



KathaVana: Children's Literature Festival, 2017

Theme: Understanding Writing for Children

Azim Premji University Event (English/Kannada): October 25, 2017

Children's Mela (Kannada/English/Urdu/Hindi): November 14, 2017

Government School Teacher Workshops (Kannada): November 17, 2017

Background and Rationale

Recent decades have witnessed a nascent and burgeoning interest in children's literature publishing in India. However, children's literature still doesn't find a vital place in Indian schools, classrooms and libraries. In most schools, literature is introduced through textbooks in upper grades, and then, is often taught in ways that don't connect the readers meaningfully with the texts.

- Can young children be introduced in meaningful ways to literature?
- Can teachers be introduced to (and convinced about) its power and relevance to the lives of their young students?
- Can this be accomplished in the context of government schools?

These are the questions that motivate KathaVana – an annual bilingual (Kannada-English) children's literature festival co-hosted by the Azim Premji University's School of Education, and the Azim Premji Foundation's District Institute (Bengaluru) – a field arm of the Azim Premji Foundation (APF) that works intensively with schools and teachers in and around Bangalore.

Since its inception in 2012, KathaVana has been exploring the role that literature can play in schools and classrooms. It brings together children, storytellers, publishers, teachers, academics and other educators on an annual basis to generate awareness about children's

literature and to explore issues of common concern. It takes as a starting point the idea that engaging with literature is a worthwhile educational enterprise. Literature enriches the curriculum by providing opportunities for thinking about topics of social and personal significance. Children who are exposed to good literature from an early age are likely to develop relationships with reading and writing that could last them a lifetime. Further, it is important that access to good literature not be restricted to the elite, English-speaking population, but be made available to children from different sections of society and from different linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, KathaVana has a significant (but not exclusive) focus on working with children in government or low-fee paying private schools, in keeping with the overall vision and mandate of Azim Premji Foundation.

Every edition of KathaVana has attempted to bring people to books by offering a variety of forums where children, teachers and community members could engage deeply with literature – through book exhibitions, storytelling and read aloud events, puppet shows, meet-the-author and illustrator sessions, professional development workshops for teachers, and forums for different kinds of stake-holders to come together and discuss pertinent issues related to literature. Between 1,700-1,800 children and 200-400 teachers from government schools visited KathaVana during each of the years, 2013 and 2014. In 2014, a specific theme was taken up during the festival: *Children's Voices in Literature* – emphasizing the key idea that children need to enter into a dialogic relationship with literature. In 2015, KathaVana asked how can we first empower *Teachers as Readers* of literature, before they, in turn, inspire children to love reading? During the teacher-workshops several teachers remembered fondly that until some years earlier, they themselves were avid readers! How can that reading habit be rekindled? We continued this strand of thinking in the 2016 edition, *Creating Spaces for Readers*, where we worked with teachers on cultivating their own appreciation of reading literature as well as enabled them to set up and use libraries meaningfully in government and low-fee paying private schools.

KathaVana 2017: Understanding Writing for Children

During the years we conducted the Teachers-as-Readers workshops, there was a request that we take up the theme of teachers-as-writers as one of the KathaVana themes. It is well known that writing in Indian classrooms is restricted mostly to copy-writing, dictation and answering-the-questions style exercises, with some compositional exercises thrown in. The *product* of children's writing is assessed by teachers, but children are rarely taught the

process of writing well. As with reading, unless teachers are aware of these writing processes themselves, they are not likely to be able to teach children to write well. This would require teachers, themselves, to experience, reflect on, and understand the writing process.

Ideally, teachers should learn to write by writing different kinds of pieces themselves. However, KathaVana does not give sufficient time to take teachers through a cycle of writing with feedback, discussion and reflection. The next best possibility is help teachers become aware of the complexities and nuances of the writing process by analysing children’s books.

At the heart of children’s literature lies the question of what it takes to write a book or a story *well* for children. There is more to writing for children than meets the eye, and practitioners working in this domain may find it useful to understand these nuances. For example, is writing for children qualitatively different from writing for adults? What are the different genres of writing typically available to children? How do pictures and visual elements interact with text in certain genres of children’s literature (e.g., the picture-book)? Do we need to write or select books for children with an eye to their “levels” of reading, or to their developmental appropriateness? Should writing for children be “sanitized” of all adult content? Can one reader think that a piece of writing is brilliant, while another rejects it completely? And so on. We believe that when teachers engage in such conversations around children’s literature, their interest is sparked, and they are enabled to develop critical and reflective views for themselves on the topic. They are encouraged to go deep, to develop a nuanced and intuitive feel for “good” writing and for “good” children’s literature. We plan to explore these issues related to writing for children in KathaVana 2017.

Broad Plan for KathaVana 2017

University Event (October 25, 2017)

- Location: Azim Premji University
- Audience: APU Students & Teachers from collaborating schools nearby
- Language: (English/Kannada)
- Event 1: Mode: Panel Discussion (2 hours)
 - Writing and illustrating children’s books – A panel consisting of children’s authors and illustrators will discuss issues related to writing for children. Panelists will feature people who have written both Kannada and non-Kannada books. KathaVana is collaborating with Parag (Tata Trusts) to bring in 1 or 2

authors/illustrators with a national presence to the festival. Facilitator: Shailaja Menon/Usha Mukunda

- Event 2: Workshop for teachers from partner schools and APU students (4 hours)
 - Understanding Writing for Children: Participants will engage in a hands-on, facilitated workshop on understanding writing in children's books. Participants will engage in a first-hand exploration of the merits and demerits of different kinds of writing for children, concluded by reflective writing on what was learned. Facilitators: Usha Mukunda/Jane Sahi and Maitri Vasudev
- Funky Rainbow will put up a stall of curated English/Hindi/Kannada books at the event.

Children's Mela (November 14, 2017)

- Location: TBD
- Audience: Children and teachers from government schools
- Languages: Kannada, English, Urdu, Hindi
- Mode: Book Exhibitions, Literary Activity Centres, Meet-the-Author and Meet-the-Illustrator events. Given the theme of Writing for Children, some of the activity centers will focus on writing-centric activities.

Workshop for Government School Teachers (November 17, 2017)

- Location: Government School/Other
- Audience: Teachers from government schools in areas where DI is working
- Language: (largely Kannada)
- Mode: Workshop
- Understanding Writing for Children – Conceptually, this will be a repeat of Event 2 described for the university event above, except that transaction will be in Kannada.