

Pluralism and Democracy-Understanding our heritage, and defining our future

Activists of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) joined by others have been travelling through Rajasthan in a truck over the last few months, building public opinion for a more participatory democracy. Sowmya Kidambi, one of those travelling in the truck writes about one phase when young people were the focus of the "truck yatra".

We were 35 people in the back of a truck. Off on a "truck Yatra" to communicate with ordinary people on the streets, and with students in schools and colleges. The name itself provoked a comment- specially, in contrast to the glorified "rath yatras", "vijay yatras," or "parivartan yatras" that are the campaign vehicles of so many of the political parties today. The purpose was to reach out to people, begin a dialogue, build platforms, and put to test the conviction we all had, that large numbers of young and old are looking for ways to contribute to creative efforts for change.

In the towns of Mount Abu, Abu Road, Sirohi, Chittorgarh, Bundi, and many others where the truck Yatra went, the yatris took the message of the "Jan Niti Abhiyan"(a campaign to build a peoples agenda) through, nukkad sabhas, nukkad nataks and small public meetings. The "Ghotala Rath Yatra" (the chariot of scams) was a marvellous means of focussing on the shortcomings of the electoral process and mainstream politics in India. By communicating through a mobile spoof on a handcart, a visually attractive, and extremely topical set of political questions were raised. Issues of importance to peoples movements like the demand for an employment guarantee act, the right to information, and the policies related to the broad canvas of human rights was contrasted with the lack of real issues being taken up by mainstream political parties, even during an election campaign. The primary message to the people was- "get involved: Governance is far too important to be left to others. There is no other shortcut to an effective and working democracy."

There was learning and teaching, and enjoyment all through. Dog tired very often, but with "live wire" looks throughout. Nothing made us balk, not the living conditions on the move, or the cramped existence for 10 days in the truck...everything was fun and all of it was an experience none of us would want to swap with anything else. Most people already want to know when the next yatra will happen.

It was a motley crowd, each one so different from the other. There was a common mission- a dream for a better India; without hunger and poverty, a more democratic and truly secular state, and a future that will ensure equality and justice for all. In the process many have discovered themselves and also discovered new friends and ideals. It is such a fulfilling feeling...

Young and old, men and women, boys and girls, rural and urban; soon became a large joint family travelling for six to eight hours from one place to the next. From the enthusiasm of two elderly and dignified rural men Mohanji and Chamnaramji, as they played the game "Psychiatrist", for the first time; to the excitement of the urban youth as they discovered the richness of Rajasthani folk music, Kabir Bhajans, and the joy of community singing. The dholak and majira were rarely abandoned, except ofcourse when a rehearsal or discussion was on, or when everyone fell asleep in sheer exhaustion.

Everyone in the group had a task assigned to them. Whether it was 11 year old Chetan, (a Saheriya child from Baran district where last years drought had brought hunger deaths to his village and amongst his friends) or 15 year old Devaki who was from the Barefoot college night school (a three term ex- prime minister of the bal sansad, the famous children's parliament in Tilonia) or Mohanji (one of the older workers of the MKSS a revolutionary dalit poet and a powerful singer) and Chamnaramji from Janavad Panchayat (where he had been instrumental in igniting the imagination of people to take on the administration and the

powerful sarpanch to force them to make their accounts public). Chamnaramji's efforts eventually led to proof of Rs 70 lakhs being siphoned off in Janavad -just one of Rajasthan's 9000 Panchayats. No one was allowed to feel left out, or be idle. We went about doing our assigned tasks with a feeling of importance and pride

The SPIC MACAY had initially asked Aruna Roy to come and speak to College and school students, and told her that she would be given travel money of Rs. 2,500 for each place she visited – enough to enable her to travel by an air conditioned car. Aruna however, asked if she could use the same money to hire a truck instead and bring her MKSS colleagues along. She told them that as she worked with a collective it would be best for the children to meet not just her, but also the collective. Only a diverse group could convey the energy and strength of collective campaigns, and inspire young people through an understanding of the varied contributions that go into the making of a peoples movement. It also provided an opportunity to meet young people in schools and colleges, and communicate with others in the towns and cities. SPIC MACAY showed a willingness to innovate, and both accepted and supported the idea, and so an entire orchestra of speakers turned up to address school and college students on the issue of "Virasat."

I wonder how I would have reacted if I had been on the other side, as one of the students whose school or college had invited Aruna to give a talk. Just the sight of this huge truck rolling in: when they had expected one distinguished speaker to step out of a car. None of us looking at all distinguished...if anything we looked quite bedraggled and ordinary. But put together the effect was quite dramatic. All the different types... wearing dhoti-kurta / saphas/ pyjama kurta / jeans and t- shirt / shirt and pant / sari / salwar kameez / lehanga lugdi/ ...rural, semi rural and urban...marwari speaking/ hindi speaking / english speaking...it must have been quite mystifying.

The truck was another sight, covered on all sides with slogans. It looked like a caravan. It was our home for 10 days. It had huge boards with messages such as "Is chuppi ko todo, koi tho munde bolo", "prem se kaho hum insaan hain", "sarkar hamare aapki nahi kisi ke baap ki", "ek maang, ek aandolan, ek junoon, rozgar guarantee kanoon", "desh ki janta maang rahi hai saare paison ka hisaab". The boards itself made it obvious to many that we were quite different from their previous speakers.

The first sight as the travellers "detrucked" was of a sack being upturned, as a variety of footwear came tumbling out. People scrambled out of the truck, searched for their foot wear and promptly set off to do whatever they were assigned to. Keeping the footwear in a sack was an unbreakable rule evolved to maintain cleanliness within the truck, which had mattresses laid out on the floor for comparative comfort in travel over bad roads.

The insides of the truck were also well organized. In the corner towards the driver's cabin there were planks fixed to act as shelves, and all the bags and personal belongings were arranged on that. Underneath the planks stood the thela for the "ghotala rath". All the documents and other resource material were kept in trunks that were also placed under the planks.

In the schools and colleges stalls were set up, material was laid out, colourful banners with thought provoking messages of peace, harmony and activism in Hindi and English were hung up, an exhibition of the nuclear holocaust in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was put up, as the usefulness of having a large group was soon established.

These arrangements created an ambiance for a presentation that emphasised our composite and pluralistic heritage. There was a conscious effort to avoid a monologue. Messages of today's realities were imaginatively and creatively communicated through plays, songs, slogans, banners, speeches and stories. The serious and powerful play

“Aman” highlighted the manipulation of social categories and divisions for political control. The Delhi theatre group “Alarippu” performed the extremely entertaining play for Children called “The Gift” raising issues like gender differences and the concerns of adolescents in a gentle and interactive manner. The intention was not to preach but to stimulate, where both the content and the mode of the dialogue were important. Aruna would ask the students what they felt was our most important heritage. As the discussions moved from culture, to politics, and from architecture to society, it finally ended at acknowledging the “Virasat” of our most ordinary people- ourselves. Icons like Aruna attract a lot of people, but nothing can match the impact of the inspiration provided by the most ordinary of people- far more disadvantaged than the students we were talking to, talking about their lives, their dreams and their commitment to help shape a better world. Here was a group that had come to say that they were inviting anyone and everyone to join...

“We want to join the movement... how can we help...please tell us what we can do...how can we keep in touch...can we give time during our holidays?” ...More than 600 students from nine educational institutions filled up volunteer forms, indicating their area of interest. Young people had been coming to us over the last few years volunteering their time. What we learnt during the Yatra, was that if you reach out to them, there is a vast pool of energy in search of an outlet. It also explained the success of those huge networks preaching a divisive ideology, who manage to recruit so many young people. Most often, they are the only ones who reach them.

Young people are interested in social and political issues. They are thinking about the future of democracy, are sensitive to the challenges faced by the womens movement, the dalit movement, and anti-communalism campaigns. They do not want to take corruption for granted. They were attracted by the idea of presenting “a manifesto of peoples issues” to all the political parties. They are troubled by the crisis they face as young people with an uncertain future, as well as the crisis faced by our country. They are willing to pledge their time, their energy, and their talents. They are willing to build on the strength of our common heritage to work to build a common future. The challenge the rest of us face is to make use of that offer.

Sowmya Kidambi Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan Devdungri, Post Barar, District Rajsamand, Rajasthan- 313341 Email: mkssrajasthan@yahoo.com