment; students have been picking up waste material such as plastic spoons and bottles from school environs to arrange patterns in the class, create animal shapes, and create resource material for classroom. The school notice board is filled with poems, pictures, stories, songs, etc created by the children, the outcome of poetry and creative writing workshops. Pragna's big task on hand now is to get a strong Sannata training in place, and she has recruited an expert from Dharwad University to help with this. We also recommended that she build stakeholdership among her peers and the parent community to enable the smooth functioning of the project.

Like Gururaj's project Madhukar's held great promise in connecting the school with local issues surrounding the community, particularly environmental issues, thus building a bridge between the experience of school and life outside. As a grantee Madhukar was the most "against the grain," given his marginal location as a dalit and theatre teacher in the school. On hindsight, it is reasonable to assert that his dalit consciousness invested the project with clarity of intent and implementation. Unlike the other grantees, Madhukar's implementation plans had a well-defined structure, with carefully chosen resource persons to fulfil the objectives. When we visited the school, on two separate occasions, the energy and excitement of the ninth standard students that were involved with the project was palpable and infectious. Clearly, Madhukar was a mentor to them, and had managed to breakdown the usual hierarchies with his students.

When we visited the school upon the completion of the grant, Madhukar showed us two school rooms that were stocked up with "outcomes" of the art workshops the students

had been exposed to. There were spiders made from plastic bottles, installation pieces, masks made from discarded *chappals*, beautiful figures made out of newspaper and duct tape, and many more. There had been a steady stream of local artists who had taken the class through a variety of workshops, including teaching local folk songs and theatre training. Madhukar has also been successful in working very closely with his resource persons in shaping the project, who have become stakeholders; his main challenge came when he tried to get his students to visit dalit homes to collect materials and found them reluctant to enter into low caste homes. He is also very candid about other weak areas of the grant, such as the absence of interest among district-level teachers for arts education, the challenges of some resource people to adopt a pedagogical mode and the absence of a repertoire of folk culture in the community. Notwithstanding the problem areas, Madhukar's grant has been one of the most successful ones, reaching completion within the stipulated time, complete with a very engaging and honest narrative report.