

## **KathaVana 2021-22 Report**

### **Introduction**

KathaVana is an ongoing annual children's literature festival hosted by Azim Premji University since 2012. There are different ways literature, especially children's literature, is understood by people around the world and interpreted by teachers and children in the classrooms. One's understanding of literature clearly pans out in ways one engages with literature in their lives. Similarly, how a teacher interprets what literature and children's literature is and their understanding of the role played by children's literature in the holistic development of children has an influence over ways children's literature enters language classrooms.

Each edition of KathaVana offers a variety of forums where children, teachers and community members can engage deeply with literature. Each year it takes up a theme and explores issues related to that theme more closely. The theme for KathaVana 2021-2022 was: ***Bevu-Bella: COVID-19 Samayada Anubhavakathana (Neem-Jaggery - Stories from the time of COVID-19)***

### **Rationale**

For the last two years, the entire country has been facing a pandemic- one of the most difficult times in people's lives. Children's lives have been most affected in this situation where they have had limited access to schools, peers, teachers, learning and the usual ways of growing into a holistically developed being. In such a situation, both children and teachers had to struggle with making sense of their sudden unexpected experiences. Several of them found it difficult to find ways in which they could recognise and share their innermost thoughts, feelings and ideas about different happenings around them. This has adversely affected the socio-emotional growth of children where several of them could not find ways to cope with the chaos inside and outside of them. Teachers spontaneously had to navigate the situation where they were to not only facilitate children's learning and well-being but also ensure sound physical and mental health of themselves.

In such a situation, we believed that literature could be one way through which one can make sense of their experiences and find ways of connecting with their inner and outer selves. Accessing literature through the lived experiences of the pandemic could become a space where both children and teachers can articulate, rationalise, and navigate their reactions, emotions, and experiences

during the pandemic. Engaging with literature embedded in the context of the pandemic could allow children and teachers to empathise with experiences of everyone and find ways of understanding, articulating and responding to their own experiences better. This space could further allow them to connect with their creative selves and access the sense of pleasure and aesthetics that literature provides us with, and bring lived realities into classrooms.

The present theme also supported Azim Premji Foundation's immediate response during the pandemic. Members of the foundation had been closely working with communities in the public health and education sector during the pandemic as well. Last year's KathaVana 2020-2021 supported these efforts by working in a hybrid manner with teachers and children of government schools across Karnataka on the theme of *Libraries Supporting Foundational Literacy*. The effort was a success with intense field involvement and engagement shown by teachers and children in the workshops on creating and using libraries and interactive sessions on read-aloud, puppetry, poem writing, storytelling, etc. To continue this engagement with children's literature, it was felt important that teachers and children find ways of understanding and engaging with literature that allows them to make sense of and articulate their lived realities of the pandemic.

## **Project Plan**

The scope of work planned for KathaVana 2021-2022 was as follows:

### **1. Teacher Workshop**

The KathaVana team planned to engage committed teachers in a series of online workshops. These workshops aimed to build their understanding of literature and its relevance in bringing lived realities of children into classroom spaces based on the theme of pandemic. Teachers were further supported in reflectively using, modifying and creating activities with children that facilitate articulation of their lived experiences through engagement with literature.

The objectives of the workshop were to enable teachers to:

1. Understand the relevance of bringing the lived experiences of the pandemic into language and literature curriculum.

2. Engage in the process of articulating lived experiences and recognise it as central to the language and literature classroom.
3. Familiarise themselves with some genres of literature that can be taught in elementary school classrooms.
4. Develop an understanding of a few different pedagogical approaches to the meaningful use of literature in the classroom, including:
  - conducting a read aloud;
  - engaging children in relevant discussions;
  - linking reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking and using art and performance in the classroom;
  - taking an emergent and multilingual approach to language learning.
5. Reflectively use, modify and create activities that draw upon children's pandemic experiences in elementary school.

The workshop was organized in two phases of 13 hours over 6 sessions. Phase 1 had online sessions on March 4, 5 and 6, 2022. Then, from March to May District Institute members mentored and collaborated with teachers in their classrooms. Phase 2 of the workshop had online sessions on June 9, 10 and 11, 2022. Around 23 teachers from 10 districts in Karnataka and 12 District Institute members participated on an average every day. Some of the themes taken up in the workshop were 'Understanding and Engaging with Literature', 'Implications for the Classrooms', 'Creating Safe Spaces of Expression through Literature' and 'Connecting Lived Realities and Themes in the Classroom'.

## **2. Engagement with Children**

Looking at the unpredictable situation on the field due to the pandemic, the KathaVana team this year decided to not engage directly with children but indirectly through teachers. The team worked closely with teachers in facilitating activities that they could do with children in the classrooms to help them express and share their experiences of the pandemic and make sense of their lived realities. The team created a compendium of activities in Kannada that teachers could use in their classrooms with children. These activities were aligned with the year's theme of KathaVana and

facilitated engagement with literature and expression by children with guidance from the teachers and District Institute members.

## **Response**

Following were some of the comments/feedback received from the teachers and District Institute members:

- Through the workshop, teachers got a platform to learn about how to creatively engage children with literature. They got introduced to new activities that they could use in their classrooms. It gave them new angles and perspectives through which they could look at children's writing, children's literature and language learning. It exposed them to new stories and the kind of children's books that are available. The second phase especially gave them more inputs and possibilities on how they could imagine working closely with literature.
- Teachers observed peer learning taking place within the classroom because of these activities.
- District Institute members shared that the workshop was beneficial for teachers as it made them realize and test their skills, and understand what kind of activities are appropriate for what level. For example, even really young children like 1st and 2nd graders could be engaged if it is the right kind of literature and activities. It also taught them how to look at children's verse/work in different ways and dimensions. And lastly it allowed them to notice how these activities can be linked to language learning skills of children
- KathaVana also supported the MaLe Billu (another departmental program).
- Even though the participation level in the workshop among teachers varied, and some were able to do much better, it gave something to everyone. Everyone got to contribute in their own way.
- In District Institute member Janaki's own words - "KathaVana has led to discussions amongst teachers. Teachers have participated well. The theme of this year's workshop was such that it involved everyone. Involving teachers and working with children through teachers is a good idea. Last year it was mostly demonstrations, but it was good that this

year we chose to work with the teachers. Looking at children's writing, building on that, learning how to use that in classrooms was the most interesting thing about the workshop".

- Another observation was that the second phase added to participants' learning from the first phase. It was good to see how much children had responded and reacted to the pandemic. KathaVana played an important role in helping teachers understand children, and the impact the pandemic had on them.
- Teachers further shared that they realized how many skills they had within themselves and what could be the different ways in which they should evaluate and critique.
- It was also good to see children's writing pieces improve by the 2nd/3rd version and by working on them.
- Demonstration of read-alouds and selection of children's books were very helpful.

A few things to keep in mind before progressing were also noted:

- Schools need good libraries and good collections - that is the need that has become clear after this workshop. We must explore how to take good stories/books and collections to teachers or work with teachers to acquire this.
- Scalability - a small number of teachers were covered in this workshop. The initiative should be taken to more teachers. The workshop was offered to 3 people per district but can be offered to 30 teachers from each district in two-days.

## **Conclusion**

The teacher's workshop and compendium of activities for children together helped teachers and children connect with their experiences during the pandemic and find a safe space to articulate and make sense of their emotions during this unpredictable time through literature. These efforts were aligned with the core aim of KathaVana and will be taken forward in the upcoming years as well to respond to the need of the hour in classrooms and the country.