

Immersive Characterisation Workshop Through Living With Indigenous Tribals in Tamil Nadu

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The author of this article **Sugumar Shanmugam** is a contemporary theatre director, actor and the founder of the Pondicherry Theatre Arts Academy in Pondicherry and works as a casting director and actor trainer for films. He is a student of the first batch who trained from the National School of Drama, Bangalore centre, and is currently pursuing Ph.D. in Theatre from the Department of Performing Arts in Pondicherry Central University. His major areas of research and specialization are characterisation, actor's physiology and bio-psychology.

Sugumar recently facilitated an immersive characterization workshop in which participants lived and learnt from tribal communities near the Sathyamangalam forest area in Tamil Nadu. An invitation to be a part of the immersive workshop on characterisation in acting and creative arts was sent to various interested people across India, out of which eight participants were selected. All of them had a great passion to undergo an immersive learning experience by living amongst tribal communities, along with having a solid background of art and literature. The participants came from different states like Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The idea behind the workshop was to gather interested people with a background in arts, literature and theatre and help them through the characterization and character-building process in their respective fields. This was done by observing, living and learning with the tribes and indigenous communities. This was not just an anthropological study of the tribes nor an exclusive acting or creative workshop, but rather an organic mix of the two, where the observation and learning of the three essential aspects - the anthropological, the social and the psychological - which combined to give a deeper understanding of the character of a person. Throughout the process, these three aspects were used as a lens to connect to the attitude and behaviour of a person and learn from it. It also helped to form a holistic perspective while building a character.

The participants spent a one week living with four different indigenous tribes like the Irular, Malaiyaan. Urali and Solagar communities, each of whom were different from each other in terms of lifestyle, living conditions and practices. During the day, the participants interacted closely with the community members, getting to know their various aspects of their lives, livelihoods, rituals and daily practices along with the personality traits of the tribe members. The participants adopted the local lifestyle so that a trust could be built among them so that they were not seen as outsiders or get a feeling that they were being 'studied'.

As a result, a casual and friendly approach was initiated by the community members, which enabled the participants to further observe them easily.

During the day, each participant chose a member of the tribe to study and observe. In the evenings, the participants found a space amidst the living spaces of the tribe itself to conduct the workshop sessions. A study of the day's observations was done, and a sharing process was initiated, in which the participants spoke about the culture, attitudes and behaviours and other observations. The facilitator connected these observations into the theoretical aspects of character study and character building. He also delved into the process of creating a character in different media like novels, movie screenplay, the performance of a stage play, where an actor can apply these learnings when he plays a particular character. The workshop participants also found time to share and perform street plays on various social issues among the audience of tribal communities. The participants were also encouraged to learn from the life of the tribal people, which helped them re-look at the notion of development and its effects from the lens of the indigenous communities. The participants made sure they lived as one among the members of the community during the day, almost completely adopting their lifestyle in order to make them comfortable and avoid self-conscious behaviour. Slowly, they started opening up and treating the participants as one among them.

The participants also got a chance to live with and observe a group who are very different from city dwellers, who in general have many layers and can be quite complex and sometimes fake, because of their circumstances and modern way of life. The tribes, on the other hand, had a certain quality of innocence and straight-forwardness in their living, behaviour and attitudes, which was a delight to observe and learn from, especially in the area of building a character. There was sincerity, sensitivity and a sense of purity in the way they lived their lives. They were honest and true in their actions and words. Further, close to nature and living a sustainable lifestyle enabled the tribes to retain their sensitivity to the environment as well as other members of the community. The participants got another dimension of what we have lost as a result of 'development'. The study of characterisation deals with human qualities and psychology, we found the tribes and indigenous communities as the primordial prototype of human nature who were the best to observe and learn for the creative process. By studying the primitive communities, one can delineate the fundamental principles of forms which are universal in nature.

In one side, metaphorically viewing the tribes as the performers of the authenticity of life and on the other side considering the participants as the spectators, who experience the sense of communalism both physically as well as psychologically we can understand that the participants (spectators) collectively share a unique adjacent experience of being in direct contact with the tribes (performers). As Grotowski explains:

I was of the opinion that it was in fact primitive rites that brought theatre into being, so through a return to ritual – in which two groups participate ... the actors or leaders, and the spectators or indeed participants – may be rediscovered that ceremonial of direct, living collaboration ... a direct, open, free and authentic response...if the actor through his action in relation to the spectator motivates him, incites him to participation, even provoking him to precise ways of behaving, of movement, song,

verbal replies etc., that should enable the restoration of that primitive, ritualistic unity. (Grotowski, in Kumiega 129)

In this course of activity, the self-absorption of the spectator is encouraged by the performer, who, through the use of his life style, body, voice and its relation to nature, exposes the most intimate parts of his inner self as a sacrifice that could become a shared experience with the spectator; the spectator becomes a participant by committing their own act of self-penetration. In theatre space, according to Grotowski this interaction between the actor and spectator has a highly ritual quality, in the sense that this type of theatre is communal in nature and is a reflection of what Grotowski has called a “tribal encounter”. As Brooke states this relationship as follows:

For me, the way of the theatre goes opposite way, leading out of loneliness to a perception that is heighten because it is shared. A strong presence of actors and a strong presence of spectators can produce a circle of unique intensity in which barriers can be broken and the invisible become real. Then public truth and private truth become an inseparable part of the same essential experience. (41)

The search for the origin of the evaluation of human socio-character from the animal nature may give the evidences through the analyzation of the tribal community. Being a transcendental creature from nature to culture, human’s creations of theatrical formation of characterization through its elements like dance, song, music, action and dialogue which are the primordial core aspects of tribal society. In the styles of their living, the prevalence of all the theatrical elements and aspects including the characterization tradition can be seen. The art of living can be traced to the anthropological origins of these tribes.

The facilitator's work was to constantly make the connection between the observations of the participants into the character-building process in their respective fields. For example, analysing the anthropological aspect of the person observed, and connecting it to how it is expressed in his/her character. It was a combination of theoretical learning and the participants' observations, and how it could be applied in a story or performance.

All of the participants thoroughly enjoyed the experience and were filled with great memories to cherish. The facilitator had a simple check of their understanding of characterization before the start of the workshop, and also throughout the learning process. Their understanding had improved a lot by the end of the workshop. Also, they made the effort to live closely with the tribes and assisted in doing their daily activities and living their lifestyle, which was a fulfilling experience for them. For some participants, it gave them a different perspective about life itself.

Reference

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