LEARNING ART INSPIRES CREATIVITY AND BUILDS RESILIENCE AT THE FACE OF ADVERSITIES: RAJALAKSHMI GOES AROUND LEARNING EVERY ART THAT COMES IN HER WAY

Rajalakshmi is a fourteen-year-old child studying at 9th standard. She lives in Tallakulam urban deprived area and attends our Children's Resource Centre (Children's Hub) there. She comes from a *dalit* BPL family. Father Koteswaran (46) works as a casual labourer in construction sites. He is recluse and does not care for the family. He gives his wife some two hundred rupees a day and does nothing beyond that. Mother Easwari (36) has studied up to 12th standard and is a resourceful woman. The entire burden of running the family is on Easwari's shoulders. Other than Rajalakshmi, the couple have two other children elder to Rajalakshmi, Bala (17) and Sathya (16). Quite unfortunately, Bala is a special child who was under institutional care till his 15th year of age and is presently with the family. Sathya is in the 11th standard and is academically very studious. She does not attend the CRC. In order to manage the family, Easwari has put up a small shop in the house-front of her impoverished dwelling. She sells minor necessities including some vegetables. She says that she makes two hundred to three hundred rupees a day. It is certainly a hand to mouth existence for Easwari and her children. The biggest burden is the special child who can't manage himself.

Rajalakshmi and her mother at their shop

But nothing deters Rajalakshmi who is full of positive energy. She was just eleven years old when she joined our CRC. Rajalakshmi says, "Even before CEDAR arrived, a tuition centre was functioning in the community and it meant only doing school homework. I was not very involved. But when CEDAR came in with the help of Ambedkar Study Centre and started giving art teaching, I became very enthusiastic. First, I got involved in craft work and origami. Then drawing and painting… then I seriously learnt *parai* music. After that photography…

Portrait clicked by Rajalakshmi

Portrait of an OX by Rajalakshmi

I also learnt theatre and clay modelling… all these I equally love." Rajalakshmi says that what she learnt from the centre greatly helped her to create new bonds in the family. She supported her claim by narrating the following incidents.

It seems that the family had not celebrated anything like the birthday of the mother. Rajalakshmi says," I wanted to really surprise my mother when her birthday came in 2020. That was during the first lockdown. This gave me an opportunity to use my skills in origami and painting. I designed a birthday card for my mother myself. Then with some flour and sugar kept at home, and toffees taken from my mother's shop I made something like a cake. I gave the birthday card to my mother and greeted her. Then I asked her to cut the cake. My mother was greatly touched by that." When asked about this, Easwari says, "My child gave me a wonderful gift… in these many years even my husband hasn't done anything like that." Rajalakshmi says, "When I thought of giving a gift to my mother it meant money and I did not have that money but a little money to buy some colour papers and glue. With whatever I learnt in the craft class I designed something. The money problem was solved."

Hand bag, Paper flower and a birthday card made by Rajalakshmi for her mother's Birthday

In no time Rajalakshmi became adept in playing *parai.* CEDAR is particular to give *parai* training in the hubs. *Parai* is a folk drum played in group, but over years has acquired pejorative connotations and castiest allusions. Like many progressive cultural activists, we too want to popularise *parai* and break all that stigma attached to that. Rajalakshmi went on public stage playing *parai* in Jawaharlalpuram during the CEDAR Pongal celebrations in January 2020. Something was to follow. Later she went to Thiruppuvanam her native village to attend the temple festival. There was a motley crew playing *parai*. Rajalakshmi insisted she would join the troupe. The troupe composed of men first opposed. Then they gave the drum in her hands just in order to make some amusement. Rajalakshmi went on a frenzy playing the drum breathless for the next half hour. Everyone was stunned. This also provoked a controversy in her extended family. First, how a female can play the drum? Second, why a lowly instrument played for funerals be played at all in the first place. The answer from mother daughter duo was, "*Para*i is not only a primeval Tamil music but also a music modern Tamils want to hear eternally after death… and that is why *parai* hangs on as funeral music." The problem was solved.

Rajalakshmi playing parai during CEDAR children's festival

The biggest use Rajalakshmi finds for her art learning is, in helping his mentally challenged elder brother. It was so touching to hear Rajalakshmi saying this. "One reason I learnt *parai* is because Bala really enjoys listening to *parai* music. In fact, he gets excited and dances. I have taught him to play the drum and he plays well." She is very sincere in her talk and her eyes glow when she says this. "Whatever I learn in the CRC, I teach my brother Bala… painting and drawing, working with paper, even clay modelling… Sir, do you know one thing? During a photography workshop the creative leads allowed me to go around with a costly DSLR camera… I immediately took it to my brother to show him the fancy gadget. He wanted to click the way I clicked the camera. Then I gave him a few instructions and he could follow them. Then he himself clicked a few times. To my surprise he had shot an old lady sitting at a distance. The picture looked nice for me. Our creative leads were surprised. Then the picture was chosen as one of the best pictures. Then it travelled a long way. This time during the art manual release function the picture was exhibited along with other pictures in Gandhi Museum. Many people saw the picture. I was proud and happy for my brother. But for CEDAR this would not have happened."

Rajalakshmi teaching her elder brother bala on how to handle the camera

Photograph taken by Rajalakshmi's brother Bala

Mother Easwari agrees. “She is the helper and guardian… she teaches him many things. His aggression has come down a lot. When he runs away in a mad fit Raji goes in search of him and brings him back.” Rajalakshmi has taught him to sing. Clay modelling too. They take Bala twice in a month, to a mental health clinic. But they can’t find a home which would keep him after 15, they say. It is not simply the brother-sister bond but what is heartening is how this child who is hardly 14 is able to improvise upon what she learnt and provide ‘an art therapy’ to her brother. “What will you do when you become an adult and go to mind your own business?” she was asked. “I will still care for my brother,” Rajalakshmi says. When the family cannot afford professional care, what Raji does makes a lot of sense.

During the school closure, once the neighbour woman took her to the ration shop where she worked. She wanted her to be of some assistance to her as she went about doing her chores. The woman gave her Rs. 50/- as pocket money and treated her over a meal every day. One day, the ‘weigh master’ did not turn up and there was a big que in front of the shop. To the perplexed lady Rajalakshmi gave the answer. She got into action started operating the machine and making bills. It became a day’s work and the lady was so happy that she gave her Rs. 500/- that day. In a few days, she bought a second-hand bicycle for Rs. 800/-.

Rajalakshmi gets up at 5.30 in the morning. By six, she cycles down 3 KMs to the wholesale market to buy vegetables for her mother’s little shop. She cycles back with 15 KG load. Mother says, “She is like a boy. He is my connect with the outside world. Without her I cannot earn these few rupees from the shop. The elder one is always hooked to her school studies but helps only in the domestic chores.” When asked about ‘every day cycling in the morning’ she says, “it is no burden at all. I enjoy going… and I enjoy helping mother.[1] When I come back from the market, I will barely have an hour to go to school. When I return from school, I go to the CEDAR centre by 5.00 PM and comes back by 8.00 PM. After eating, I go to bed by 9.00.”

Her present obsession is drawing and painting. She was given a certificate of appreciation in a regional level competition in 2020. She plays Volleyball for her school. She says she is a ‘good block’ and enjoys playing interschool competitions.

Portrayal of a horse by Rajalakshmi using oil pastels

Recently, she threw up another surprise. She joined a woman *nathaswaram* artiste by name Chandrakala trying to learn the heaviest wind instrument. *Nathaswaram* though is played in mainstream temples, *nathaswaram* artistes are looked down upon in casteist terms. Chandrkala spoke to me over phone. She said, “Rajalakshmi was still an apprentice and on one occasion she was with me on the stage … I had to take a break while performing. As I was returning from the rest room, I heard someone continuing with the instrument… it was Raji and I was thoroughly surprised. She is a girl of immense courage. The pity is, she hasn’t got the time to commit and learn full-fledged.”

Rajalakshmi (third from left) with Chandrakala, her Nadaswaram music teacher

Every time you meet her, she surprises you with something new. Asked about her studies she says, “I am not like my sister studying so well… but I don’t care.” What she wants to become then? “A few years ago, I thought I must become a policewoman… no more I like that idea. Presently, I am toying with the idea of becoming an artist. I like pencil drawing… but I still keep my options open.” Rajalakshmi’s instant readiness to experiment with different arts keeps her constantly exploding with positive energy. But her problem-solving abilities keep her cool and get meaningfully engaged with life as it obtains. Her greatest creative achievement, anyone would agree, is the ‘supportive space she has created in the family. Given the economic and social circumstances this is no mean achievement. Rajalakshmi’s case demands revisiting of our understanding of creativity and resilience in children.

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Notes:

1. Children assisting family enterprise even under the age of 14 is not child labour anymore according to Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation Amendment Act) 2012.