

Inhabiting Palampur: Teaching Economics and Political Science through Drama during the Pandemic

[MANJIMA CHATTERJEE](#)

SHIV NADA SCHOOL, INDIA

ABSTRACT

This essay reviews a process drama led integration of Economics and Political Science in a project called 'The Story of Palampur' through the lens of Dorothy Heathcote's 1983 call to re-evaluate both the purpose of our schools and the society we wish to build. Taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic at an elite K-12 school in India, the project utilised the process drama approach to teach the threshold concepts of choice, scarcity, and marginalisation. By stepping into the lives of vulnerable residents in the fictional village of Palampur—such as displaced migrant workers and Dalit farmers—privileged students from an urban Indian school navigated the complex intersections of caste, class, and democratic friction in rural India. This embodied learning approach challenged the traditional, data-driven frameworks of the social sciences, shifting the pedagogical focus from the rote memorisation of civic institutions to a lived experience of political awareness and social justice. While demonstrating how digital drama

pedagogy successfully fostered profound empathy and interrogated neoliberal educational paradigms, the essay also candidly reflects on the systemic challenges of sustaining experiential frameworks against standardised assessment pressures. Ultimately, the Story of Palampur case study illustrates that drama can provide a critical lens for humanising the curriculum, developing 21st century skills and cultivating genuinely engaged democratic citizens.

The present time will provide the time to wander and press,
Not the time that we must arrive.
Arrival are those moments of being able to demonstrate our
knowing,
And the wandering is the time of learning.

— ‘Of These Seeds Becoming’ Dorothy Heathcote, 1978

In 2020, during the first year of the coronavirus pandemic-induced lockdown in India, urban Indians were faced with a sight from which they could not turn away: millions of the urban poor, who seasonally migrate to the cities for work, began walking back to their homes, in villages across the country. The sight of these resilient people, struggling to traverse the thousands of kilometres on foot, shocked the affluent teenagers with whom we work at an elite K-12 institution, which also caters to a large group of economically disadvantaged children who live in the neighbourhood of the school. With students at home unable to attend school for a whole year (eventually almost two, although we did not know this then), teachers were struggling to engage them in learning processes. Cameras would be turned off, chat options would often be misused, and the 12-14 age group was the worst affected by constant distraction and online bullying, much of which was taking place during the class schedule. Events in the outer world were impossible to escape and only added to their malaise, and it was in this context that a group of teachers came together to explore a different way of learning, choosing drama as the medium instead of the regular chalk-talk or discussion methods.

Why did we choose drama? A live medium that thrives on human interaction, drama wasn't doing very well in the online mode. Our

physical forms were largely hidden from view, framed within the narrow borders of our respective screens, and voices were distorted or reached us via delay, disrupting timing and dousing the spark of enthusiasm for ‘live’-ness. Ensembles couldn’t work, neither could choruses. In the Theatre classroom, we had taken to monologuing, and much of that was anyway mediated by camera angles and visual technology. So the choice to work with drama was also a choice to engage with non-live forms such as video and online platform-based technology, as well as a range of very specific tools and conventions that could survive the vagaries of Zoom interactions. Yet, the outcome was an experience unlike any other. Student participation increased exponentially with each stage, cameras were switched on and often stayed on, and each student’s final contribution was a richly developed essay on a question formulated or chosen by them and refined during the course of the journey. The focus of the process was on changing the narrative—choosing to acknowledge our situation and enabling students to find a way to engage with agency, curiosity and empathy with the world beyond their known realities. In the process, we turned many of the accepted practices of learning in the Senior Years on their heads, and planted the question: what sort of learning do we want in our schools? And how can this learning empower students to be well-adjusted and contributing members of society at large? As one may well imagine, this project was deeply influenced by and designed along the lines of drama as a learning medium as developed by the inimitable Dorothy Heathcote.¹

THE CONTEXT AND THE OBJECTIVE

Our school is located in Uttar Pradesh, one of the largest and poorest states in India, but the city itself is a tech hub, and the school’s demographic is varied, with parents who are entrepreneurs, white collar workers and government employees, as well as landed farmers who have recently entered the ranks of the rich. In Noida, semi-urban villages lie next door to corporate townships, and provide the labour that keeps these spaces clean, safe and served. In 2014, in keeping

¹ As we begin the exploration, the author would like to share with readers that the word ‘role,’ is used in multiple ways. When it is used in lower case, it is used in the layperson sense of the performance of regular functions or duties, whereas when it is used with a capital R, as ‘Role,’ this refers to its use in drama.

with the nation's Right to Education rules, the school opened up 25% of its seats to students who came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and lived within a 1 km range. These students, whose parents often work as cleaners, drivers and support staff in the school, or as daily wage labourers at construction sites nearby, study on a full scholarship and are supported by the school in the procurement of their uniforms, tech devices and all learning needs. Orientations are conducted on a regular basis for fee-paying as well as non-fee-paying parents, new and old teachers, with an intent to integrate students from all backgrounds and find ways to work together towards a joyful learning journey.

The case study I'm presenting here formed the basis of our exploration of the base concepts of Economics and Political Science through the development of 'Kahaani Palampur Ki' (The Story of Palampur) in Grade 9, an introductory chapter in the Economics textbook meant to introduce the discipline of Economics. The threshold concepts of Choice, Scarcity, Margins, Cost and Benefit which are embedded in this chapter were introduced to 72 13–14-year-old students through the Story of Palampur, using Process Drama as a pedagogical tool to address these concepts. The students came to us through four different homerooms of approximately 18 students each, and were guided by a group of six facilitators—two each from Drama, Economics and Political Science. Three students in this group were scholarship students who had come to us as referrals from the Teach for India network and were supported by a charitable foundation.² The virtual module created liminal spaces for a transformative and integrative understanding of choice and marginality, developed in three parts through seven months in 2020.

What We Did

In the first of 3 story cycles, we began by viewing video footage of 3 residents of the fictional village of Palampur (teachers in role)³ sharing

² It is to be noted that this batch did not include the students added under the RTE (Right to Education Act, 2009) rules, who were added as 3-4 year olds in the batch entering school in 2014, and therefore were still studying in Primary Years at this time.

³ While the Roles were presented by drama teachers, the stories themselves were taken from [People's Archive of Rural India \(PARI\)](https://people.sas.upenn.edu/~paulr/pari/). Evidence from the drama process may be [viewed on genially.com](https://www.genially.com/)

how they were affected by COVID-19—a migrant worker walking back to Palampur from Delhi, who was also on the verge of selling his land, a landless female farm labourer, and a low caste male *havaladar*, or police constable. The story was discovered to be set in the village of Palampur, which by deduction was placed in a valley somewhere in Northern India. Contrary to most popular beliefs, most of the farmers there were women, as the men were mostly away on seasonal migrations (reflecting the data on the ground in most of India).

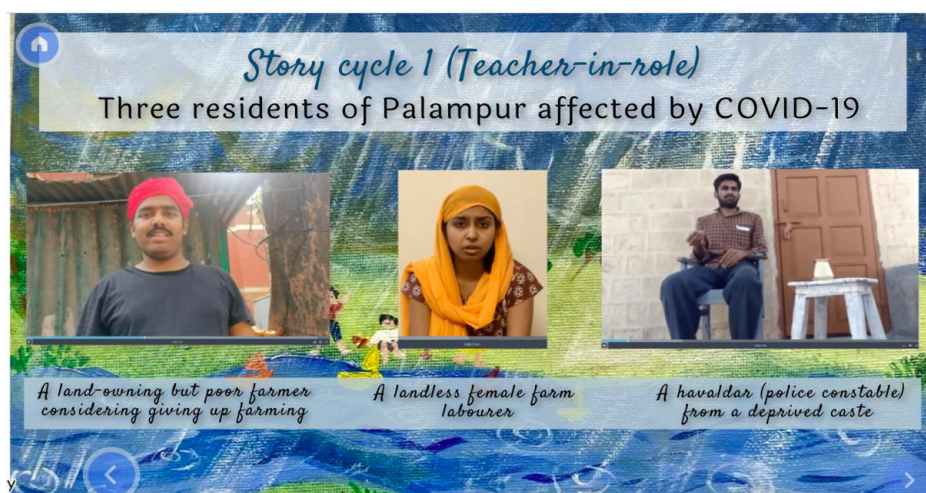


Image 16: Screenshots from the video testimonies that launched the first cycle.

Through these video interactions, students were made cognizant of the fact that caste factors drive many aspects of life and livelihoods in rural India, including the choice of professions, and even apparently caste-agnostic professions like that of the police are not, in fact, free of this form of bias. Their stories were drawn from real life incidents reported on the People's Archive of Rural India, or PARI, a site which we urged students to explore as a part of their research. After watching the videos, each student was asked to frame questions, which they were able to ask the 'residents' in person during a panel discussion. The 'residents', of course, were Teachers in Role, and their task was to introduce the concepts of poverty and marginality as lived experiences.

In the second cycle, we explored margins and marginality and their impact on choice-making. This time, students stepped 'in Role' through a 3-step process. In the first step, they imagined a map of the village, applying their prior knowledge and understanding to propose the same. To review the appropriateness of this map, they studied the

maps of some villages in the region, village demographics from Northern India via the most recent Census, and, based on the same, created their own imaginary demographics for Palampur. After this, they co-created a final map of 'their' village, with some basic common features in place, such as a state road, a river and a bridge across it, using their new-found understanding of factors such as socio-economic power and how it governs village landscapes to design the map. Once again, they were invited to debrief their experience in the drama, both through reflecting on their own concerns and their questions in Role, and through the formulation of theoretical responses and questions pertaining to the economic and political concepts under study.

At the third step, they were allocated their caste and religious identities via lottery, and chose their name, profession and area of residence on this basis. Once they had become comfortable with the Role, they were invited to contribute to an ongoing discussion on the setting up of a paper mill near the village in a village Meeting.

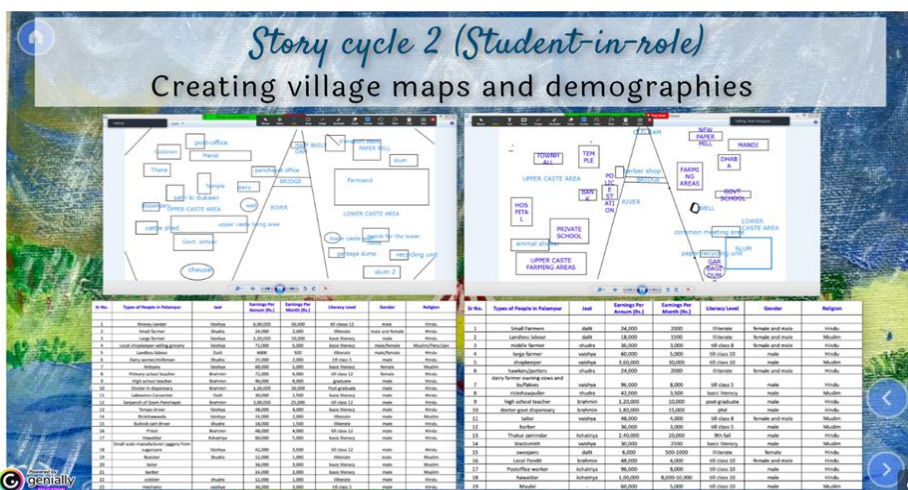


Image 17: Sample maps created by the students on the basis of their research.

The paper mill promised economic prosperity and employment (appealing to the immediate, material survival of the landless and displaced villagers), yet its impacts included environmental degradation, water pollution, and the systematic encroachment of a powerful clique onto communal village resources. In Role, this created an acute ethical and economic conflict within the village community, and this discussion became the major talking point of an election,

wherein 3 Teachers-in-Role stepped in as potential candidates for election to the local government with campaigns that took different positions on the paper mill.

Without going into too many details, it should suffice to say that the Roles and their standpoints were layered and complex:

1. A middle-aged male Dalit contractor who supported the paper mill, which would be set up and run by the local landlords
2. A young male Muslim schoolteacher speaking against the paper mill for environmental reasons
3. A middle-aged upper caste female politician whose husband was the previous Councillor, removed from his position on the grounds of corruption

The tension grew with the understanding that a vote for one's caste-supported candidate did not necessarily mean a favoured outcome for the community as a whole, whereas the candidate who seemed to be speaking in favour of equitable development did not have the favoured background, leading us into the third and final cycle of the process.

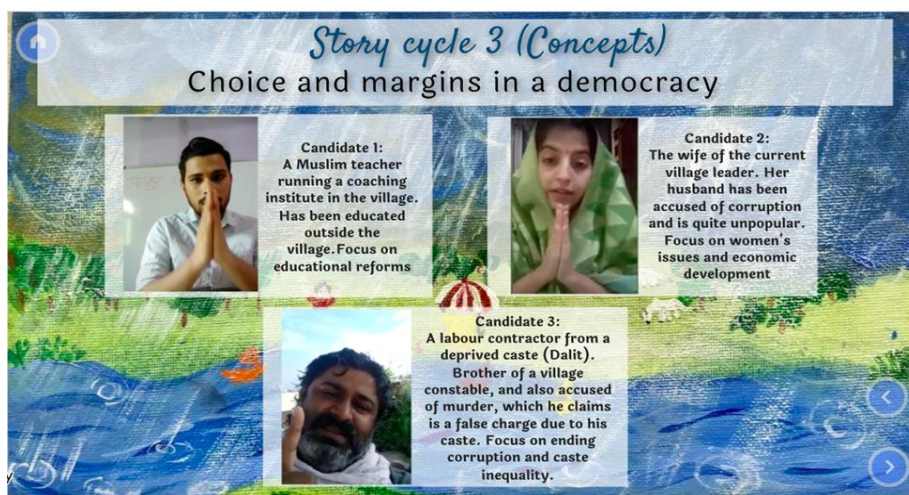


Image 18: Each candidate standing for election represented different interests.

In the final cycle, the three Teachers in Role as candidates for the aforementioned leadership position, who had adopted different caste and religious identities and had different manifestos, shared campaign videos with the villagers. A televised panel discussion and debate between the candidates, and an article on the election written in a local

newspaper were also shared. Our students who had ‘become’ the inhabitants of Palampur engaged with the issues raised by the candidates, and, through the use of drama, this engagement transcended their lived experiences of urban privileged children. This was supported by, at different points in the drama, charting daily travel routes on a digital map, choosing specific physical postures appropriate to their role, and, as a part of their final deliverables, delivering a monologue explaining their choice of vote while dressed in Role. As a culmination, each student was invited to write an essay on a question formulated by them or chosen by them from the accumulated pool, and also, in Role, share an endorsement for a candidate of their choice, demonstrating their understanding of their Roles’ interests and priorities. Through these engagements over the course of three months, students, as voters in Palampur, dealt with the pandemic, with caste and class issues as well as migration patterns, and, through the conflicts and narratives introduced, began to grasp how theories of Economics and Political Science play out in real life situations and impact real people’s lives.

THE PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS OF INTEGRATION

It is therefore, dear [researcher], my task as I see it
To arm myself well for this struggle,
So as to lead my class well into this forest of ideas,
Where light, dark, soft, hard, shallow, deep elements wait so that
we
Can carry well-guarded
The questions to which we have as yet no answers.
— “Of These Seeds Becoming”. Dorothy Heathcote, 1978 (p. 4-5)

As you can see detailed above, the tools and drama conventions which we used through this process were primarily Role, with Teachers and Students in Role; and Conference, or Meeting. While playing ‘in Role’, the teacher or student engages with the situation from a particular person’s perspective, and invites others into the world of the drama. It creates scope for empathy, as we step into the shoes of a villager and view a situation through their lens. In Role, the teachers were told that their ‘performance’ was meant to be minimalistic; more a matter of

helping students engage with the situation or story, and not about getting the delivery or body right. Similarly, the Student-in-Role was told to bank on their understanding of the Role through research, and to express their understanding of a situation from that viewpoint. We primarily used this tool on 3 occasions—while introducing the village of Palampur and the impact of poverty through its residents, while getting the students to understand the relationship between choice and marginality by ‘becoming’ residents of Palampur, and to intensify the conflicts through the candidates who stood for election.

Meeting, or Conference, is a drama convention in which students gather together to confer, in Role, about a fictional situation. While this was our overarching drama convention, used at multiple moments of crisis within ‘the Big Lie,’⁴ the panel discussion or debate was a pedagogical strategy deployed within that convention to spark dialogue, such as when students gathered to ask questions of the Palampur residents in the first phase. When the critical question of a paper mill being set up in the village was raised in the second phase, the children in Role as villagers had to formulate their stance both individually and as a collective. In the third phase, we met in Role at a Gram Sabha, a Village Conference equivalent of a Town Hall, to listen to and ask questions of the candidates standing for election.

By way of these conventions, we were able to considerably raise the bar of classroom discourse, as could be seen from the reflections of teachers on the essays written by the students, and the questions the students raised in Role and out of Role during classroom interactions as well as meetings and discussions. The liminal space provided by Drama helped students negotiate social exclusion and vulnerability and understand the neglected story of ‘expectations’. One student reflected that her main learning was best expressed through this quote from *Animal Farm*: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell, 1945).

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The objective of this endeavour was to make all the students appreciate and more than superficially engage with the complexity of

⁴ The ‘Big Lie’ is an agreement between teacher and students to enter a fictional premise *as if* it is true, while being fully aware that it is a fabrication.

economic and political transactions between individuals, each of whom have their own private goals and rights in a Political-Economic system which is often in complete contrast to their own realities and identities. While the hidden agenda was to help students confront their own prejudices and misconceptions with sensitivity and develop empathy and consideration for others and for themselves, the conversations between teachers regularly reminded all of us to keep the inquiry open to multiple perspectives and allow students to arrive at their own independent conclusions and take their own paths to reach the same. We were all too aware of the ways in which the conversation could become didactic, as well as the risks we were taking with a topic such as this one, and in our planning and debriefing sessions with each other we followed a set of inquiry questions that allowed us to reflect on the sessions and our own roles within the process. Some of these are shared below.

1. What is 'the Big Lie'—the practical, fictional situation the group must enter at this stage? What is the task they must perform?
2. What is the universal or underlying human tension (caste friction, scarcity, structural bias) that they might discover through that task?
3. What is the dramatic frame, constraint, or disruption we will introduce to nudge children into the driving seat?
4. Which conventions might we use effectively at this stage?
5. What registers am I looking at taking on for this purpose? How does this chosen register grant agency to the students?
6. What can we share, and what we must absolutely not share with the children at this stage? If and when the children discover what we are withholding, how will that alter the stakes of 'the Big Lie'?
7. What are some possible questions that may arise? What should our stance be on these? How can we ensure that our stance on their questions protects multiple perspectives, rather than guiding them towards our predetermined assumptions?
8. How will we respond to difficult questions without breaking the open-ended nature of the inquiry?
9. How are we helping children keep the distance between their realities and that of their roles? How will we safely bridge the transition between operating inside the fiction and reflecting out

of Role?

Through this iterative, nine-point planning and debriefing framework, we aimed to systematically navigate teacher bias, maintain open-ended inquiry, ensure effective deployment of drama conventions, and protect the emotional safety of all participants—children as well as teachers—while dealing with sensitive socio-political themes such as caste. Following Heathcote’s use of tension as the ‘pressure’ created by the facilitator by deliberately narrowing the options for action, forcing the group to work within tight boundaries of time, space, or social constraint—‘the suspense of not knowing, or ...the desperation of sensing a crucial limitation which one has to fight to overcome’ (Wagner, 1976, p. 149)—we intentionally designed structural bottlenecks. For instance, withholding critical economic information regarding the mill’s ownership structure as well as potential negative impacts forced students to operate with incomplete data, mimicking real-world bureaucratic opacity. The candidates’ loyalties were hidden by design, with some facts revealed during the Gram Sabha discussion and others remaining ambiguous up till the end. These constraints ensured that students had to deepen their engagement through discussion and investigation—one student even proposed a raid on a Councillor’s home to get to the truth!—which helped us to ensure that we were able to fulfil our learning outcomes.

ECONOMICS AND POLITICS AS LIVED REALITY

Economics is often represented as a ‘hard’ science made up of abstract, rational actors, graphs, and numbers, and the higher the academic level, the more this tends to be true. We believe that humans act as per their self-interest and that the definition of self-interest is one that is universally understood. On the ground, however, this approach simply doesn’t fit. As Kate Raworth, the founder of Doughnut Economics (to which both this plan and this paper owes a great deal) famously said, the notion of *Homo Economicus* as a purely self-interested being is a monocultural myth, and in order to truly understand how human socio-economic behaviour occurs, we must shift our view of humanity to “social, interdependent, approximating, fluid in values and dependent upon the living world” (Raworth, 2017, p. 85). The economist and ethicist Paul Heyne, reflecting on his own

practice, wrote:

I started out wondering why economists arrived at so many immoral conclusions and gradually discovered both that social systems were far more complex than I had supposed and that my notions of morality were much too simple. (2008, p. 7)

The intersection of human reality and economic theory is too often obfuscated in the search for perfect solutions—and more often than not to serve the purposes of individual prosperity at the cost of people and the planet. Educational processes serve these purposes through the factory model that is designed to teach subjects as bearing abstract and general ‘truths’, rather than as compilations of findings from real life, based on real experiences, much of which is variable over time and space, and can neither be sublimated, nor generalised to any great extent.

Like economics, political science at the secondary level has been traditionally taught as the study of sterile institutions, constitutional clauses, and mechanical processes. The ‘democratic state’ is presented as a neutral entity, and the ‘democratic citizen’ is presented as a universal, rational actor exercising free will at the ballot box. Educators have actively sought to query this approach, as mentioned by the authors of the introductory letter to teachers and parents in the Grade 9 NCERT textbook on *Democratic Politics-I*.

Syllabi of Civics in our country tend to focus on formal institutions of government. The textbooks are full of constitutional, legal and procedural details, presented in a dry and abstract manner. No wonder children experience disconnect between the theory they read in the textbook and what they see in real life around them. (2012, p. v)

The chapter on Kahaani Palampur Ki in the textbook was thus introduced with the clear intent to humanise the learning of Political Science. However, presumably owing to a lack of understanding of alternative approaches, teachers of Political Science tend to skip the story and abstract the findings of this chapter into generalised, sanitised concepts which they can easily teach in class. Our drama project sought to actively challenge this sanitised reality and to offer an

alternate approach by framing Political Science and Economics through the lens of deeply human, messy, and socially constructed lived experiences.

We did this in four major ways:

1. **By shifting the baseline reality:** We intentionally moved the students out of their lived reality of urban privilege into a village in the foothills of Northern India which was unfamiliar both geographically and sociologically, challenging them to construct a reality of which they had very little prior knowledge, and which was therefore subject to lesser bias.
2. **By humanising abstract concepts:** Instead of treating Choice, Scarcity, Margins, Cost and Benefit as mere vocabulary words, we framed these deliberately and iteratively as ‘threshold concepts’—foundational, transformative ideas within the discipline that act as a gateway to deeper understanding of the domain—that had to be experienced to be understood.
3. **By introducing intersectionality:** We redefined economic reality by showing that it cannot be separated from sociology and politics, emphasising that caste and class factors drive professional choices and that economic survival is often impacted by real-world crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. **By defining the Economic Actor/ Agent:** The objective was to make students appreciate the complexity of economic transactions between individuals, recognising that each person has private goals and rights within a larger political-economic system, and that human agency is impacted by multiple considerations and not just profit.

Safeguarding in Role & the Drama Contract

First and foremost, our process sought to challenge the notion of the generic, equal citizen. While in theory, every student in India recognises the existence of marginalisation, it is often difficult for them, particularly those operating from positions of great privilege such as most of ours, to understand how it operates in the everyday. When we conceptualised the different Roles, we were aware that there would be certain Roles which no one would want to step into. These are typically Roles associated with being especially disadvantaged, including the performance of menial and dangerous tasks such as sanitation work or

butchery. At the time of the map-making activity, we had itemised the professions of villagers as per the national demographic data, and students were aware that we would be stepping into these Roles. In order to democratise the process, we had students draw lots for their Roles, but not publicly share the Roles they had been allocated. We then invited students who were unsure or uncomfortable with their Roles to share their discomforts privately (through one-on-one messaging) and set up individual conversations with them. Most of the findings were as per our anticipation.

- In most cases, students knew that they did not want to take on certain caste (and therefore professional) identities, but couldn't articulate why.
- In a couple of cases, parents got involved, once again with mostly inarticulated discomfort.
- Some students said that they were not uncomfortable per se with their allocated Role, but anticipated teasing by peers.
- Only a couple were straightforward about sharing their prejudice, saying they did not want to play people whom they thought of as 'dirty'.

The conversations with students began with being reminded that this was a drama-led project where everyone was 'only pretending,' and then moved into a deeper probing of the discomfort, with clear reminders that they would not be judged on their stances, nor persuaded to do something they did not want to do. The results were mixed.

- Some children took on their Roles after due reassurances that the teachers would ensure that 'what happened in the drama stayed within the drama.'
- A couple said the conversations helped, but they did not feel confident enough to take on their Roles within their peer groups. Their feedback was respected, and their Roles quietly changed after discussion with them.
- Some parents, it turned out, were uncomfortable with the 'risky' topic of caste being broached at all, and, after being shown that it was a subject of academic study in the 9th Grade, were persuaded that children should be allowed to explore the topic

through a non-biased lens and arrive at their own conclusions. The only reassurance they sought from us was that if the subsequent questions from the children were too complex for them to answer, the teachers would step in to help!

Subsequently, the teachers went back to the group and reiterated that the drama was meant to be a safe space and that if anything from within it was used to hurt anyone outside of the drama, we would suspend the effort immediately and return to a regular lecture-based study. Each participant—student and teacher—took an oath to keep the promise: ‘What happens in the drama stays within the drama.’ Many students were already familiar with this idea, having experienced it multiple times in our regular drama classes. We brought out the ‘Drama Contract’—essential agreements with which we approach any drama class—and all students and participating teachers agreed to honour it. The Contract is shared below for reference.

1. All participants agree to adhere to the reality described in the drama and will only step out of the same by way of an established signal.
2. When the established signal is used, all participants will step out of Role immediately.
3. The group agrees that whatever a student says or does while in Role belongs entirely to the fictional Role, not to the student's reality, and therefore the student will not be penalised or teased on account of it in real life.
4. When the teacher adopts a specific register (such as a helpless bystander or a bureaucratic officer), the students will respond to that Role's status rather than treating the teacher as the One Who Knows. Where the Teacher-in-Role does not have all the answers, the Students-in-Role will try to figure out answers for themselves, as per the demands of the situation.
5. This is a space to ‘be’ not ‘act’. The aim is not to entertain our peers. None of the participants will exaggerate or parody their assigned Roles, but will try to step into their shoes with authenticity and respect.

The sharing of the Contract, and the reiteration of drama essentials went a long way towards building confidence in the group as

well as setting the boundaries of what was permissible.

Understanding Intersectionality

The overall effort sought to establish that political reality in India is fundamentally intersectional. A Dalit (casteless) female farm labourer does not experience the State in the same way an upper-caste landowner, or even a lower-caste male police constable does. The reality of citizenship is often fractured by identity, and even the state apparatus (the police, the law) that is meant to be inherently objective is in fact embedded with the same social prejudices as the society it governs. In an important move, rather than teaching about the local government system (the Panchayati Raj system) as a dry flow-chart of processes, the drama presented the Gram Sabha (Village Council) as a highly charged space riddled with personal and socio-economic biases and contested authority. Inside the Sabha, the poorer, lower-caste and female farm-labourer Roles had to voice their demands against the institutional dominance of upper-caste landowning Roles and uncooperative, corrupt bureaucratic authorities played by the teachers. This asymmetry of status created a palpable, lived conflict. The tension lay in the sheer impossibility of making one's voice heard, if one were, at worst, a poor, landless, low caste woman, within the high-stakes arena of social contestation that is an administrative apparatus. Politics, therefore, came to be understood not as a set of rules, but as a live negotiation of power, survival, and resource allocation.

Much of this learning came through when we reflected with the students on the day's events after stepping out of Role. On some days, we did not have the time to have out-of-Role reflections during the drama session, and therefore this took place during the Economics or Political Science class. The drama teachers learned about many of these reflections through conversations with the academic teachers as well as the students' written reflections and their final essays.

HUMANISING EDUCATION THROUGH EMPATHY

Schools take pride, as we discussed above, in teaching us 'the scientific approach', which, with its "fiction of academic orderliness" (Wagner, 1976, p. 166), is perhaps the very opposite of Dorothy

Heathcote's method. Heathcote was interested in "leading an expedition into the wilderness of the left hand" (ibid.), towards "*knowing*—understanding emotionally as well as intellectually" (ibid.). Wagner (1976) mentions that Heathcote "uses drama to expand [children's] awareness, to enable them to look at reality through fantasy, to see below the surface of actions to their meaning. She is interested... in, as she terms it, burnishing children through the play." (Wagner, 1976, p. 15) Integral to this process of 'burnishing' is the unstated demand for the teacher to step away from their position of power, from the position of the 'one-who-always-knows' (to extend a Heathcotian teaching register) to become a part of the process, and discover and learn with the children. The most important aspect of Heathcote's process was the asking of the right question at the right time. She mentioned elsewhere her sense of identification with the work of Jerome Bruner (Heathcote, 2002, p. 4-14), who proposed a *spiral curriculum* which would allow children to learn at their own pace and not be held back by adults' notions of what is appropriate for them. One can appreciate this identification, given that the heart of Heathcote's project lay in empowering people, bringing dignity to those who feel helpless, and raising the level of a person's consciousness to make sense of their world in a new and deeper way.

Armed with the intent to take forward the learning process in a Heathcotian way, we were able to thoroughly interrogate traditional, passive learning heuristics (like reading a textbook or listening to a lecture) by replacing them with immersive, experiential frameworks. The use of Role created scope for active empathy, as we stepped into the shoes of a villager and viewed a situation through their lens. Students had to formulate political arguments not from their own privileged and biased perspectives, but through the lens of the specific political-economic needs, biases and vulnerabilities of their assigned Roles. Learners conducted research by way of reading news items as well as their textbook, and then acted as experts to offer solutions to the given contexts, thereby delving deeper into more purposeful learning. In a typical Political Science class, they might have been asked to write an essay on 'The Importance of Voting.' Instead, by the use of the convention of Meeting, or Conference, students created slogans on the pressing issues in their village, and asked questions to the candidates at the Gram Sabha, culminating with them casting a vote. This heuristic method provoked students to discover the

mechanics of democracy by actually doing the work of democratic deliberation—debating, challenging authority, and making electoral choices based on on-the-ground exigencies.

Traditional classrooms usually avoid genuine political friction, but drama thrives on tension! As Heathcote frequently emphasised, dramatic tension—distinct from conflict, which causes outright opposition—is the fuel that drives curiosity and the drive to resolution, the catalyst that transforms passive spectators into active, critical investigators. It is not the tension of melodrama, but the one designed through an assigned task, limited time, and responsibility. The tensions evoked by our drama created a cognitive dissonance within our privileged urban cohort: they could no longer view rural poverty as an abstract statistic to be solved by simple philanthropy or simply ignored as a fact of life. Instead, the dramatic tension compelled them, by stepping into the lives of contemporary Indian villagers, to interrogate their own unearned privileges from within the safety of the dramatic frame. In their exit ticket reflections, several students actively pointed to this, as indicated in just a few of their statements shared below:

- “I shouldn't take my privileges for granted.”
- “How the villagers have compromised in their life so much and here we are provided with all the luxury and we can't compromise at all.”
- “One important thing I learnt today was that a majority of people faced extremely critical problems for which there is no immediate solution. It reminded me that there was a lot more to the world than the life that I was living and encouraged me to try and become part of that world.”

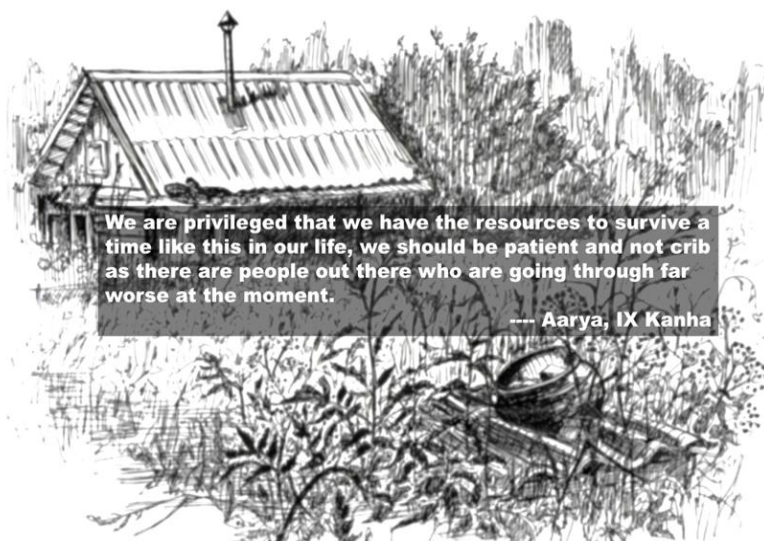


Image 19: Comment from a participant.

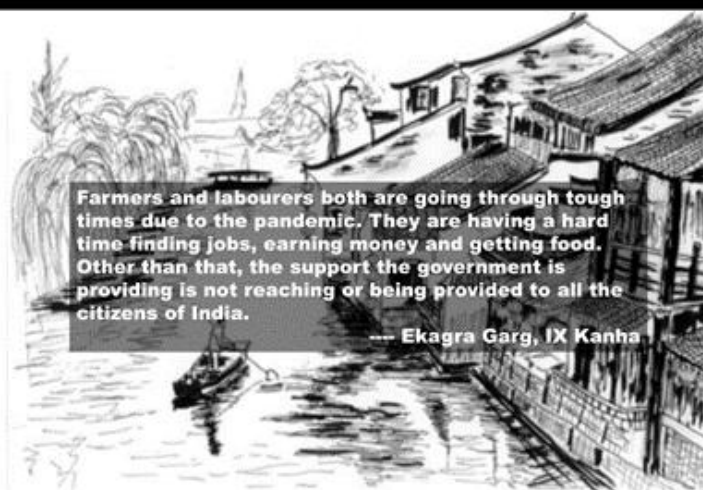


Image 20: Comment from another participant.

By using the liminality of drama, teachers were able to create a safe environment for students to explore political conflict, social exclusion, and inequality. Drama thus became a laboratory where political theories were tested against human behaviour, transcending students' lived experiences of being urban privileged children to become voters in Palampur, dealing with the trials and tribulations of a

known, yet unfamiliar social group. The heuristic shifts from memorisation of abstract concepts to empathy in a lived situation, requiring students to step into a villager's shoes to view socio-economic situations through their specific lens, developed empathy into an active learning strategy and provided a liminal space which allowed 14-year-old students to negotiate the universal concepts of vulnerability and social exclusion through 'the left hand of knowing'.

The most important consideration for us through the planning stage was that students had to *arrive at* these learning outcomes on their own, so that the theories would (or would not) stand up to scrutiny over the course of their learning journey. We aimed to present the theories for their consideration, as up for discussion, and not as *ipso facto*, closed and final truths. Towards this end, the method of learning was critically important.

THE IMPACT OF THE APPROACH

Development does not start with goods; it starts with people and their education, organization, and discipline. Without these three, all resources remain latent, untapped, potential.

— E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (1973, p. 168)

The German Sociologist Max Weber offered a three-part model of social stratification—including Class (which he defined as economic position), Status (which he defined as social honor/ prestige, and which in the Indian context maps almost perfectly onto the caste system), and Party/ Power (political influence), to help one arrive at *Verstehen*, or a comprehensive understanding, of human society (Weber, 1946). This framework clearly outlines that human choices have to be understood in terms of social experiences that are mediated by multiple variables. When our students took on their Roles as villagers, they added another layer of complexity to the decision-making—individual idiosyncrasies! The drama exercises further pushed our privileged students out of their comfort zones to experience the crushing weight of social facts in the Durkheimian sense. They realised that in Palampur, the freedom of economic decision-making, proffered

at the outset by their teachers, was an illusion, heavily constrained by the social facts of their assigned caste, gender, and religion, revealing the structural inequalities of which they were until then unaware. Furthermore, the sub-text of the pandemic demonstrated how macroeconomic shocks destroy the fragile stability of marginalised individuals. It showed them that economic scarcity isn't just a graph shifting left or right; it can devolve into profound social trauma (*anomie*) that tears at the fabric of a community.

The outcome of the process was a rich outpouring of thinking in the form of questions, followed by question elaborations, evolving into essays on which the academic part of their learning was assessed. Some of the questions, as well as a glimpse of essays produced, are shared here.

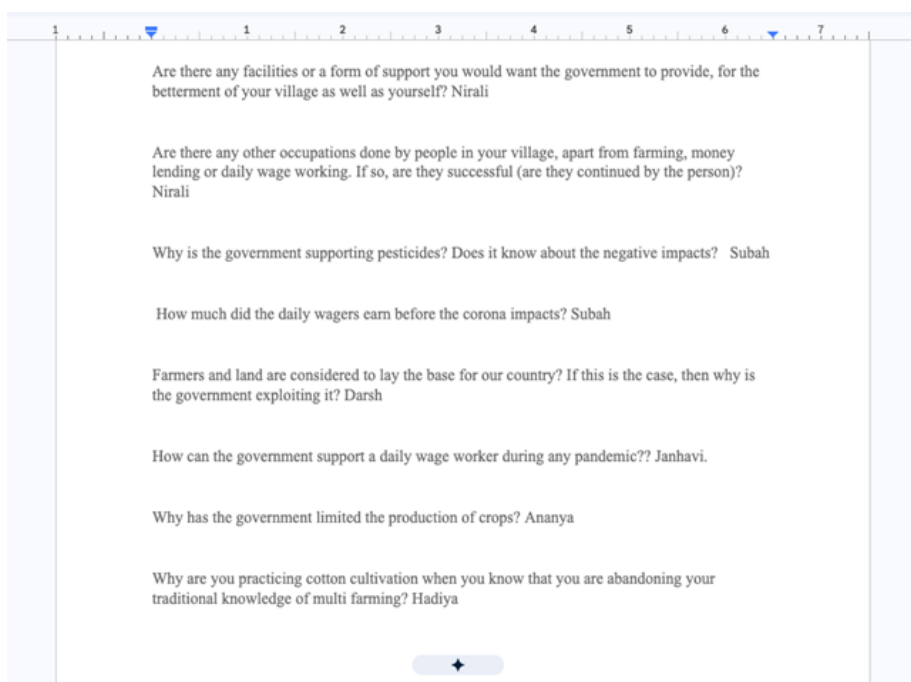


Image 21: Some questions shared by students during the first and second cycles.

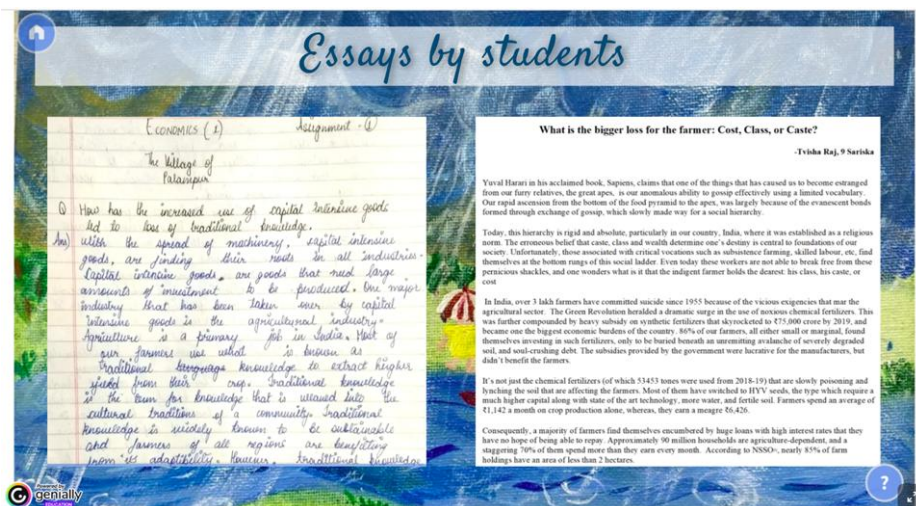


Image 22: Screenshot from a presentation sharing findings: questions chosen by students and explored through essays.

Through the process, emphasis was on the three Rs—rigour, realisation and responsibility (Heathcote, 2002). Teachers shifted registers depending on the different Roles they were playing, whether outright or in the shadowy sense.⁵ We pressed the group when they were facetious (as a group of 13/14-year-olds is sometimes wont to be) until they started correcting each other and themselves. We stepped out of Role and probed when they were too quick to jump to conclusions in Role. Sometimes, as district officials or media persons, we were decidedly unfriendly and often openly scheming, corrupt or uncompromising in Role, which caused a fair bit of shock in students hoping to be heard fairly or get across their demands easily. By way of these conventions, we were able to considerably raise the bar of classroom discourse, as can be seen from the questions raised in Role and out of Role during classroom interactions as well as the content of the meetings and discussions.

Similarly, most of the final essays depicted a depth of understanding far beyond what the teachers had expected from this batch of students, particularly given the loss of learning during the pandemic. While the conversations in the four different homerooms where this process was conducted varied to an extent depending on the different teachers and students who were a part of the process, the

⁵ To learn more about the 'shadowy' or 'twilight' Role, please take a look at Tim Taylor's article in this issue.

level of analysis and quality of text approached by all students across the homerooms was far higher than before or indeed, in other classes attended by the same group. Many of the final reflections in Role, expressing each villager's final choice of candidate (or NOTA—none of the above, in some cases), carried a deep understanding of their own challenges and struggles in Role. By the end of the process, on the basis of teacher assessments and their own feedback, it can be said that at least 80% of the students had developed a depth of understanding of the Roles they inhabited, and an ability to see the world through their eyes, standing not in their shoes, perhaps, but at least shoulder to shoulder in the same reality.

To that extent, the experiment can be said to have been successful. The area of improvement, as shared by students, was in tightening the timeline of the drama. The gaps between the cycles—the process overall took place over a period of three months, with 15–20 days between each cycle—were not helpful in holding up the tensions of the drama process. These gaps were caused by multiple factors, including the planners' unavailability for meetings while we were all online, multiple shifting decisions in the external world, changing assessment timelines and the general unpredictability of matters at the time. But the most important one, which I want to discuss here, was a general lack of belief in the efficacy of the process on the part of the teaching staff.

BUILDING BELIEF IN A BETTER APPROACH

Approaching Palampur through drama had been attempted before at our school. In the initial years of the school, the project-based learning approach (PBL) was used with all grades, though not throughout the year. Since the traditional schooling requirements did not permit PBL as a regular approach, the school had a designated week in its annual calendar, called 'Fun'kaar Week,⁶ during which this could be done. During one of the 'Fun'kaar Weeks, we had conducted a week-long drama immersion into the Palampur story, and it was a great success in terms of student and staff response. Students had expressed their desire to delve deeper into some of the situations and storylines which

⁶ 'Fun'kaar is a portmanteau of the English word 'fun' and the Hindi term 'kaar', which means 'one who does'. The word *funkaar* in Hindi literally means artist.

we had to skip on account of the paucity of time, but participating teachers had also expressed great enthusiasm for the process and asked for it to be repeated. However, in subsequent years, for various reasons, this could not be done, and eventually 'Fun'kaar, primarily an arts-led learning week, came to be suspended for Senior Years classes, where teachers cited a lack of time for such processes.

Over the years, a few teachers who were enthusiastic about trying different approaches reached out to the drama team and several ideas were discussed, until, in early 2020, Palampur was picked up as a potential arts-integrated learning process. Teachers began explorations and training in drama conventions to try and develop a constructivist⁷ and experiential⁸ approach to the lesson. And then, one fine evening, a nation-wide lockdown was announced. For a while, schools were simply suspended pending the next government announcement. When it became obvious that no such announcement was forthcoming, and the status quo was to remain for an undefined future, we were told to take school online. As we know, teachers worldwide took several weeks to understand the operations of online learning platforms; children were much faster on the uptake. In the chaos that followed, many teachers made a strong attempt to stabilise their classes using their tried and tested methods, even though all the evidence seemed to point towards the need to evolve new approaches to suit contemporary needs. As shared earlier in this essay, it was in the light of such a situation that, in desperation, some teachers sought to return to the process drama planning for the lesson on Palampur.

By the time we took up the lesson, much time had been lost in figuring out how to deliver the annual curriculum, as well as the basics of how teaching and learning were even going to work. Assessment conversations, normally a big part of Senior Years, took up the majority of time, and considerations of wellbeing, also equally a big part of Grades 9 and 10, particularly, took up another big chunk. Academic time was reduced overall, and some big decisions had to be made to accommodate any kind of change in teaching and learning processes.

⁷ The constructivist approach to education posits that learners do not passively absorb information; instead, they actively build knowledge and meaning through their own personal experiences, interactions, and mental frameworks, and that this is a lifelong process rather than one occurring at specific junctures of life only.

⁸ Experiential Learning Theory defines learning as the continuous process of creating knowledge through hands-on experience.

Under these circumstances, we planned the first cycle from mid-April to mid-May.

At the end of the first cycle, the summer break had begun, and we were sure that, come July, when school reopened for the Monsoon session, we would be back in the real world. Soon, however, it became clear that we would perhaps continue under lockdown for another month or so, and so we planned the second cycle. But the second cycle ended too, and the end of the first assessment cycle approached, and teachers requested that we close the learning process using the same methods, as traditional assessment methods would be difficult to run under the circumstances.

One can see, thus, that this was a process run by desperation, and not belief. One point of feedback shared by teachers at the end of the project was that they did not feel sufficiently prepared for the process. The drama-led approach sought a degree of empowerment from the facilitator, an ability to handle unpredictability as well as resilience in the face of difficult questions, which most traditional Senior Years teachers simply did not have, and the training that could have helped them could not be completed on account of the lockdown call. This was made tougher on the days when out-of-Role debriefing could not be done during the designated drama time, and had to be taken into the academic lessons, as the academic teachers felt ill-equipped to lead these discussions in an appropriate manner. As a result, only two of the four academic teachers—one of whom was the Head of the Humanities Department and another a seasoned Economics teacher—felt comfortable to actively lead the learning, whereas the other two felt quite overwhelmed by the entire design and the floodgates of questioning that we had opened up. This was a clear failure of the process—unintentional though it was—and an unfortunate outcome of this failure was that an otherwise successful student-empowering process was not taken up again by the department after regular school resumed.

A SINCERE CALL

When your student asks a question that you find difficult to answer, when she seeks information that is not easy to find or expresses an opinion that you don't approve of, this may actually

be a sign of your success as a teacher or a parent.

— Y. Yadav and S. Palshikar, "A Letter for You," *Democratic Politics-I* (2012, p. v)

It was John Dewey who famously advocated that classrooms should function as "miniature democratic societies" where pupils learn cooperation, critical discourse, and shared responsibility through collaborative projects and decision-making (Dewey, 1916). When we began planning the Palampur project, we were deeply conscious of the need to begin where the children were, and that it was critically important that the process should at no point of time shame the children or make them feel inadequate for their lack of knowledge or understanding. At all times during the drama, teachers were reminded to be non-judgemental and allow children to construct their own conception of the world of Palampur through research, common sense, and their own felt experiences, intervening only to correct logical fallacies or fill in gaps in information. A significant learning from the experience for the teachers was that the three children who came from urban underprivileged backgrounds were as clueless about many of the realities and challenges faced on the ground by their Roles from the village, as the rest of their urban peers, even as they related more closely to the facts of scarcity and marginalisation. It helped the group as a whole to understand that there were multiple ways to 'have and have not', and they realised the importance of asking the right questions and listening closely to their peers before arriving at conclusions. An unstated (though very much intended) consequence of the overall experience was a sense of appreciation for each other and a deeper level of trust, made visible through the sharing of reflections that demonstrated a willingness to be vulnerable.

The aim of the project was to arrive at a learning experience that 'burnished' the learners in the Heathcotean sense, and I do think that the evidence shows that this was achieved. Drama (as Rosalind Flynn shared in a previous article in *ArtsPraxis*) is possibly one of the most impactful forms promoting embodied learning (Flynn, 2025). I cannot ignore the irony of my assertion at this point—sharing a purely digital process to illuminate the visceral impacts of embodied learning. However, I would assert, having seen this process in the physical space in an earlier version (as mentioned above), that the quibbling

over this point is moot. At a basic level, students had to engage through their imaginations in both cases. In the online space, as they ‘inhabited’ their Roles, we also invited them to dress in Role, and their final monologues required them to do so. At the beginning of the journey, in order to engage their bodies beyond the basic visual/cognitive level, we invited them to create a set of actions demonstrating their daily routines, asking them to think about the ways in which they held their bodies, the kind of clothes they wore, and the kind of tools and implements that they used on a regular basis. As the map came to be built, we also invited them to chart out, in Role, the villagers’ usual routes from their homes to their workplaces, and beyond. These prompts and nudges helped students to locate their bodies in the imaginary space, even though they were unable to do so in the physical one. The visualisation of the village space through the map also helped them to imagine how marginalisation limits human beings within their lived realities. In the physical space, this would have been more impactful, and we know from shorter, drama-led lessons across different age groups, that this works beautifully. But even as we were online, the psychological impacts of the move towards ‘embodiment’ cannot be denied.



Image 23: A student delivering her testimonial in Role as a female Dalit farmer.

One important finding, which was acknowledged by the participating teachers, was that the students' learning through the process was not only richer and deeper, but they had, in fact, covered more conceptual ground through the process than was planned and expected. This was paradoxical in the face of the regular fear expressed by teachers stating that drama is "too time consuming" for Senior Years. In recent years, when we sought to revive the Palampur process in real life, the feedback from teachers was interesting. While the lack of expertise and need for training of the facilitators was clearly cited, another reason given was that, while the process did cover what was required and more of the syllabus, it did not account for the assessment plan as per the national board (CBSE)! This shows a certain reluctance on the part of academic teachers to change their approach, even as student feedback, particularly post-pandemic, has consistently shown that students need and appreciate tools and methods of exploration that are empowering and build confidence in their learning abilities and capacity for risk-taking.

Having said this, we must candidly acknowledge the structural insularity of this intervention. 'The Story of Palampur' was, in many respects, an elite luxury made possible only by the convergence of a black-swan event—the pandemic lockdown—and the extensive material resources of a privileged K-12 private institution. The collapse of the framework upon the resumption of traditional schooling exposes a sobering systemic truth: under neoliberal educational paradigms, experiential and critical pedagogies are frequently relegated to temporary 'states of exception.' When standard accountability structures and high-stakes assessments reassert themselves, the institutional appetite for radical, time-intensive inquiry rapidly diminishes. This project should not be looked at as a seamless blueprint for widespread curricular use, but rather as an experiment that highlights alternative pedagogies and how fiercely the traditional systems resist these.

Furthermore, a critical evaluation of this work demands that we confront the risk of pedagogical voyeurism. We come from a city where 'Slum Tourism' is actually offered as info-tainment, and were very aware, going into the project, of how stepping into the roles of marginalised Dalit labourers or displaced migrant workers through a lottery risks reducing generational, systemic, and physical trauma into a temporary playground for privileged urban youth. To claim that a

digital simulation can grant authentic *Verstehen* or replicate the lived reality of historical oppression would be both naive and ethically fraught. Seen through a Heathcoteian lens, however, the value of this intervention lay not in a superficial consumption of poverty, but in the deliberate construction of a structural mirror, which aimed, through the maintenance of aesthetic distance, to expose to the students the mechanics of their own unearned systemic advantages. The intention was not to alleviate upper-class guilt through performance, but to complicate it through a glimpse of how the world operates depending on the standpoint from which one is looking at it.

What, then, does this say to us about the kind of schools we should have? The National Education Policy 2020 promotes alternative forms of assessment, calling for a holistic report card that goes beyond standardised testing practices, yet formal teacher training processes do not yet account for this change, leaving teachers ill-equipped to practice these alternatives. As long as assessment demands remain stagnant, particularly at the Senior Years level, learning-by-doing practices will continue to be neglected. Over several years, the call to education has been to promote practices that enable students to be risk-takers, to have faith in themselves and their own problem-solving abilities. There are very few strategies currently at play that actually do this, and drama is perhaps foremost in its ability to deliver all these outcomes and more. The ability to play ‘as if’ the world of the imagination were real allows the participating student to try out ways of being, as they might in a laboratory (see Heathcote, 1991). In fact, one may go so far as to argue that this transforms the school space into a laboratory of the self. In other words, the student does not only try out other realities as a means of developing empathy, but that they, through this process, try out the many different versions of their own selves, exploring as one may call it, a ‘multiverse’ of personas, figuring out what matters to them and why, and how they would wish to present themselves to the world in a Goffmanian sense (Goffman, 1956).⁹ In the changing world order, especially with the advent of AI, the role of schools can no longer be (if it ever truly was) delivery of information-

⁹ Erving Goffman’s seminal sociological concept, the ‘presentation of self,’ posits that social interaction is like a theatrical performance (a framework called dramaturgy). In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Goffman argues that individuals act as ‘performers’ on a social stage, using expressions, clothes, and behaviours to engage in ‘impression management’: consciously or unconsciously controlling how others perceive them.

based learning. Instead, schools need to become communities and shared spaces where students can work out the ethical, logical, humane choices they would need to make in order to live happy, fruitful lives. They would need to learn to define for themselves what success means to them, what a purposeful life might look like, and how they could make a meaningful contribution to the planet during their lifetimes. Drama provides the perfect opportunity for this. Not only does it change learners' relationship with knowledge, giving them greater ownership of it by shifting the framework from, as Sir Ken Robinson puts it, static bodies of knowledge to multiple ways of knowing (Robinson, 2009), it helps them understand that actions have responses, choices have consequences, and every Role has its own set of limitations. By playing 'as if', it helps them imagine 'what if' and so imagine a better world. While a general push towards learning-by-doing is the critical need of the hour, I, as a drama-in-education practitioner, would strongly push for the need to integrate more drama into the daily curriculum.

I would argue that, ultimately, the contradictions of the Palampur project do not invalidate its utility; rather, they map out the exact frontier where critical education must continually fight to humanise the classroom. In a world that is changing more rapidly in more ways than ever before, it is imperative that we push these boundaries and promote non-traditional learning methods that embrace the messiness of real life and enable students to figure out the nuances of who they are and what matters to them under different circumstances and constraints.

In an ideal world, we would have loved to finish the Palampur journey with the following exercise: ask the students who have gone through the entire drama process to create, per their understanding of the journey, an ideal map of Palampur. What were the aspects that bothered them within the drama? What might the village look like if things could change? What, therefore, would they seek to change? Augusto Boal famously claimed that drama was a "rehearsal for revolution" (1979). While I wouldn't go so far as that, I would certainly say that drama has immense capacity for bringing about change organically, and the potential to help us construct in our imaginations—where everything begins—something of an ideal world.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Manjima Chatterjee is an educator, arts practitioner, writer, and curriculum leader with over two decades of experience across education, publishing, and the performing arts. Currently serving as Head of Sustainability Programs at Shiv Nadar School, she previously held leadership roles as Vice Principal and Central Arts Curriculum Lead, where she developed pioneering, practice-based arts and sustainability curricula. A recipient of several national and international honours—including the CENTA Teaching Professionals’ Olympiad (2024) and the Hindu Playwright Award—Manjima is passionate about integrating climate justice, equity, and the arts into meaningful educational practice. She holds a postgraduate degree from the Delhi School of Economics and a PG Diploma from Shiv Nadar University, and leadership certifications from Cambridge University, IIM Ahmedabad, and the Principals’ Training Center. Deeply invested in learner-centered, values-driven pedagogy, she co-founded The Kutumb Foundation and remains active in arts advocacy, teacher mentoring, and educational research.