

## FINDING A LANGUAGE TO SAY GOODBYE

### *Trauma-informed anti-oppression drama therapy in a school in rural South India*

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Twenty years ago, an association of Kattaikkuttu (traditional Tamil theatre form) performers in rural South India, started a school for children enabling them to have a traditional Kattaikkuttu training alongside “regular education”. The students in this school came from communities who bear generational familial trauma on account of structural and systemic oppression because of caste, class (poverty) and gender.

The founders of the school made intentional structural and pedagogical choices to respond to the students’ educational, relational and emotional needs from a theatre-based trauma-informed anti-oppression perspective. Their approach created a unique institution.

Unfortunately, the school had to close down due to lack of funding and support from the government. A two-year closure and transitional process was charted. As part of this closure process, we (the authors of this chapter) were invited to facilitate a series of interventions over a period of six months. Drama therapy was chosen as the methodology for the interventions because the students had an affinity for performance and because it could be used within a socio-political and culturally appropriate frame.

In this chapter, we introduce you to Kattaikkuttu theatre and the unique context and workings of this school. We then delve into the process and impact of the drama therapy interventions. These interventions, just as the school itself, are grounded in a trauma-informed anti-

oppression ethos working towards decolonising systems. Not just against eurocentrism but anti-caste as well (ensuring not to recolonise using a caste-based hegemonic idea of India).

To write this chapter, we draw on existing literature, interviews with key stakeholders (founders of the school, students, teachers, parents), our process notes and documentation. We also consulted one of the founders of the school during the writing process.

Our work with this specific community unfolded like a conversation in action between context, need and vision. In order to capture the nature of this process we have experimented with the form for this chapter. Parts of this chapter are written as dialogue between the kattiyakkarans, the comedian-narrators from the Kattaikkuttu theatre genre. We have chosen to engage in this type of “performative writing” (Pelias 2005, Pollock 1998, Fitzpatrick & Longley 2020) to (1) to honour a structure from Kattaikkuttu theatre (2) to include the children’s voices (3) mirror the iterative and conversational process that occurred in the intervention (4) draw attention to the gaze and the location of the reader vis-a-vis writers vis-a-vis the subject matter (5) create a text that privileges situated and embodied knowledge, thereby challenging colonial norms of academic writing.

### *Kattaikkuttu theatre and its social location*

Kattaikkuttu is a rural, Tamil language-based form of theatre that integrates music with sung and spoken text, dance and acting. Performances are usually based on episodes from Indian mythological epic, the Mahabharata. The theatre gets its name from the elaborate ornamentation -- distinct head, shoulder and breast ornaments made out of *kattai* (wood) -- and its vibrant facial make-up that adorns the principal male, heroic characters (De Bruin,

2020). Performances are outdoors and extend through the night. They feature a *Kattiyakkaran* (narrator) who uses humour to comment on local socio-politics and often breaks the fourth wall-- reminding the audience of who they are and what they are watching. An innovation of this association was to add a second *Kattiyakkaran* to their performances to enlarge the scope for comedy and critical feedback. “*Kattiyakkaran* has the freedom to criticise, subvert, improvise, and translate, often in a ludic manner, the problems faced by these epic characters into everyday life proportions and situations with which individual spectators are familiar” (De Bruin, 2020 pp 6-7). Traditionally, *Kattaikkuttu* is a male-only bastion. Men perform both male and female characters. It is only after the establishment of the *Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam* school (KKG) and the founders’ gender advocacy that the *Kattaikkuttu* form has become accessible to rural girls and young women.

Picture 1: KKG students- M Doraisamy and P Moorthy, as *Kattiyakkarans*. (PC: KKS/PV Jayan. 2009)

*Enter stage left male Kattiyakkaran (MK) and a female kattiyakari (FK) played by a male and female performer respectively.*

**MK:** *Vanakkam vanakkam vanakkam* (hello, hello, hello) Okay, let us begin at the beginning. In Asia, in India, In South India....

**FK:** Hang on a minute. Before that... How are you doing? Have you eaten?

**MK:** I have. How about you?

**FK:** Yes yes. But is your family well?

**MK:** Yes they are well.

**FK:** I am not asking you, I am asking the audience.

**MK:** As if you can do anything if they say otherwise....

**FK:** That doesn't mean we will not enquire.

**MK:** Fine I will ask you. How are you?

**FK:** (Takes a breath) I am okay... but... the last year...

**MK:** (Interrupting) Hang on, we've no time to listen to how you are feeling and all, the audience is waiting...

**FK:** Okay then begin... Do they (indicating the audience) even know where we are?

**MK:** I know how to tell them. Audience, in the world map there is a continent called Asia. Come south, you will see one cashew *barfi* shaped country.

**FK:** What will they know about cashew *barfis*? Tell them it is a country shaped like a kite, or diamond or an irregular quadrilateral...

**MK:** Che, you took out all the magic!

**FK:** You want magic to describe the shape of India?

**MK:** Fine! Here, just look at the map!

Picture 2: Map of location and photo of Kattaikkuttu Sangam. (Illustration: Pallavi Chander. PC: Hanne M. de Bruin. 2021)

**FK:** and in the performing arts centre, there used to be a school called Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam... Why did the school close, you may wonder? We will get to that later. First let's talk about what they did there....

**MK:** To know that, just visit our association's website [www.kattaikkuttu.org](http://www.kattaikkuttu.org)

**FK:** (*To MK*) do not try to get out of work so easily... this, we will have to explain a little... (*To the audience*) Do you know what Kattaikkuttu is?

**MK:** How will they know? In other parts of India only they do not know about our Kattaikkuttu. ...

**FK:** The first thing you need to know is that we do all-night plays.

**MK:** We sing, dance and deliver dialogues... without a mic... out in the open...

**FK:** For 8 hours!

Picture 3: Stills from Kattaikkuttu performances. S Tamilarasi as Arjuna (PC: KKS/A Sumanth Kumar. 2015). R Kumar as Duryodhana (PC: KKS/PV Jayan. 2010).

**MK:** We, the Kattiyakkarans, are the first to appear and the last to disappear...

**MK:** That is true. We appear here and there...

**FK:** there and here...

**MK:** (Jumps to the other side) ...to make things clear!

(They begin to sing)

We are here to make things clear

city men say Kuttu needs to be revived

and preserved- (like in a museum?)

THEY do not see but [that?] we are here

to make things clear

we perform 100 shows a year

To audiences of 1000 or more

come see for yourself

To make things clear

The pay is low...

20000 rupees a show

that 15 must share

Is that clear?

No insurance, no stipend

No government support

Do the maths my friends

To make things clear

We are here -- To make things clear

Yes we are here to make things clear!

Picture 4: An all-night Kattaikkuttu performance with hundreds in attendance (PC: KKS/A Sumanth Kumar. 2016)

**FK:** *Anna* (brother), one more thing we need to make clear... It is considered a low status to be a Kattaikkuttu performer....

**MK:** Well of course, if you work so hard for so little money -- how could you be a big man?

**FK:** ... or woman...it is far worse for us women. When we perform, we are putting our bodies on display, they say... shameful for us and our family...

**MK:** For me too it is considered shameful... because this type of performance is only done by people of lower caste...

*(To the audience)* do you understand?

*(To FK)* When we never talk about caste, how will the audience know?

**FK:** Well, audience, go and look it up. You can say it is social stratification.

**MK:** Yes, or perhaps it is just a play -- like we do -- a power play with different rungs. But it is not as visible as racism is... Yet, it is deep seated.

**FK:** It is like a ladder ... what rung you are born on determines what you are allowed to eat, wear, where you are allowed to live, what work you can do, who you can marry, what name you can have... everything...

**MK:** Even what art you can watch or perform...

**FK:** If you are on top of the ladder, life is good. If you are lower, life might still be okay as long as there are others who are lower than you...

Picture 5: An illustration of caste (Illustration: Pallavi Chander. 2021)

**MK:** And if you are on the lowest rung, you are... nothing.

**FK:** That is right. And anything that is traditionally accessible for you to do, nobody else will want to do. Because it shows low caste. It is not desirable for anyone else.

Kattaikkuttu is on a low rung; people above think it is loud, crude, not refined... not HIGH art...

**MK:** Anyway (*sarcastically*) lower caste people cannot make ART... only craft  
As long as I do the same things my father did, and only that, I will survive... If I stay put on that rung of the ladder... I am safe.

**FK:** Do not dare to try and climb up the ladder, brother!  
.. But at least you can walk along freely on your rung.

**MK:** Huh? So can you. We are on the same rung, *Akka* (sister).

**FK:** You are a man; you get the full rung... I have to stay in the place where I am put.

**MK:** ...There is so much we can tell you, audience, about caste... about the other rungs and how their rules may be different... or about those who claim the ladder doesn't exist at all...

**FK:** ...because if you are on the top, it is just wide open skies above you!

**MK:** No time for that now... You want to know about the school and the drama therapy. ... But first, dear audience, remember where we are? In the southern part of the irregular quadrilateral shaped country? In a village with a performing arts tradition. vibrant yet challenged... faces complexities (like all places) with caste and gender...

*A school based on anti-oppression and trauma-informed principles*

In 2002, the Kattaikkutu Gurukulam (KKG) was established as a boarding school to offer “rural students (6–18 years) a dual curriculum in which training in Kattaikkuttu - acting, music, and singing and formal school education occupy an equal space” (De Bruin, 2020 pp). KKG was started by P Rajagopal who is a Kattaikkuttu performer and Hanne de Bruin who is a researcher. Rajagopal needed to leave formal education when he was 10 to start working in his father's theatre company. KKG was his vision; to have professional Kattaikkuttu training and formal education under the same roof, accessible to all genders.

Schools have the potential to be spaces of emotional and interpersonal learning and healing (Chafouleas et al 2016, Sajnani et al 2014, Feladman et al 2009). They also have the potential to be, or contain within them, countersocialiser spaces to challenge social inequalities and injustice (Clonan-Roy et al 2020, Frydman and Mayor 2019, Chacko 2015, Charania 2007, Fine & Weis 2003). When we viewed KKG and its functioning, we saw that several intentional trauma-informed and anti-oppression choices were made in the design and the running of the school.

The community of 50 students and 20 staff and teachers were close. “For children missing one or both parents, the Gurukulam’s students and staff act as substitute family members” (De Bruin, 2020). Students used relational titles to refer to artistic teachers, staff and students. For instance, Rajagopal and Hanne were called *thaatha* and *paati* (grandfather and grandmother). Others were called *akka*, *anna*, *sithappa* (elder sister, elder brother, uncle) and

so on. In this part of India, especially in a rural context, it is quite common to call a familiar individual by a relational title.

Picture 6: The Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam community in 2012-13. (PC: KKS/Sue Rees)

"Regular" schools in the area insist that students call their teachers sir, miss and so on. Like in many other parts of the world, colonialism continues to permeate the curriculum, classroom practices and culture of schools across India. As scholars have noted, this locates the school outside the community, subjugates local knowledge systems and alienates learners thereby breaking down their self-confidence and sense of capability. The teacher, who has immense power in the classroom, is tasked with imparting knowledge that is alien to them and their student (Shizha 2006, De Bruin 2020, Thiongo 1986, Freire 1970/2005).

Most formal education teachers at KKG came from such "regular" schools. All of them told us that they had to unlearn old teaching patterns when they came to work at KKG. Whether this was about the school's rule banning corporal punishment or being compelled to teach the child "in a way that they can learn" (Murugan, Math teacher). Hanne, one of the school founders, said, "50% of the students at KKG had either a learning disability or [were] trauma affected. So, effort was put into training teachers to change their approaches to help [the] students better".

At KKG, for the first time, girls were encouraged to learn and practice Kattaikkuttu.

Students shared chores, attended all the same classes and wore the same uniform. 'We are all equal despite where we come from, our caste, our gender...' was a repeated refrain of all of

the students we spoke with. At the same time there was room for accommodating differences in needs and behaviours. For instance, one of the theatre teachers, Tamilarasi (an alumni herself), told us that it was common for some of the students to have violent outbursts and that it was okay. She told us about how she would respond if a child hit another during such an outburst--

Then the child who is beaten will come and tell me. I tell him, “Listen he [the child who had the outburst] probably is sad or having tension”. I suggest he [the child who was beaten] go and say something kind. Since he is in a normal mood, he understands. The situation is such... Later we found a way to explain to him [the one who had the outburst]. He will also cool down and say sorry.

She continued to tell us how phrases like “tension has come, I’ll talk later” were commonplace in the school and something she herself uses. This indicates a normalisation of an emotional state and a practice of regulating by stepping away.

Sundaralakshmi, another formal education teacher, shared:

With student \_\_\_\_ (name deleted) we saw a very huge improvement. He saw his mother’s death and it was a very difficult *soolnilai* (circumstance). I think he came in 4th [grade]. He had no clue where he was-- he would look somewhere, no focus. Low in studies. Even for him, we started from scratch. He first started paying attention to his surroundings only then he could study.

In this extract we see two trauma-informed observations. First, Sundaralakshmi prefaces her comment about this student’s behaviour with an understanding of the circumstances he has been through. Secondly, an act that could have been interpreted as distracted behaviour (i.e paying attention to surroundings), was seen as an essential step in his process of acclimatisation that would allow him to study.

As Sajani et al (2014) state, in most schools “becoming distracted, inattentive, or dissociating or in increased irritability and aggressive actions etc” are seen as disruptive... “teachers will naturally apply various control actions to contain or suppress the behaviour... [which] creates more anxiety and confusion for the student, whose disruptive behaviour then escalates... Having knowledge of the student’s background... will provide the context in which to help he/she [the student] to address the confusions...” (pp 211-212). Tamilarasi and Sundaralakshmi’s illustrations show that, at least some teachers at KKG had the sensitivity and training to respond in a way that was trauma-informed.

Tamilarasi, is an alumna of KKG herself. Her strategies are likely to have developed through her own education at KKG. One of her strategies is to offer an extra Kuttu class after school sometimes if a child is “down”. “As they perform, their distress goes away; they start focusing on performing...”. This also shows how KKG’s approach to Kattaikkuttu training lends itself to a trauma-informed education. “For children who have experienced trauma Kattaikkuttu’s structured performances offer a well-defined trajectory to hang onto in times of stress (De Bruin 2020, p.11)”. In Kattaikkuttu, primarily episodes from the Mahabharata are performed which are familiar to performers and audiences. The stories and characters from the epic become a dramatic reality (Penzik, 2006) onto which life struggles can be projected and grappled with. For instance, Rajagopal in his class would ask his students to reflect on the motivations and choices of a character. He would invite them to play the character differently. In one class, we observed students “playing with” shame as it may show up in their bodies within the safe container of this distanced epic story.

In her report, Meertens (2005) evidenced that Kattaikkuttu improved students' communication, social skills, collaboration, self-expression and discipline. These skills are critical to emotional and relational development and thus contribute to mental health. Thus, KKG seemed to promote both preventative mental health care as well as trauma-informed interventions.

Access to open spaces and nature as beneficial in trauma treatment has been documented and researched as has the growing field of nature-therapy (Poulsen et al 2016). The design and utilisation of the physical space of the KKG, also indicated a situated trauma-informed approach. KKG is located on seven acres of land. School and performance spaces flow into each other. The space also has an organic vegetable garden and large open areas of trees and play space. Classes could be taught indoors or outdoors or in one of the many "in-between" spaces. A child sitting on the windowsill or on the threshold with legs dangling outside (while class was on inside) was neither uncommon nor discouraged. Students also worked in the garden as part of the curriculum.

All the students we interviewed appreciated the regularity, quantity and quality of the food they received at the KKG. The importance of regular and nutritious meals, a clean and safe place to sleep, clean toilets and bathing areas, access to running water etc, cannot be overstated. In addition, the fact that the adults in the KKG actively "took care" of the children is also something that the children mentioned made them feel safe. As Sundaralakshmi told us "Comfort comes from school -- what they could not get from home. They came to school and received good care and nutrition. After 6 months, they got better".

**MK:** So, I am stuck on one rung, you are stuck in one place on the rung... The school....

**FK:** The school represents a possibility... Like Ambedkar says education is one method to annihilate the ladder....

**MK:** Audience, do you know who Ambedkar is...? Something more to look up...

**FK:** See... yes, I remember.... Children who came to the school needed food and safety.

**MK:** Oh, I loved the food... as much as we wanted and always on time...

**FK:** There were other difficulties... Many children had lost parents or seen violence. You remember our friend who saw his father kill his mother...?

**MK:** Things have been so hard for so many of us...

**FK:** Children felt safe here... at KKG.

**MK:** In my old school, I was never allowed to ask questions...no questions at all. If we did, we would get hit nicely with a stick.

**FK:** Teacher in my old school used to say, 'You are a shameless girl' You are of bad character... No back answering!

**MK:** (Looking back and checking) Back answering... Answering with your back?

**FK:** (looking back at MK who is behind FK's back) What are you doing?

**MK:** (Pretending to be an old school student) I am looking for answers in your back, Miss!

**FK:** (Pretending to be her old school teacher) Stupid village boy, get out of the class!

**MK:** ... oh I am so glad I left my old school and came here...

**FK:** This school is safe.

**MK:** This school is different... our teachers remember where we came from and did not punish us for it...

**FK:** I think the school wanted us to be able to make choices for our lives....

**MK:** But the caste ladder stays...

Picture 7: Different spaces at the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam. (PC: KKS/A Sumanth Kumar. 2015)

*Keeping the school open is a challenge*

Over the years the fundamental clash between the approaches and ethos in “regular schooling” and the Kattaikkuttu education became more pronounced. With inaccessible curriculum material, the teachers were forced to teach only for the exams in a way that alienated the students. Passing the exam was crucially important in order to be able to advance in life and so more and more time and resources went into simply getting the students to pass. Having students do well in exams was also necessary for the school’s survival since government approvals depended on this “performance.”

KKG became known in the community as a safe place that was willing to take in children with difficult academic, behavioural and familial histories. Many families began to drop children at the school and then wash their hands of all responsibility. In the last few years, there have been several children who had nowhere to go during the holidays. This meant that KKG had to take full responsibility for the students without having legal guardianship. This was a precarious place to be in. As Rajagopal told us “It is important that the students' family be involved so that they also question us, and make sure their children are well cared for”. This kind of partnership between the child, their family and KKG rarely manifested.

Initially, families were keen on their children getting a Kattaikkuttu education. The father of one of the senior students told us why he chose KKG for his daughter. “This is the only school like this in Tamil Nadu where our own culture is given importance.” However, the school’s reputation of being a safe space superseded its uniqueness in terms of education. The fact that there are few places like it that are willing to take in children from such backgrounds is a deep systemic deficiency that impacted KKG. Thus, families who enrolled their students into the school came to be less interested in the art form. “The children often became interested in Kuttu when they studied here but their families would not support them to continue to be performers afterwards” (Rajagopal).

KKG management recognised that their twenty years of existence appeared to do little to elevate the status of Kattaikkuttu in the eyes of the local (and wider) community. The expectation that a single revolutionary institution within an oppressive system could undo centuries of caste-based injustice, was perhaps unrealistic. While KKG certainly made a difference to the lives of the students, the vision to promote Kattaikkuttu art through the Gurukulam proved to be much harder.

Despite this, Hanne and Rajagopal told us that if they received government support and assured funding, they would have kept KKG running. However, there was no government support and no financial assistance. On the contrary, each year brought more red-tapism and corruption to negotiate with the governmental systems. Foreign and non-governmental sources of funding began to dry up. The constant struggle to fit into the educational and bureaucratic system along with their tussle for funds to sustain and run the school, eventually led to the decision to close the school.

**MK:** Was there no other way?

**FK:** What else could they do?

**MK:** Everyone is crying... can you not see? The parents, the teachers, us...?

**FK:** What else could they do?

**MK:** *Thaatha* and *Paati* are crying too?

**FK:** What else can they do?

**MK:** Why are you repeating the same thing?

**FK:** What else can I do?

**MK:** argghhh! Now I am getting angry.... All this while I was sad now, I am angry....

**FK:** What else can you do?

**MK:** If you do not stop, if you do not stop I will... I will

**FK:** what will you do? (*Runs away*)

*(MK begins to chase FK)*

**FK:** What will you do? We will forever go round and round there is no escape

**MK:** (*Getting tired*) just stop. I want to stop...

**FK:** (*Still running*) So stop!

**MK:** I cannot till you stop

**FK:** Ah ha! SO, you cannot do anything till I do, till I change... We are forever connected...

*(Both stop and stare at each other and then collapse in exhaustion)*

*A decision to close the school and a request for a drama therapy intervention*

With the decision made, a plan for this closure over two years was chartered. As part of this plan, Hanne and Rajagopal wanted to offer the students a programme that consolidated the principles of dignity and equality that was foundational for KKG. They hoped that some of the anti-oppression ethos of the school could be crystalised for the children in a way that they could access it later. “The kids are really interested in theatre and drawing... For me [Hanne] I was not sure how far they were able to express themselves verbally... We had to find a way of communicating these very important things of equality, dignity, in a way that they could access”. The creative arts were, therefore, a good fit as a modality for this intervention.

Maitri has been associated with KKG for fifteen years and has worked with the children on specific projects in the past. Many teachers and senior students were familiar with her. For practical, ethical and efficacious reasons, we (Maitri, Pallavi and Padma) decided to take on this project jointly as a team of facilitators. We believed that we could bring in our multiple skill sets (art, film, drama) to support one another to do this work responsibly. A European non-profit had promised funding to KKG for work on gender. Thus, Hanne was able to put the resources and needs together to offer a drama therapy intervention that looked at equity and dignity (particularly gender).

After the explorations in the first visit, we perceived that the children might not experience the kind of safety and support they did receive at KKG and hence they might require to equip themselves before going back to their families and “regular” schools. While the uncertainty of the school closure loomed over the participants, it seemed relevant to work with them to process this transition and think more deeply and intentionally about how they might

negotiate spaces that they would go back to – home, school, friends, etc.; where structural and societal pressures i.e., gender rules, caste barriers, class differences, continue to operate. This change of course was readily accepted by the KKG management.

Hanne’s openness in speaking about her own location as a white woman in rural south India (De Bruin, 2000) catalysed our own conversations regarding our location-- the benefits, challenges and responsibilities that came with it-- in the school community. Despite being from the same country, knowing the landscape and being able to (passably) speak Tamil, the fact that all three of us are from urban backgrounds and hold caste and class privilege relative to the children could not be ignored.

That we were outsiders (albeit welcome outsiders) was clear from the minute we stepped into KKG to be greeted by the “Hello Miss!” as opposed to the “*vanakkam akka*” (hello sister), that was the regular greeting heard. None of us spoke Tamil fluently. Therefore, we would often have to ask the students for certain vocabulary and invite them to correct our language/pronunciation. This made for several amusing interludes that also served to shake up the power dynamics of the space. The fact that we stayed on campus with the students for the weeks that we were facilitating, made time for after session chats and loitering in the area, helped to build connection. Since we were seen as trusted but not part of the system, the students were more comfortable to share things that seemed critical of the system. Their reverence for the management and teachers meant sharing criticisms to them was harder. We also stepped into our power to advocate for the children when needed. As you will see in the following section, we chose to fall into step with the rhythms of the space to be able to be adaptive and responsive. In the process many of our previously held beliefs had to be abandoned or reworked.

**FK:** Did you see Miss?

**MK:** What did I miss?

**FK:** No No, Miss, did you see her?

**MK:** Who her?

**FK:** Miss!

**MK:** I am missing something...

**FK:** Padma Miss, da! Did you see Padma Miss?

**MK:** Oh.... no, I did not.

**FK:** Argh, you wasted my time....

**MK:** Sorry sorry, anyway, where is she?

**FK:** If I knew where she was, would I ask you?

**MK:** No no... I mean more generally, where is Padma Miss from?

**FK:** She said, no... she's from Bangalore.

**MK:** How can she be from Bangalore... no one is from Chennai, Bangalore and all... people go there from Cheyyar, Punjai.. From the villages, we go to the city.

**FK:** Maybe some people are FROM there...?

**MK:** So, if Padma miss is from Bangalore, she must speak Kannada... Not bad she is at least trying to speak Tamil. Her knowledge about Tamil films is super!

**FK:** When she doesnt know a word, she googles... and confidently says it. Sometimes it is all wrong!

**MK:** Maitri Miss also confidently says wrong words. Without googling...

**FK:** (*Imitates Maitri*) the... the... the fire from the inside.

*(Both roll about laughing)*

**FK:** But stop stop... we cannot laugh... it is not right. They have come to teach us something.

**MK:** That is true... but what are they teaching us?

**FK:** I do not know.... But it is nice in the class....

**MK:** It is nice in some way....

**FK:** Padma Miss and Maitri Miss are married and have children.

**MK:** From the way they look, you would not know that... no chain, no *pottu*  
(*bindi*)

**FK:** Pallavi Miss... she's not married...

**MK:** Do not get any ideas... in Bangalore and all it may be okay, but here, you will  
HAVE to get married.

**FK:** What? Who are you to tell me what I HAVE to do? Are you my mother or  
father...?

**MK:** Oh... as if you listen to everything your mother and father say. Do they say it is  
okay for you to be here performing on stage?

**FK:** The point is, you do not get to tell me what I have to do....

**MK:** It is just that it is different for them... the Misses and sirs that come here to  
teach us... For them life is different...

### *The intervention: Finding a language together*

Our location as welcome-outsiders allowed us to explore certain aspects that the teachers and peers probably could not easily access. However, it also meant we had to find a language of therapy together with the children without necessarily assuming common ground. As a team of facilitators coming in with our bag of tools and a desire to uphold the anti-oppression (dignity, equity, respect) and trauma-informed ethos both in what we did and how we did it, we approached the intervention with some operational principles. It allowed us to stretch and hold the work with the intention to support the students, in tandem with KKG's efforts to prepare the children for the school's closure. They were-

- Adaptiveness and curiosity
- Noticing and working with emergent needs
- Falling in step with the rhythm of the space

In the next few paragraphs, we use examples from the workshops to illustrate how these principles came into play and helped us find a language that worked for the children. You will see that the principles are interlinked and the processes of learning and unlearning for us (the facilitators) were constant.

### *Space as a therapeutic device*

The intervention comprised three series of workshops over a period of six months. Each workshop series spanned a week and was facilitated by two of us. During the week we stayed on campus with the children. We divided the 25 students (the strength of the school in its last year) into two groups based on age and socio-cognitive skills– 'older group' and 'younger group'. We met both groups for 3-4 hours every day. Time at KKG was marked by meal

times or natural light availability. Thus, the session would be after breakfast-before lunch or after lunch-before sunset. Initially we tried to use time on a clock to schedule the sessions but we learnt soon that tea had to be drunk hot, pots and pans had to be washed immediately after lunch, and that falling in step with the rhythm of the space would be beneficial to us and the process we hoped to facilitate. Falling in step helped us see the relationship between the children and the physical space. By learning this, we could make choices in the workshop that would strengthen the sense of safety and regulation that they were receiving through a connection with physical space.

We were first offered one of two large closed rooms for our work. The teachers (accurately) assumed we would want privacy as “counselling is usually done in a closed room.” The school premises also had multiple outdoor spaces. We looked around and considered that these outdoor spaces were accessible to the entire school and thus might not have been contained or safe enough for therapeutic work. Thus, we picked one of the closed rooms and began the workshop. However, it became clear that something was not working. With the younger group, we observed restlessness and rigidity in their bodies. The older group seemed lethargic, languidly sitting around leaning on the walls. It was extremely hard for both groups to stay present during the workshop. We decided to move the workshop out to one of the outdoor classrooms to see if it would change the energy of the groups.

[Picture 8: Working in the outdoor classroom. \(PC: Padmalatha Ravi. 2019\)](#)

The minute we stepped out; we noticed a palpable shift. Our playspace had a parapet wall to mark somewhat of a boundary that visually opened up to trees, the sky and breeze along with the hustle and bustle of the school in the background. We noticed that the participants were more at ease and seemed to be more participative as they lounged on those parapet walls,

jumping across or walking over it, often leaned against each other, even lying down during activities. We slowly began to pick up on cues on what potentially helps this group regulate.

Even in the outdoor classroom, we noticed that for the younger group there seemed to be an urge to run out of the space and then back in again. The image of a train had been evocative for the group. So, we thought we could incorporate their needs within the structure and image of the train. We constructed a human train which moved out of the space and took a long circuitous route around the school eventually coming back to our classroom. One facilitator went with the train and let the students take turns setting the pace and vocal rhythm. The other, transformed the space (with an act of magical declaration) into a “station” of a particular emotion. The train halted at the entrance of the classroom; the facilitator announced the name of the station (i.e. the emotion). Students had to step into the station that was filled with that emotion and fill their bodies up with it. They shared colours, images and memories it elicited.

Embodying different emotional states and attuning to the sensations in their bodies helped to observe and gain some insights. Conceptualising emotional states as stations that we would move in and out of, seemed to be comforting. We used the exercises to map links between experience, emotional states and behaviour. These processes helped us understand and together think through ways of navigating; in effect encouraging them to build healthy adaptive coping strategies.

### *Offering dramatic structures to unpack lived expertise*

Being curious with questions and allowing conversations to meander, opened grounds for rich explorations within sessions. For example, during an activity with the older group we looked at scenes from popular television series and films that reinforced a social rule. We observed that the students were aware of how these rules were being set and normalised

either explicitly or implicitly in seemingly regular acts of care and interaction. In the exercise, one of the girls played a caring parent who told their daughter to go to school ‘carefully;’ Implying how the onus of safety (and hence honour) lay with the girl. In another frame, the group created a scene of a bus where a man (politely) gets up to give way for another. However, we later discovered that the motivation was about caste where the former was of a higher caste than the latter.

Students stated that caste and gender intersected when it came to safety, loss of freedom, love, marriage, and caregiving. This especially played out when it came to the consequences for breaking these rules. The discussion naturally progressed on to how to navigate these social norms outside KKG while staying safe. Students exchanged ideas that ranged from finding allies (a caring father in the case of a female student) to stepping into one’s power to ensure gender equity in a romantic relationship (A male student shared how he wanted an equal marriage). The students were acutely aware of the challenges of implementing these strategies, however the discussion provided insights as to the possibilities of subversion within the casteist and patriarchal structures.

The students spontaneously took the conversation into Kattaikkuttu, jumping up to play scenes to demonstrate something to us; we curiously followed. One student told us that while playing Duryodhana (a heroic male character), the actor must take up space and be rigid. However, while playing *Kurati* (a common female character) one can never stand with her legs apart taking up space. This inflexibility was attributed to the form. When questioned about the experiments in Kattaikkuttu class, they were clear that it was allowed in the learning space but not while performing on stage, because class is KKG and performance is the outside world.

We noticed that during our workshops boys took up more space in discussions. Our gender equity ideas (stemming from our own urban upbringing and caste locationality) compelled us to address this. One of the female student's responses challenged our ideas. "I did not feel the need to make my point at times. Yes, the boys speak more than us. But if I feel the need to communicate something I will." The students also perceived how much space we facilitators took up (despite our gender) and held the power to interrupt any conversation. The awareness of how gender, caste, class and power played out for the students helped us hold our own ideas around the same lightly.

Picture 9: Using the floor to share thoughts and exploring space and emotions (PC: Pallavi Chander. 2019)

**MK:** (Playing the bell)

**FK:** Aie! What's wrong with you, can you not see some serious questions are being asked here...

**MK:** (Addressing the audience) Tea ah? Coffee ah? See there's also *bonda* and *akka* has cut jackfruit...yum. Tell me, what do you want?

**FK:** Oh, break time already? One hot coffee please, I'll go get jackfruit from *akka*

**MK:** These Misses are not looking very happy with my bell, no?

**FK:** Then what? Some serious discussion they were having, some questions they were asking and you just ring the school bell?!

**MK:** Aie, See you should drink tea and coffee when it is piping hot otherwise you will not get the correct effect.

**FK:** (Eating jackfruit) Tastes so good. Yes, we should take a break when the coffee is hot. But how will they know?

**MK:** You think that is why they drink cold coffee in the cities? Why do they not take a break on time? Poor things!

**FK:** No, I think it is because everything has to happen at that-that time within that-that window for that-that situation just as planned and then only it is okay; little out of plan means they get stressed (laughs).

**MK:** But slowly they are also taking a break with us, see...Miss also likes her coffee, piping hot.

*Moving away from Anglocentric therapeutic language.*

Since most of the students from the younger group had experienced trauma in early childhood, the workshop orientated towards emotional expression and psycho-education. As we explored, we noticed that the students expressed traumatic experiences (past neglect, abuse etc) and intense emotions, but lacked emotions vocabulary (other than the basic few that had formed the stations). Since we came from mental health training that told us that naming emotions was essential for regulation, we set about building a vocabulary bank. An amusing brainstorming process ensued. We narrated an incident and asked “how would you feel then?”. The students would reply in unison “*kashtama irukum*” (it will be difficult). We persevered -- consulting a dictionary and taking the help of the teachers and came up with a list of translated accurate emotion words. However, we realised that the vocabulary wasn't actually helping children understand themselves or each other any better and thus, abandoned it.

We then observed that the students used symbolic language that held rich yet complex thoughts and emotions. For instance, one student spoke about a feeling state as “a tortoise with its hard shell-- it did not need anyone else to protect it.” Another said “the butterfly can go anywhere by itself.” We extrapolated that both were speaking of something akin to courage but their communications contained so much more nuance that would be lost by reducing it to a single word. There were also associations that we found perplexing and yet seemed to make sense to the students -- “anger is the colour of milk” said one of the students. These expressions are oppositional to the ideas steeped in eurocentrism in ‘regular’ schools. Yet they proved to be as effective if not more, in communicating their thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, the symbolic language also seemed to provide a container for the emotion which helped with distancing. For instance, in the older group, to express what he felt about an upcoming board exam, one student drew a rock with a small indent in which there was water. He said “I am that water in that indent. I am just there waiting. Hopefully one day the rain will come and splash me out”. While viscerally evocative of his sense of helpless waiting, this image is also containing and therefore offered grounding for the student.

*Concretising the intangible: Mapping the road ahead.*

Many students and teachers expressed hopes that ‘something might work out,’ and KKG would continue to exist. The founders, who had no doubts about the decision of closing the school, were keen that the students had a way to concretise their learnings and have a roadmap ahead for themselves and their association with the Kattaikkuttu artform.

We explored several reflective tools to help this process. We asked the younger group to map their own journeys in school from the day they walked into the school to where they were at present. Tracing back significant learnings, the many people they have met who visited from across the world, friendships that had developed, and plants they have nurtured along the

way. Many drew their learning journeys in signs and symbols. These sometimes short and often twisty roadmaps were filled with vibrant experiences and memories. The students poured great effort into their maps and were satisfied that they could take their experiences of KKG concretely with them when they left.

[Picture 10: A student mapping her journey at KKG. \(PC: Pallavi Chander. 2019\)](#)

With the older group, we co-created a large Mandala on the floor to explore dreams/ aspiration, skills, vulnerabilities, expectation and guides. We chose this format because it was similar to *kolams* (traditional practice of drawing decorative patterns on the floor using rice flour) with which the children are culturally familiar. We also observed that it came easier than writing on paper, or on a board. When asked to reflect on their vulnerabilities and dreams about the future, one boy drew the sun and moon - where he was the moon who shines at night when the sun is away, he considered Rajagopal to be the sun which held his dreams and aspirations just as it gave the moon its light, alluding to a sense of interdependence in the community. He further reflected that the sun also obscures the moon. indicating that there were certain power structures that potentially played out within the school. Further illuminating the fact that the students were aware of the status quo within and without the school and only needed guidance in identifying the negotiation tools.

As the closing ritual at the end of the third workshop series, we invited the older group to create site specific performances to reflect on their journeys. We hoped to harness their aptitude for performance and the regulating capacity of the school environment into an embodied memory to keep with them. The students picked sites on the campus that were special to them. They spent time there, reflected on their memories, their associations to it, the stories, the relationships they had built. It was evident from their sharing that the space had become their companion. On the final day, we moved through the school, witnessing

their performances. One student paid tribute to his best sleep spot that had the right amount of breeze at all hours of the day. Others picked other spaces -- a branch of a tree, a make-shift tire swing, the corridor, a little mound at sunset. There they shared poems, memories, played instruments and even performed as the Kattiyakkaran or other characters they loved. Afterwards, the students offered appreciation to each other in writing, which also became a part of the memory bank they could access in the future, if they needed to.

Picture 11 : Site-specific performative sharing by students. (PC: Padmalatha Ravi. 2020)

*Transitional objects and its role in memory keeping.*

The students seemed to naturally regulate when they worked in an embodied way. We observed this not only in activities where they physically moved around the space but also with hands-on media - craft work and stitching. We also learnt that the students at KKG had very few personal possessions. Hence as a celebration of their individual journeys in KKG, the groups were encouraged to make an object - a bag and a book, which they could add to their possessions and take home. We made the books during the first week of the intervention so that images and ideas could be recorded over the next six months.

We made the bags in the last week of the intervention with extra cloth from the costume room. Each student carefully designed their bags in different shapes and sizes, with elaborate patterns and colour coordinated name tags stitched across them. They spent hours in silence, deeply absorbed in the act of creating an object of their own, that represented their unique preferences - favourite colour, shape, flower pattern. These individually designed one-of-a-kind bags served as their transitional object which held special objects and memories of the school. In the final session, as a dramatic closure ritual to our intervention we invited every student to offer symbols of appreciation to their peers through drawings and writings via handwritten notes. The students from the younger group were encouraged to exchange these

notes in a playful ring-a-round where they secretly left notes in each other's bags that were laid out in rows. With the older group, we did a similar exchange but with letters to their future selves which were shared with their peers and as a response to those letters, they offered notes of appreciation in the form of symbolic drawings to each other.

Picture 12: Making bags and reading secret messages from classmates (PC: Pallavi Chander. 2020)

**MK:** (Asking the audience) Are you ok?

**FK:** Oh... what is happening to the world?!! YOU are asking if someone is ok?

**MK:** It was a long and heavy section.

**FK:** It was about the work we only did in the KKG, no?

**MK:** But the way they talk about it with big words... So much theory, so many concepts... big big KNOWLEDGE.

**FK:** But that knowledge was made along with us.

**MK:** Ah.. Ha.... WE did not make this BIG KNOWLEDGE.

**FK:** If we were not there, would it have been made?

**MK:** Without the tamarind, you cannot make the *sambar*. Yet, if the *sambar* tastes nice, no one congratulates the tamarind or the lentils or the vegetables or the water. They only congratulate the cook.

**FK:** So, they were the cooks and we were the ingredients?

**MK:** Seems like that....

**FK:** Hmm... but did the cooks come knowing they wanted to make *sambar* only?

**MK:** Well...more like they knew how to cook and they wanted to cook but perhaps they were okay to cook anything.

**FK:** So, they saw tamarind, lentils, vegetables and said okay, let's make *sambar*. If they had made pizza or ratatouille, it would have been horrible!

**MK:** Ha! Even chicken biryani would have been horrible... because no chicken!!

**FK:** Also, the cooks must have been called because food had to be prepared and they would have understood what the people here would eat, no?

**MK:** That is true...

**FK:** But one problem with this analogy... the *sambar* gets consumed and finished. Only the vessel and the cook remain....

**MK:** The knowledge also gets consumed, no? See how the audience is eating this up....

**FK:** hmm... we also get to eat it... to experience... to take something from it... and we can also make something else with it.... Maybe I can start that women's Kuttu company and... maybe I can use the Misses and *paati*'s capacity to write big words and make BIG KNOWLEDGE to my advantage.... So that I can share my knowledge... the knowledge of the fire, the knowledge of the vessel, of the tamarind, of that *sambar*...

**MK:** .... Hmmm... how are you, audience? Have you eaten well? Are you enjoying the flavour of this *sambar*? Are you wondering how you can make your version of it?. Or are you imagining the journey of the small single lentil in it? Are you imagining the story of the fire and the vessel? Are you wondering how that cook came to be here and whether they are also stuck making *sambar* again and again and again...? Why? Because we all have to eat...

### *An interrupted Goodbye*

India's 6-week nationwide lockdown owing to COVID-19 began on 24th March 2020, all schools were required to shut down and KKG children had to be sent home in a hurry. The closure process, including a final goodbye event and planned meetings in the early part of the next academic year to check-in, was disrupted. As we write this, it is July 2021, all across

India, primary and middle school children have still not returned to school. High school students had only a few weeks of school between the first and second COVID waves.

Our February 2020 workshop week and the site-specific performances came to serve the function of a final closure to the space and school. As Hanne says, “I am so happy that this [the drama therapy workshops] happened because we could not anticipate this COVID and the sudden way they [students and teachers] had to leave. It must have been very inexplicable especially for the younger ones...”.

We conducted our phone interviews with students in early February 2021. This was one year after our last workshop and the onset of COVID. We were understandably concerned for the children’s wellbeing. Our conversations, however, pleasantly surprised us. All the children we spoke with were excited and enthusiastic to speak with us. Many of the children seemed to be in touch with each other, connected on facebook and whatsapp, and had organised themselves into study clusters based on proximity. KKG management had arranged a laptop and internet dongles for each cluster. Some children who lived further afield got their own laptop. Some children had been teaching Kuttu to other kids in their village and managing to attend school online. Thankfully the first wave of COVID 19 had not been too harsh on the children and their families.

It seems like many of the students had managed to carry some of the connections and practices from KKG and the drama therapy workshops into their lives outside. Here are some of the extracts from our interviews with students that speak to this

*“... during the weekends, me and my friend, Pachaiappan, would help the thaatha at the garden. We would help him water the plants, on the brinjal plants. Now, at home, me and my sister Kannaige, who is in her 9th std, have a small garden at the back of the house where we grow stuff.”*

*“I take the bag we stitched and the notes that all the friends gave me. It always makes me happy. I also remember making kolam (mandala), I felt peace and happiness when I made that. I think about it often.”*

*“I remember the workshop we did last year. I felt it was useful, like if we want to feel ‘amaidi’ (peace), I remember you had asked us to sit by a tree for some time. Now, when I feel ‘oorumardari’ (low) I try it out. To give you an example, I have sat alone and looked at trees to feel ‘nimmadi’ (peace/calm) when I wasn’t feeling too good at home.”*

While the children missed KKG, there seemed to be a general upbeatness and optimism when they spoke with us. This surprised us. On reflection, we wondered if we had underestimated the children’s capabilities, resilience and resourcefulness. Interestingly, the teachers (one year after the closure) seemed to have a far harder time adjusting and seemed to be dealing with a sense of loss and grief. “I miss my school, my students, all the faces that come in front of me, I do not know why it upsets me so much. Why is it so difficult?” asked one of the teachers.

Hanne and Rajagopal’s continued involvement in the alumni’s lives also is a source of hope and strength. Besides arranging laptops etc, they had also invited senior students and alumni to use the Kattaikkuttu Sangam space for their work and to co-teach Kattaikkuttu classes with

Rajagopal. Building a plan for the campus and the Sangam that includes alumni is a long-term hope of theirs. Five senior alumni have come together to form a women's Kuttu company that hopes to do traditional Kattaikkuttu performances as well as innovate performances on the meeting points of "real life and Kuttu." This collective (including married young women) will meet (with their babies) and rehearse on the former KKG campus. Hanne is aware of the Kattaikkuttu Sangam's "fragile dependence on his [Rajagopal's] wellbeing and ability to teach." She hopes that the alumni can slowly take over. So, initiatives like the Women's Kuttu Company are exciting and welcome.

India has had a devastating second wave of COVID. Hanne and Rajagopal told us how difficult things had been for Kattaikkuttu performers with the government ban on all gatherings (i.e., performances). As elsewhere in the world, marginalised communities in India bear the brunt of the pandemic crisis. We hope it has not diluted the children's ability to connect, create and have agency in their lives.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, we have demonstrated how drama therapy can work within a trauma-informed and anti-oppression frame. By entering the space with a desire to learn a language (rather than impart knowledge), negotiating power dynamics, falling in step with the rhythm of the space, and responding to emergent needs with adaptiveness and curiosity; we were able to identify, amplify and concretise the resources and expertise that the students had. In order to do this, we had to let go of several conventions of therapeutic practice in favour of methodologies familiar to them (the students) and not to us.

It is important for us to stay connected and be available to the students and the institution as resources even after the intervention ended. Interviewing students, teachers, parents and management, for this chapter has also allowed us to reconnect and ask questions of benefit. It is important that this chapter not only benefits us (a publication in our names) and the drama therapy community (a practice example to learn from) but also that it can be used as an advocacy tool to benefit Kattaikkuttu and the community of performers. Our work at KKG, the writing and presentation of this chapter, corresponds to the idea that “subverting colonial models of research [and practice] entails creating research that supports indigenous self-determination, decolonization, and social justice and that various models can be used to emphasise benefits to the community rather than... seek out what is dysfunctional [and attempt to fix it]” (Lu & Yuen, 2012). We acknowledge this is a co-creation and hope it will benefit them. We take these steps to ensure that our work is culturally response/able and ethical (Dokter & Sajnani- in press, Sajnani et al 2017, Sajnani et al 2016, Sajnani 2012, Hadley 2013).

An anti-oppression frame and a commitment to decolonise practice is ethically critical, particularly when drama therapists work in contexts that we do not belong to. Without it, we enter communities as experts and impose our notions of health and treatment. We extract practices, knowledge and expertise. We colonise. Without this frame, trauma is located in the individual and not seen as a result of systemic oppression. When we use an anti-oppression lens, we have no choice but to situate ourselves within the problem. The way out is complicated and messy but holds within a promise of liberation. As drama therapists, much changes when our goal is liberation and not adjustment.

**MK:** And so, there is no more school. The ladder still stands...

**FK:** Kuttu will stay on its rung... but perhaps the sound of the drums will be so so loud that one cannot help but hear...

**MK:** Even those on other rungs ... Yes... they too will want to know, what is this sound? The beats will move them too...

**FK:** Yes, we have our friends across the ladder ... Perhaps they too will want to dismantle it...

**MK:** IT IS AN EMERGENCY!! They will scream.

**FK:** We will keep performing and when we are tired, we will call others to help us.

**MK:** Perhaps the others will want to know what's behind the curtain....

**FK:** So they join us and bring what they know... And the music builds up, the voices are loud. Then the curtain is dropped and we all together see her. Draupadi, she stands there tall, as a goddess... No shame... With a story to tell...

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