Thira, a Wave: Interventions with the Mukkuva community in South India

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ABSTRACT

This project explores how designers can work with communities on environmental issues through a participatory approach. There is a traditional fishing community called *Mukkuvars* in South India, whose livelihood depends on the Oceans. Here, the designer plays the role of a facilitator, working with *Mukkuvars* to design communication for behavior change which can reduce marine pollution. There is a lot to learn from Indigenous Local Knowledge (ILK) of communities while working locally for a global cause. Final outcome creation with the participation of people with diverse skill sets led to mutual learning, exchange of ideas and sensibilization in several areas, which was more important than the intended outcome of a neatly designed spatial experience. Such forms of collaboration can bring positive changes in society.

Author Keywords

Participatory process; Bottom-up approach; Protecting ecosystem; Raw and authentic; Awareness and action

INTRODUCTION

Being the second most populated country [1], communities in India with all its values, unity and diversity hold immense potential to make positive changes. The coastal population of this peninsular country can contribute a great deal if proper awareness and actions are taken. During the deluge Kerala State faced in 2018, people witnessed the potential of local communities in immediate action. *Mukkuvars* worked together to save the lives of many, inspiring the whole world. Why can't similar strength be utilized to work for a global social cause?

PROCESS

The 4 month long process could be summarized in two stages:

Making Friends

Protecting marine life should be discussed with *Mukkuvars* for a successful bottom-up approach. *Mukkuvars* are like the sea - dynamic and unpredictable [Panipilla, personal communication]. To become friends with them, one has to understand and adapt to react according to situations. They know the sea like the back of their hand. Stars, the sun and the moon tell them when and where to go into the sea [3]. Familiarity with their language, curiosity to learn, enthusiasm to share stories, behaving empathetic, being a good listener, appreciating their ideas, adapting attire acceptable by them are some important qualities required. Other stakeholders who have opinions about marine pollution were also identified.

Co-creation

In such a socially inclusive and participatory design process, the stakeholders feel valued and empowered, developing a sense of ownership towards the environment, and thus care for it. First-hand knowledge of the *Mukkuvars* and parallel views of academicians on the issue need to be shared and discussed with the public to create awareness and to generate solutions. Building collaborations meant connecting people of different groups who rarely interact with each other, otherwise. Around 20 such collaborations planned, designed, and co-created a space which facilitated people to come together and express their opinions on marine pollution (Refer to Table 1).

Collaborator	Roles	Output
Mukkuvars	ILK, skill, experience, awareness among local communities, present underwater pollution scenarios they documented	Acquiring space, procuring materials, power and skill while working with local materials
Designers	Design inputs- event design and managing execution, documentation	Sharing of knowledge and skill
Experts (Including *Mukkuvars*)	Content curation	Enriched with information, communicated in interesting and engaging ways when design input is inculcated
Volunteers	Setting up, communication, awareness among people far from the coastline	Self-motivation, individual responsibility, commitment, feeling of ownership of their environment
Students	Awareness activities like making posters, voice concern about their future, innocent and raw suggestions/opinions	Valuable comments on marine pollution, a new and different perspective from the future generation
Other Groups	Resources (skill, material, fund)	Proud contribution for a global cause, visibility as emerging groups
Authorities	Interact, listen to concerns, initiate actions, make changes in policies and take decisions accordingly	Interactive discussions, direct communication with community members

Table 1. A summary of the collaborations- Collaborators, their roles and the individual outputs achieved during the process. A participation structure [2].

Event stakeholders included artists, performers, decision-makers and children. A plastic-free event, all the structural elements made from local materials, using local skill invited around 400 people to be a part of the unique experience.Reflection

This process can be helpful for other participatory projects for social causes. For any environmental issue, find the community most attached to that environment, create collaborations, understand the issue, develop strategies/plan of action with the community members, design a participatory process, and find stakeholders and co-create/design for awareness/action.

REFERENCES

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