Finding his voice, finding his way

The story of Levin Kumar, 14, Kovilpatti

CRC, a place he refused to enter

When Prem invited his friend Levin to CEDAR's Children's Resource Centre (CRC), Levin refused. He thought it is yet another tuition centre, with more lessons and more drilling and memorizing for examinations. Prem kept pestering him until he agreed to visit. A single visit changed Levin's attitude. Once there, Levin discovered something he had not expected. The atmosphere was casual; the facilitator was friendly and the room strewn around with sheets of papers and drawing and painting materials. He felt the pulses of freedom he was missing at home and school.

Levin lives in Kovilpatti with his parents and younger sister. His father, who studied up to Class 5, supports the family through hard work. He manually loads trucks and lorries for a daily wage. He attends agricultural labour too. His mother manages the household. Levin was carefree and not particularly focused on his studies. He was yet to understand what sustained the family, particularly the father's effort behind it.

At the centre, drawing quickly caught his interest. With a pencil in his hand, he could become so absorbed that he forgot even the chores his mother had assigned. During a session with drawing teacher Chitra, he imagined a tortoise jumping from a bridge into a pond, water splashing around it. Some friends laughed at the picture. Levin, however, remained convinced of his idea. His mother appreciated it. CRC facilitator Ponuthai was supportive, and Chitra offered suggestions for improvement. He was willing to take advice. Yet he trusted his imagination. This confidence he would soon take beyond the drawing table.

Words fail



In 2024, Ponuthai encouraged Levin to participate in children's theatre activities organized by CEDAR with the support of visiting Swiss GUB company. He readily accepted and totally immersed himself. Noticing his involvement, theatre lead Balaji tutored him on introduced he relationship between performance, emotions and emotional intelligence. Levin could now explore feelings better and understand how people respond to different situations.

Then came a three-day workshop in Lingavadi. It was an opportunity for children to perform before village residents. Levin was given the role of a *comali* (jester) in a play meant to problematise open defecation. His humour and sense of satire suited the role. But when he faced the audience, he panicked. The dialogue he was supposed to deliver slipped from his memory.
Levin nevertheless completed the performance. Afterwards, he spoke to Balaji. "I got frightened when I saw the audience and forgot the lines... but I enjoyed the experience. I will do better next time," he said honestly. His difficulty did not extinguish his interest. He continued with theatre. To everybody's surprise he wrote his own play, *The Poor Father's Girl*. He staged it before an audience in Manjanayakanpatti, village. From defending an unusual tortoise image in his drawing to recovering from a faltering performance, Levin was learning to stay with his ideas even when the response or the experience was uncomfortable.

A different kind of recognition

Something made Levin accompany his father to work and help doing load-lifting for trucks. First time he experienced bodily, the hardship his father had been going through every day. He began to recognise what was behind the family's daily sustenance. He told his father, "I will work with you during my holidays."

His father, in turn, started recognising qualities in Levin that were not always apparent in school. Teachers had described his son as somewhat lazy and indifferent. "When he comes to work with me, he is more focused and empathetic and this is enough for me," he told his mother emphatically. This brought a new dimension in the father-son relationship, namely, trust. Levin was changing fast.

The CRC gave Levin opportunities to create, take risks and reflect on setbacks; he could recognise his agency; time alongside his father taught him what it means to share responsibilities. An academic lens might not easily see these qualities as necessary for life.

Levin's story remains unfinished. He still has to work on his studies and his confidence before an audience. Yet the boy who expected little from the CRC defended his imagination, completed a difficult performance and brought his own play to the stage. At home, he is learning to appreciate the labour and sweat that brings salt home. As Levin discovers what he can express, his father is discovering more of what his son can become.

Balaji