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## PREFACE

*'You who are holding the book now in hand'*

*--Walt Whitman*

**Dear Reader,**

I'm writing this book because I want to share a bit of my journey with you; a journey that seeks to find meaning to what growth and education is all about. But this is difficult to define or state for a person who is *still seeking* and hasn't quite found all the answers. I wish I could say I'm a teacher because I have all the relevant degrees and certificates, even the experience. But I'm not so sure. So, this book is more likely to be filled with more questions than answers, more problems than solutions. I'm just a teacher talking aloud and beyond the staff-room, at the same time walking on in an attempt 'to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield'.

Honestly speaking, this book has written itself. I did not set out to specifically write a book. It's something that happened gradually, even subtly when after a long journey I found myself in a 'different' school. I would just pen down my observation thoughts, feelings, even reactions to what was happening around me, till I realised that what was being jotted in my diary in solitary or intense moments seemed liked a book. Now you are holding those moments in your hands. In the real sense it is not a 'book' it is a collection of snapshots in the form of words. It doesn't tell a complete story, it doesn't propound an educational philosophy as such. This 'book' attempts to share glimpses of a journey, a journey every sensitive and thinking person who's concerned about the way children are growing up, would like to undertake.

With me, it began when I joined a public school in Delhi after completing my Masters in English Literature and Teaching degree course. It was an interesting experience on the whole full of lovely moments and a close association with the students. But it was also a year which left me with a sense of incompleteness and a gnawing feeling that this education wasn't *it*. That's when I started searching for 'true education', an education where excellence was not synonymous with grades or marks. Where you didn't have to define yourself with how many prizes or awards you got at competitions. Where rapport with the students or colleagues was not aimed primarily for professional success and had more intrinsic value. a

After all, what is the basic purpose of education? I began to ask myself this question very seriously. This was not an idle question, something that you talked over a cup of tea, and forgot about as soon as you put the cup down. It burned me from inside. I was too young and restless to sit quiet without at least having a jolly good attempt at finding the answer. That's when I left my first job – after a year of sincere, diligent, intense and yes, enjoyable teaching in a formal school. But then, if I really liked it that much, why did I leave? Simply because it made me see things and ask fundamental questions about educating children to whom I couldn't get answers there.

I wanted to know whether it was right to force a child to study. I felt uncomfortable about deciding what was right or wrong for the child. To say that 'doing this is good' and 'doing that is bad' made me shaky. Yes, I was young and confused. I guess in some ways I still am – confused, that is, I'm not so sure about the 'young' part! The notion of the child being wet clay, or just inane raw material to be molded into a desired shape that I had been so familiar with, not only because of university education but also because it was woven in our cultural fabric, was something I'd not quite been able to assimilate.

Once, the principal of a school where I'd been working said to the staff-members, "No more third prizes for my school!" She wanted the school's name at the top in inter-school competitions. This made me wonder whether competitions and prizes were the only way to prove an individual's or school's worth. Of course, competitions spur you to action and motivate you to sharpen your skills, but at the same time don't they encourage feelings of jealousy, insecurity, tension making you depend on outward authority? What should be the place and attitude towards competitions in a school? Years of competitive education seemed to have taken a toll on the emotional fabric of society, especially that of growing children. Restricting admission to institutes where a difference of 0.1% at written test decides careers and fates, has affected both the individual candidates and the concerned institutions. Since it is easier to evaluate mere information, information has become the sole criterion in admission to educational institutions. As a result we have students with computerized minds and undeveloped hearts and character. Do we have to inevitably develop our mental faculties at the price of our emotional well-being and spiritual search? Are there any alternatives to competition-based, lop-sided education, or is it that we need to look at competition differently... I wondered as a young teacher?

After that I tried to explore various schools in India with different syllabi, different environments and ethos. The questions grew. The journey was not without its valleys and peaks. I must add here that it was not education alone that I was trying

to understand. It was life at large. The quest to find the right education led me to ask fundamental questions about life too. Can right education and right life be separated? Or, are they fundamentally the same? Can you address one without looking at the other?

As I saw it, education in India was a predominantly academic affair. Even in many residential schools that I was exposed to or taught in didn't directly address the emotional growth of the child or the mental faculties in their entirety. While the mental and emotional faculties were brought into play when children had to learn things and prepare for exams, however the focus was always on information and not on developing the faculties and facets of the students. Education, in India at least, seemed to raise information on a pedestal, while the other aspects of the human being were side-lined. No school seemed to be interested in devoting any time or employing people who took care of the emotional growth and spiritual dimensions of the growing child. It was left to the family or to the winds, I don't know which. Was it that the people who were running educational institutions didn't care enough or were they not aware of its importance? I would say perhaps a lack of sufficient awareness has led to a lack of sufficient caring.

My own inner quest prodded me to search for some institution or system that sought to address the growth of the child as a complete being rather than just prepare him to get a job. I also wanted to observe children in relatively natural environment where the behaviour is not contrived or there is a mechanical observation of rules. Perhaps I was unconsciously seeking to explore freedom in the education and growth of children. My exploration led me also to discover a free-progress school in a busy Indian metro. This is where this book has been written. I found the educational philosophy on which the institution was based rather interesting, something that deserved a sincere and thorough examination. By the time I was through with the place I can't say I entirely agreed with the way in was interpreted and practiced, nevertheless, it held me there for a good three years. Moreover, it gave me an opportunity to observe things I could never have observed in my regular teaching, besides the space to actually pen it all down.

This book strives to explore the basics of childhood and education and sometimes to ask questions that children ask grown-ups and grown-ups don't ask themselves any longer. This book is only the beginning of a question, not the end of an answer. So, it's natural to wonder why something like this has been written at all. Why put forward questions if you don't have any definite answers? To this accusation I can only plead guilty. But I do believe that to gain clarity you most likely have to experience the chaos. I hope writing about this confusion which is within me and the

world around me is a step towards clarity. In sharing what I have to share in these pages I'm really sharing a hope that the answers will come. The idea is, that, if there are questions there must be answers somewhere. This is an attempt to seek those answers and not state them. Perhaps you'll find a clue to an answer in a serendipitous moment. If you do, please share it. I'll be waiting.

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## ABOUT THE PLACE

The place and the institution where the book has been written are real and are situated in the heart of a metro in India. It is run by an NGO, an organization with a spiritual ethos, devoted to spiritual figures. The organisation has other educational institutions and various other educational and youth development activities, run by the same management with the campus. It also has a guest-house which is meant to serve as a retreat for those who want to live quietly and meditatively in natural and quiet environs. I lived on the ashram-campus as a volunteer and taught in the school and at the teacher-education institute that is attached to it. Most of the observations in this book are of the children and teachers that were associated with this place. I have also changed some of the names of both children and adults where I felt it could be objectionable or could hurt the concerned persons.

The school is based on a spiritual philosophy which stresses upon the need to take up the holistic development of the child. It is a small school with only about 150 children from the age of four to thirteen. The grades or classes are referred to as 'groups' and named after colours in the younger grades and after qualities in the higher classes. So, the younger children in the school study in 'red group', 'blue group', 'green group' etc, whereas the older children study in 'Progress group', 'Equality group', 'Receptivity group' and so on.

The teachers are primarily the teacher-trainees from the teacher-training institute attached to it and live on the campus. There are some volunteers from outside, besides a few residents of the ashram. All the people who taught there were volunteers and were not paid any salary for the service rendered besides a possible travel allowance if you were not on campus, and a very small sum of pocket money which was termed 'prosperity' for the ones who lived on campus, in both cases the sum never exceeded Rs.1000 and was a token rather than anything else. Sometimes visitors and guests who happened to be staying in the ashram as guests would come and share their skills with the children and the teacher-trainees. In all, if you added up the number of adults that were available to give attention and help the children it becomes a utopian ratio of one teacher to five-six children, or even less at times.

The school was based on a philosophy that sought to let the child grow at his or her natural pace without defining rigid parameters or setting goals for the child to achieve. The underlying belief was that you can't force learning upon the child, nor can you inject learning into a child's head in double or triple doses because he or she is expected to pass an exam. Education was to be a natural, spontaneous unfolding

of one's interests and personality, and the role of the adults was to help in this process. Undoubtedly an idealistic approach – and to most a downright impractical one too!

There was also no stress laid upon competition - the one strong motivation engine that pulls many a student to the threshold to...wherever. In fact, during my three year stay I did not come across a single competition there. Competitions were consciously discouraged, because of the emotional strain and the negative traits they catalysed, like jealousy, discouragement, conceit, and the like. Moreover, it was believed that competition teaches you to look outside, towards someone else for sanction. They take you away from finding the source of peace that lies within. And since the institution sought to bring out the spiritual or psychic dimension of the human being, competition was not consciously practiced or pursued.

The atmosphere in the school was distinctly relaxed and easy, it was one of those places where both children and adults could walk around bare-footed without eyebrows being raised. There were no declared or tacitly understood dress-codes; you could wear whatever you felt comfortable with. Lunch was served in the school, so the children enjoyed this facet of life too which basically is the domain of residential schools even though this was a day school. Here the teachers were not referred to as 'sir' or 'madam', but 'didi' meaning sister and 'bhaiya' meaning brother, and the generic term for teachers was 'diya' (a combination of both 'didi' and 'bhaiya') meaning a lamp. This helped to contribute to a relaxed and tension-free atmosphere that was characteristic of the place.

The day always began with morning sports followed by a juice-break. Then they had 'music-time' or concentration, followed by classes and projects. The junior classes were referred to as red, blue or green groups, whereas the senior classes were given the name of qualities like harmony, sincerity, peace and so on.

The building and campus was one of the most beautiful features of the place, spacious, clean, loved and looked after. The children studied in open class-rooms, so visitors to the school often stood outside the low wall and watched and it was okay to wave at somebody passing by. This would have been very disturbing to anyone used to the closed classrooms, but since the children were growing up in this system from the beginning of their schooling years, they didn't seem to mind much and were surprisingly hardly ever distracted from their work - provided of course they were interested in doing the work at all. This helped me especially as I could freely observe children at work without influence or interfering with them.

I have avoided naming the institution which has formed the back-bone of this book, where I actually sat down and jotted my observations and thoughts. One reason is that I did not want this book to focus on any one institute and/or make it an ideal or model, which it is not. I feel that the institution is neither perfect nor is it important in itself, but only so far as it represents a possibility of at least thinking about an alternative way of growing up and educating young children. Of course, it doesn't provide any absolute answers or alternatives, but nevertheless many of the basic questions about growth, evolution and education were directly and consciously addressed by this system. It suffices to say that what I considered really important there was the atmosphere and the professed aims. To what extent these aims were achieved is another story. But an attempt was made here to address the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions of the human personality, in a relatively free and unstructured atmosphere. This atmosphere inspired and enabled me to think about and focus on various dimensions of education to a great extent.

## INTRODUCTION

Something is happening to our education system. It's crumbling. At least partially. There is something in it, which is breaking down -- the old order. The problem is that the new one hasn't emerged yet. We are, 'living between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born'. Hence, the heartache, fear, confusion, restlessness and rootless ness. It's nothing new, it happens every time there is a major transition in the world at large. The transition here is of course in the consciousness at large. Basically what our growing children are feeling in a vague way is just a mirror of what we're feeling in the larger school of life. Our schools and colleges are the microcosmic reflections of the macro-level changes in our adult global society. There are no secrets about the societal and political unrest and widespread disillusionment with existing norms, the world over.

There are many uncomfortable questions that are coming up again and again. Questions that refuse to be suppressed any longer. Questions that have come out of hibernation and are alive with energy of their own. Questions like relationships - between man and woman, rich and poor, older and younger, white and black; like, marriage, what it implies and why it implies what it does; like life of man and of the earth; like, the aim of life and the meaning of death. These questions are not just intellectual, they are real and they raise their head every time a woman is burnt alive for dowry, or a teenager starts shooting indiscriminately without any immediate provocation, when men kill and swindle in a desperate bid to reach the top of what they think is the success-ladder, or an old isolated couple is murdered, or a rich, famous, successful person jumps off a high-rise building because he doesn't feel the urge to live any longer.

Yes, there's a lot of confusion around us, a lot of things that don't really make sense if we look deep. So, we don't look deep, sometimes we don't even glance. But our children do, and now they don't ask merely about why the grass is green and why the sky is blue, and also ask why you are they way you are. Earlier, a butterfly or a paper boat could distract a child and keep his or her mind occupied for long. So, many uncomfortable questions didn't come to the surface or were dismissed without much ado. Not any more.

Today, if you get a chance to listen to children incognito, you get to know what's really on their minds. *Is it okay to cheat and get marks if ultimately marks are the only thing that counts? Am I good only when I come on the top of the list? Can teachers be friends? If I get angry what should I do? What's wrong with lying? I've*

*learnt all the formulas in Maths, all the symbols and valencies in Chemistry, all the grammar rules in English, all the dates in History, all that all text-books say, now tell me, am I educated?* Most of us at schools can't handle this, so we ignore it when we can, or if it's too obvious, the 'good' teacher will say, "Hush child! Good children don't talk like that!" So, those children who are keen to be 'good' try not to think or talk like that. A lot many just don't talk like that in front of their teachers or even their parents. But they still *think*.

This is more so in rigidly structured systems like the formal education system in India, which is actually the legacy of the British colonizers that aimed at producing clerically trained minds. They succeeded. This left a trail of 'do or die' spirit about outlined dos and don'ts on the colonized minds as an aftermath. The children in schools, at least in India are either to 'do' what's outlined or expected of them, or 'die' as it were. It is perhaps time to question the old order, question its relevance in today's world. Difficult though it may be we have to be ready to change. Remember King Arthur's advice to Sir Lancelot who broke down when the legendary King was departing, in Tennyson's poem, *Morte'd Arthur*,

*The old order changeth, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfils himself in many ways,  
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.*

Are we corrupting the world, or are helping God to fulfill His way? Is it time when started addressing the need to change the kind of system we have in education? Change does not however imply that we have to shut down our schools. We simply have to be honest about acknowledging the shortcomings in the system and be open to change. If there is need to reform then we must reform, if we need to re-energise, then we must re-energise, and if we need to change totally then we must change totally. The practical implications of this could be that we need a parallel system, or a complementary system or perhaps just a shot in the arm.

To be able to do this, you have to be able to take an honest and unbiased look at education. India, in the twentieth century, has seen the emergence of many thinkers, writers, philosophers who have tried to explore the essence of life, and in the process have perforce had to look at the process of education, almost as an inevitability. For anyone who is concerned about human growth and evolution cannot be blind or indifferent to the very process that brings it about -- education.

People like Tagore, Krishnamurty, Sri Aurobindo in India and others around the world tried to experiment with the educational system of the times and arrive at

solutions and alternatives help the situation. There is a great amount of literature available which contains the views and thoughts of these authentic thinkers. For Tagore, it was his poetical and aesthetic vision along with unpleasant memories of his own schooling that led him to create Shanti Niketan. Krishnamurty and Sri Aurobindo who were both men of deep spiritual insight, addressed education as a fundamental dimension of human life.

While these along with other thinkers have not given complete answers or have even offered perfect models to emulate, however they have inspired many people to experiment with education in order to try and develop a superior system. Schools that follow alternative systems as compared to the common formal structured system are scattered here and there in India. Not many are well known, however they have a story to share about their educational experiments to any sincere and interested person who wants to listen.

The New Millennium has brought about the dawn of a New Age, which is asking a whole lot of questions. We are striving to find alternative ways of healing the body, techniques like reiki, pranic healing, and spiritual healing are being seriously explored. There are efforts on to build modern natural living resorts and communes. There are people trying to feel and find God through science. There is a renaissance out there where man is trying to find his roots exploring the old so that the essence can be used for the betterment of today. How then can we ignore the question of right education for our children? It is said that it is better to build children than mend adults. Whether right or not, the question of the right way of educating a generation is a living question that has to be addressed anew. Complacency and indifference will not do any longer. The overwhelming question in the new millennium is not, 'to do something or not to do something', but what to do. If we want the world to be right, we have to address what is wrong with education. Surely, if all that was being done on the educational front was fine, and then books like this would not be written or read or published.

## EPISODES.....

July 10,

I ask a serious-looking Khyati, an 8 year old of Orange group who's been hit by a ball in the head and has come back to the group,

“Why aren't you smiling?”

“Because I don't want to.”

There's no way you can put an exclamation mark at the end of the sentence. It's not an exclamation at all, just a simple statement meant for a rather thick-headed adult who can't figure out the obvious.

I'm reminded of my practice-teaching days, during my B.Ed course, when we had to teach in allotted schools. I had to teach a section of class seventh, with 11-12 year old children. As far as I was concerned at that point of time there couldn't be naughtier children on the face of the earth. I've learnt a lot since then! I had told the children that they shouldn't disturb the class by asking permission for going to the toilet or to drink water. What I'd meant was that they should stay put and not shuffle around. I was right in the midst of Wordsworth's 'daffodils', reading “I floated lonely as a cloud...” when Ikshvaku right in the middle of the class went glut, glut, glut, gulping down water from somebody's water-bottle, and spilling half of it on his shirt, with blissful disregard of the rules set down by me. As a novice, I saw this as act of supreme rebellion, something that could lead to something worse, if not nipped in the bud. What if they all started gulping down water – all fifty-five of them? My new-founded teacher's ego was hurt and challenged. I ROARED at him, “Ikshvaku, what do you think you're doing?”

“I'm drinking water.”

“WHY?”

“Because I'm thirsty!”

No exclamation mark here either. He's thirsty and he's drinking water. Period. Children are naturally direct and straightforward, unless you give them a cause to be otherwise. But with fifty-five children and an inexperienced teacher the 'otherwise' prevails.

In the school where I was now, the children are encouraged to be direct and truthful. They are given endless room and freedom – physical, academic and psychological, and one can see how this affects the children. They are truthful, open, straight, sensitive but often undiplomatic to the point of appearing uncourteous.

July 11,

For the sixth time I ask him his name. He smiles wilfully, refuses to answer and walks off, dampening my eager heart. When I catch him again, he's filling his water-bottle from the tap where we all wash our lunch dishes, I dare to volunteer my opinion,

"This water is not meant for drinking you know."

"I'm washing the bottle!" he retorts superciliously.

"What's your name?" I courageously venture for the seventh time.

"Aseem."

"Which group?" I'm getting bolder.

"Green – I'm in six."

"Sixth class?!" That's news I thought that was meant for 10-11 year olds, and this guy can't be more than five.

"Six years!!" he says this in a tone that tears me down to bits. A tone which says 'you just can't teach adults!'. But I'm tough too. Considering that the dining hall is empty and he's the only child around, I ask him,

"Shouldn't you be in your group?" I ask a foolish question.

"I know the way!"

It serves me right for asking. I'm certainly learning things here!

July 11,

Come lunch time and Gandhi Bhayia's library becomes a Divine House of Fulfilment for all the little-ones. Gandhi Bhaiya is the sixty-ish gentle voiced, cutely pot-bellied and unimposing gentleman who serves as the librarian in Mirambika. The below sevens see him as a provider of 'stickers'. I've never asked him where he gets his unending supply of stickers. Earlier I used to think may be he has a friend or relative who owned a factory that made stickers and cards with cute colourful pictures of flowers animals and a host of other things that delight a child's heart. But I later learnt that he buys these regularly from his small pension along with small stationery things for the children to work with like crayons, scissors, paper, glue. No wonder the kids are glued to his desk!

I've often wondered why Gandhi bhaiya does this. Could it be to ease the pain of loneliness he might be feeling in the evening years of his bachelor life or is it from a selfless desire to share joy with children? I know that I have many times come to watch the kids in the library myself and see them chattering and flitting around, and that's not because I'm lonely but because watching children freely working and doing thing is and amazingly refreshing thing to do.

Some kids start the day by trying to extract a promise for an 'extra' sticker. Others complain that the extra sticker granted to another child for her mother's birthday was unfair as her mother's birthday was after two months from today. And Wordsworth thought all children are 'mighty prophets' or seers! Anyway, Gandhi bhayia is quick to object,

"The next thing you'll do is to ask me to give you a card for your dog's birthday!"

"But I don't know when is my dog's birthday Gandhi bhaiya, and neither does he!"

The debates are often long-winding, with the kids generally ending up being the Sophistic winners and poor Gandhi bhaiya ends up shelling out another card.

Receiving cards and stickers has become a joyful and informal ritual for the young children in Mirambika. It's regular, unfailing and a happy ritual. I wonder what impact something like this could have on the life of a child without his or her realising it. Stability and regularity and receiving are vital for the emotional stability of a child. Having figures like Gandhi bhayia could make a positive difference to a child's life I dare say. Later on when you've grown up and the scene of life has changed and there are different players around, you realise how small, selfless things in your daily life can make a difference...even a happy childhood memory can be like a cool shower on a hot day if nothing else. It helps eventually. July 12,

Walking to the school in the morning...

Early morning games are being played all around you. Three little ones as they jog around the track to warm up break into a song and spontaneous step dance. They holler joyously as they skip together holding hands and with synchronised steps, "Walking to the Lord we are walking / Walking in the sunshine, we're walking." There is a beautiful spontaneity and vivaciousness about these children which is rarely expressed and encouraged in educational institutions. Here, nobody objects if children behave like children. It is considered healthy and holy to be natural and spontaneous. Growing naturally, children are filled with fewer frustrations and the need to undergo cathartic courses and exercises is relatively less, as there is little suppression or anger bottled up within.

Two uniformed students from the neighbouring school sweep past me, their faces intense with the effort to run hard. I think it's a race. ....Competition – it's everywhere. Is it a basic human instinct, this desire to want to out do the other? Or is it a human ploy created out of the desperate desire to save oneself in the 'survival of the fittest'? However, in this school, competition is not encouraged in the general scheme of things. Since it is based on a spiritual philosophy, competition with others is not seen as something healthy. It becomes a source of heartache and a catalyst to many negative emotions like, jealousy, a sense of inadequacy and a desire to seek an approval stamp from an outside authority.

There is no doubt about this as newspapers are full of reports of disastrous consequences of competitive attitudes gone bizarre. Naturally one wonders whether this should be encouraged in children.

On the other hand these very children living in the heart of the polluted, noisy and competitive capital of India have to mix and merge in the same heaving multitude. Will they be able to cope when they walk out of these gates to make a living in the world, or nearer to home when they leave this free-progress school and move on to a 'normal' formal senior secondary school? So can you wish away competition from the school or the world by not having organised competitions? And can you ignore the fact that people often do better when the competing whether with their own self or with each other? Moreover this way is only till the age of thirteen or so after which the children have to per force join the mainstream, then what? Many parents agonised by the same anxious questions have withdrawn their children mid-way and put them in formal schools. I suppose, the way of life that this school stands for is a difficult and brave choice, and only the very brave and adventurous take it up, or the ones who are terribly disillusioned with everything else.

July, 15

We're about to have a story-session with Orange group – the energetic 7-8 year olds. The weather is killingly beautiful and so is the place. A rare combination in a mad metro! How can you help feeling blessed and privileged to experience moments like these, when there's a benevolent umbrella of clouds and the Eucalyptus trees sway joyously, and the elegant bamboo leaves quiver at the cool touch of the breeze?

The children race to the outdoor stage in the green-belt. We start out session – or try to –

“Who will tell the story first?” I ask.

“I!” “Me!” “Him” “Her” “Blaa, blee, bloo, blum!”

Maintaining peace and preventing the third world war to start in a story-session is not an easy talk. Ask any teacher who's tried it. We begin with Shayree. She is very shy and demure, so a very brief two-minute story is gracefully accepted from her. Now, Arnav has started scratching his neck and Avani is elbowing Parul who is trying to rest her knee on Avani's knee. As soon Shayree finishes everyone else is ready to tell their story.

A visitor has come to click photographs. But of course, these Orange group children are too busy trying to extract exciting stories from each other to notice him. They don't believe in giving courtesy glance unless their curiosity is catalysed. And right now it is not. ‘Appu, you told a story yesterday! Now let other tell.’

When Arshu is in the middle of how the clever monkey was devising a way of shaking off the crocodile who wanted to gobble him up, the sun comes out from behind the clouds in its blazing glory to listen to the story.

“Ah didi! It's so hot.”

We all unanimously decide to shift venue to the cool green patch below the Eucalyptus trees groove. The gentleman photographer who later gracefully introduced himself as a photographer from the National Geographic is having a whale of a time.

In between stories and Simon-says, which I use as concentration pegs, somebody shoots a question, “Didi, how old are you?”

“55!” I quip, just to shut them up and not be forced to answer the question that is bane of every (young) woman's life. But I am unceremoniously ignored. The guessing game begins ‘29’, ‘22’, ‘19’ their guesses are pouring forth. I pretend to be deaf – they aren't going to get this secret out of me!

“Didi do you live in the Ashram or outside?”

“Are you married?”

“Do you have any children?”

They don't give you much time to answer in their rapid fire round, so I tell them expansively,

“You all are my children.”

“Oh! that means you've been married so many times!”

I wonder how their fathers and mothers would react at this!

July 18,

I am sitting at my favourite spot in the library overlooking the green belt. Right outside is bamboo grove. I often lie on the stone slab below the window and watch the bamboo leaves that become luminous when the sunlight that filters through them. When the breeze blows, they quiver with almost an artistic fineness and sometimes experience peace. I wonder if it's just my imagination or whether there is really something behind it, some scientific cause. May be science will discover it soon after a bit of research, why we feel a certain way amidst certain plants and trees and flowers. It's only a matter of time when yesterday's ridiculous dreams become the today's cliched reality...

Anyway, right now there's no sun shining but a canopy of clouds above and a delicate drizzle falling outside. There's a small stone pond which is almost always dry next to the bamboo shoots, surrounded by flowering bushes. The small white flowers are falling into the pond under the weight of the rain and the stone are beginning to gleam washed by the rain. No wonder I find myself drawn to this very spot in the library. A sitting space like this is blessing...a blessing one may just might miss. In moments like these your heart is wrenched, and sometimes such joy pours forth from within that you feel you will burst...

On the small green mount outside I can spot two children - six or seven years old having a whale of a time in the rain. It's lunch-time or free-time for them, and they are certainly exhibiting the spirit of freedom! They have an umbrella between them but that's only an excuse to play in the rain. They are tossing it and swirling it, they are throwing it in the air and catching it, in other words using it as anything and everything except to guard against the rain. Ah! one of the girls has tossed it far and is raising her little face towards the sky with arms outspread like open wings. The raindrops are falling on her face, and she's open her mouth to let a few drops fall straight from the sky. I don't know about her but in me a thirst is quenched. Her friend comes and rubs her wet cheeks vigourously with her hands and darts away, the other one shrieks and laughs and then runs to catch her friend.

Behind the children on the narrow road, five adults are skimping away in a row providing a stark contrast to the children. Nobody's carrying an umbrella and they apparently have been caught unprepared in the downpour. The women have covered their heads with *dupattas* and one of the men is shielding his head with a plastic folder he's carrying. They're all bent forward and are racing away. They don't notice the children playing, the children don't notice them. Each one to his own world. Not one of the adults seem to enjoy the rain. It seems difficult to believe that as children they did not enjoy the rain, even if they did not study in a free progress school. What happened along the way? How is it that in growing up we lose the ability to appreciate a drizzle and just wait for it to get over and are only bothered about hurrying to a dry spot? What has deadened our senses? Well, maybe they're in a hurry now these grown ups. Maybe they have to race off to their office or finish domestic work... What's this song I find myself humming... *teri do takiya di naukri, mera lakhon ka savan jai.*

***Music of the falling raindrops  
Makes my heart go pitter-patter.***

July 18,

“Snake! Snake!” I hear a kid screaming.

I turn around and see two red group children squatting on the wall of a deep well. One adventurous one is leaning right over and peering into the deep, dark hollow and hollering his lungs out. One little tip and he could go tumbling in. But of course the well is covered with a thick iron mesh – you can’t take risks with kids around, especially if they’re the snake-seeking types!

It had really poured the previous evening and all the beings of the nether world seem to have climbed out to have a party on the surface of the earth. A snake is not an impossibility around here, I once saw somebody catching a baby snake in a beaker. So, I wonder if these kids have seen a real snake, that’s excited them. Besides I’m pretty eager to find out for myself.

“Did you see a real snake?” I ask him

“No, but one lives there (in the well), and I’m asking it to come out.”

“Whoever falls in will die – even you!” I’m forewarned by the other investigator.

“But I’m grown up !” I protest, “How can I die?”

“It (the well) is very deep and the muscles of the fence are very weak, so if go ahead you’ll die.”

Who says it’s only adults who worry about kids?

***Oops!***

***When water in the fridge began to boil,***

***And raindrops sprouted from the soil,***

***When there was a traffic-jam in the sky***

***‘Coz the entire fish-community decided to flay,***

***When the dog drove the Mercedes Benz***

***While the master was collared to the fence,***

***When the dumb politician started to preach***

***And the deaf public applauded his speech,***

***When apes wore Ray ban, and spoke French too,***

***While the scientists were being observed in the zoo.***

***When guinea-pigs dissected women and men,***

***And spoke of the inferiority of the homo sapien.***

***When tigers practised vegetarianism, and lions talked of zen,***

***It was time to stop at the beginning and start at the end!***

July 20,

There I spot him again sitting in front of the huge window in the library. Yes, it's Aseem all right, over there in the green belt, roaming around all alone. Oh no! he's not quite alone and he's not quite loafing around. He's following a cat, rather stealthily I think. My teacher's conditioning makes me want to shout and tell him to get back to the group where he should be. But now I know better. 'The shoulds' don't carry much weight with these children. I sometimes find the absence of the supposed-to syndrome very inconvenient. If a child is chasing a squirrel outside the school building or running after a cat for that matter, you can't say with mechanical authority, "you're not supposed to be here, but in the class!". The child may just turn around and ask 'why?' and if you don't have a convincing answer you can be sure that the squirrel or the cat are going to get a jolly good chase.

You can reason with the children or try and persuade them to follow the ways of the group but unquestionable authority doesn't prevail in a system as free as this. Children here are vocal and open about what they feel and think. I've noticed that this encourages honesty and frankness and child does not have to resort to hypocritical ways. However, it can and does in some instances encourage willfulness and laziness. The natural and pressure-free environment that the school seeks to provide has its other side too. The reason why a child feels bored may not necessarily be because the teacher is boring but purely because of lack of discipline in the child. In fact, this makes you wonder if such a system is appropriate for those children who do not have an innate sense of discipline and sincere desire to learn. It may happen that a child far from developing qualities of independence and responsibility may well end up being just down right lazy and whimsical. Then the question to consider is – Is this kind of system meant for every child, and if not then how do we really figure out what kind of child is suitable for something like this?

July 21,

Glorious shrieks of joy greet you as you walk across the green belt to reach the school building. Sun or shade, summer or winter, it makes little difference to the children and diyas. They play with full gusto and I've hardly ever heard the diyas complaining even afterwards that they have to play with the children. Being young and healthy most of the group-diyas take an active part in the games with the children and help them to play along. The more lazy ones like me generally take a back seat and take on the observer's role.

The games are generally planned out and organised by the group-diyas or whoever else may be incharge, many are fun games especially with the younger children, while the older children generally play games like basket-ball, football or those great-fun German games. When they are playing it's very difficult to get a kid to say 'hello' to you. Children generally show amazing concentration when they are at play, and parents perpetually complain that they never show the same concentration in studies!

When children learn to enjoy simple games and physical activities, when you hear them "Yea!" "Ahh!" "Got it!" "Come an' catch me!" ... joy becomes a reachable reality and not a formidable yogic trance. These children will grow up knowing joy through sports and not just crass competition. And even if they don't probe any deeper in life, this will play its part in helping them sail through stormy times. I've noticed that a healthy body and the satisfaction you get in exercising it often serves as a cushion in times of grief.

Even now you can see this in red group, the youngest class in the school. When the little ones are admitted the first few days are devoted to orient the child and make her or him comfortable with the surroundings. I've noticed that playing with the children aids in this more than anything else. How long can a kid go on clinging to his parents and go on crying when the other children are busy shouting and trying to chase 'bhayia'?

The kids have now stopped playing and are moving to the dining hall for juice. Gokul of Progress group (9 year olds) squats next to Ananya who's resting at the side of the basket-ball court because she's hurt herself. I overhear him sharing a bit of highly personal information.

"This morning ten sparrows were sitting in the balcony of my house, and they all did potty and flew away."

Kids sure make mighty intriguing observations!

August 2,

Children... I watch them, sitting here in the dining hall and sipping juice (I can't make out which juice it is but I'm told it's apple juice!). Their movements are so spontaneous and uninhibited, something new unfolding everyday...like life. I guess we just need to look the right way, not wearing blinkers and seeing only part of the whole, not wearing coloured glasses and seeing missing out on the true colours. The spontaneity and freshness of children is said to spring from the psychic center, which is relatively more alive in childhood and then as we grow older it gets covered with the thick fog of expectations, worries, ambitions, and all that fills the human mind.

The other day I was standing at the edge of the sand-pit and three-four little angels (devils?) from red group were busy transforming the sand-pit into a jungle. They were digging the sand and implanting the twigs and leaves and grass which they'd got from outside between the various castles and tunnels they'd built. I remember feeling a gust of joy almost like you feel the wind around the sand-pit. It was like a covering or blanket that covered that part where the children ran about doing there business of fun and play. I felt as if the entire sand-pit was shrouded with an aura of joy – much like the joy that rises like a fountain in your spine in quiet moments...

*Love  
drops from Above  
Soaking  
the body's cloak  
and diffuses  
into the invisible  
  
...leaving no stains*

August 3,

The children are washing their glasses at the wash-basins after having juice. One of the boys of blue group (5 year olds) is wearing only his underwear below his T-shirt – he must have soiled his shorts somewhere. As he washes his glass, Aseem, the cute little devil of blue group tries to hit him on his bottom and – what's this he's trying to pull his drawers down! But the other guy doesn't retaliate or get angry, he just holds it up with one hand and washes his glass with the other. He's doesn't even try to get even with him. But then children don't usually get back seriously or remember a grudge for long. It often happens that while the adults are trying to sort out the complaints and are weighing the situation to pronounce the judgement, the children have already patched up and have run off to play!

As a teacher I've often taken children's cursory complaints too seriously in my bid to be sincere. It's later that I realised it was not necessary. May be we should think from the point of view of the child more often. It'll lead to a more peaceful world.

August 3,

Children in this school have one advantage over others in formal schools - when they're absorbed, they're really *absorbed*. Here the children study in open classrooms so you can always look over the wall to what's going on in the neighbouring class. As a teacher I sometimes find it distracting especially if you're having a story-telling session and the other class is having a loud discussion. But generally it works very well because most classes are activity oriented and the children are busy in their own little worlds.

Right now we are having a spelling session in Orange group with seven-eight year old children. They've made flash cards of graded spellings. We've divided the group of twenty into three sub-groups according to their level in English and assigned words accordingly.

I've already demonstrated how to divide the word according to syllables, and write it boldly and clearly in the middle of the card using coloured sketch pens so that the most confusing part of the word stands out. They could also use symbols or draw figures so that the word was visually embedded in their minds. We asked them to

make the flash cards themselves instead of handing it down to them ready-made because in this way they could focus on the part of the word which confused them which may or may not be a common problem. Moreover, if you write and select yourself, you are likely to remember it more.

It was trying in the beginning as they couldn't really understand what was asked of them and the purpose behind it. A few children just enjoyed writing with different colours for its own sake instead of being bothered about highlighting the difficult parts to facilitate the learning of spellings. But I noticed that even the indiscriminate use of coloured sketch pens had its uses. The children took more interest in the work and paid more attention. I suppose, if we cease to make education a drab black and white affair then children will learn better. Of course, in making things interesting and 'colourful' one mustn't forget the original purpose, the English class in spellings should not merely become an exercise in exploring colours. It is important to keep your perspective and basic aim in a free environment, or one may end up losing more than gaining.

The children are totally absorbed. They are busy asking each other spellings. There are lovely songs being sung in the group beside this, but nobody seems to be bothered or distracted. In fact, they don't seem to be listening. I'm rather amazed, because my own attention is drawn time and again to the rhythmic group-song. The children in Orange group are working in pairs and have been given a word list according to their level in English. They're *all* absorbed - all twenty of them and are learning with zeal to the point of being deaf to distraction. This was something I'd longed to do in the formal schools I'd taught in, but never managed it because there was the same test every fortnight or every term for all the children of that grade. The same structured syllabus which the teacher had to compulsorily teach and the children had to compulsorily learn. Both were reduced to mechanised beings that needed to be programmed. Here we had the freedom to be more than disseminators and absorbers of information. Of course, the danger exists that we could be reduced to being even less than that. That's why people prefer a set standard curriculum and system to this, as you don't have to design and formulate a lot of things. In other words we don't have to think deeply....Why are we so reluctant to think? I've noticed that when we really think authentically, we need to be or rather we simply *are* more aware. And what does awareness imply? That would be something to munch over at lunch-time. Meanwhile, the Orange group children are on their spelling spree, undaunted.

Sept 2,

Sitting and peering out of the huge window from the library, it's almost become a daily after lunch ritual. There's a canopy of clouds outside, the sun is hidden a little and revealed a little in mellow mix. The cool breeze coming in makes you forget that there's no electricity. The grass is fresh and the leaves are washed. You can smell the grass in the wafts of air. There's a squirrel frolicking on the earth-mount where the children play. It's two o'clock and the children from the neighbouring school on campus are going home in disciplined lines, in uniform with bags and water-bottles...an array of white ants. A myna calls out, I wonder what she's saying...

*Poetry*  
*drips*  
*from tree-tops*  
*dissolved in dew*

*Hiakus ripple in rain-puddles*

Sept 3,

I bump into Gokul on my way up, and then he's followed by the rest of the Progress group gang - Ritwik, Leela, Appu, Rohan. They are all panting and sweating and carrying toy guns. It's 'free-time', which is when children are at their busiest. I venture to ask them, "Why are you all carrying guns if I may ask?" Rohan just nods in a funny way by way of an answer or may be he means that I can't ask. That's for me to interpret. Gokul is kinder, he elucidates,

"Ishan (their class-mate) has a rifle. How do you think we can defend ourselves, with sticks?"

And they shoot off to the battlefield.

Children are strangely absorbed in their own worlds, it never occurs to them that the other person may not know what's happening because he's another person. Often I've been asked by many red and blue group children if I've seen Raghav or, Subu, or Tanya or whoever their friend may be. The child's mind doesn't take into consideration that the other person doesn't even know who his friends are. But that's the way children often think. Interesting.

### **Oh! Grown ups**

*Papers and papers*

*And solemn examination-takers*

*Mummy wants my books to be clean*

*Daddy says TV was never meant to be seen*

*The teacher talks of optics and prisms*

*The principal of international stuff and "isms".*

*In school they don't let me look out of the window*

*And tell me to sit quietly in a neat row.*

*At home, they snatch my toy, and cry –*

*"Jack, you are a dull boy!"*

*But I want to sing my own "silly song",*

*So what, if the grammar's all wrong?*

*At least, I is happy!*

Sept 4,

I washed my cumbersome long hair in the morning. Since, they're still wet, I walk into the school with my long and wet hair open. As I pick up the glass to go to the juice counter, Appu of Orange group, all of seven years, passes by with his glass and remarks in passing,

“Hello, Cleopatra!”

I look around, there's nobody else standing. I deem the greeting is intended for me. How dare he! In a formal school I probably would have pulled him up for such a remark, though I have to admit that I'm more amused than offended. Anyway, I could certainly do with a glass of juice to swallow this comment down!

I am struck by the number of comments I get from various quarters in the dining hall itself. “How come you've left you hair open today didi?” Another little one strokes them and says, “Oh didi, you have such long hair!”. Divya, of the senior groups comments, “You change your style everyday.” That's true, one of the beautiful things about Mirambika is that you don't have to fit into a set role - either of mannerisms, or clothes. It's okay to be what you are. You can be natural and comfortable - not outrageous. I can stride in wearing a comfy T-shirt and cool pajamas with chappals on my feet as today, or a more formal salwar-kameej or saree if I liked ( which is rare).

...Later, in Orange group, I ask the cheeky (or so I thought) just why the he called me ‘Cleopatra’.

“Because of your T-shirt”

I look closely at the T-shirt I'm wearing. It's white and has a line-picture of an Egyptian court-scene. This is the first time I've observed the picture carefully. Really carefully.

“But how can you say that this figure is Cleopatra, it could be anybody?” I heckle him mercilessly.

“Well she wouldn't be sitting on the throne then” he explains the obvious.

I look closely, yes, the figure seems to be wearing a crown too and is being offered a goblet of wine. It definitely seems to be an Egyptian royal figure. I have to admit Cleopatra is not a bad bet at all....Strange, that all the time we think it's *we* who teach children. In times like this we realise that it's the children who are more advanced and are doing the teaching inadvertently.

Sept

I am standing next to the bamboo grove at the edge of the small round pond at the entrance watching the sun filter through the foliage. There is a gentle ripple in the green water of the pond and surface is glimmering in the sunlight. Sachin of Receptivity group approaches me from behind holding a notebook, evidently working on some project,

“Didi why is this called a bamboo grove – because of these bamboo trees?” He asks and answers his question, waiting for me to affirm the answer.

“Actually these are bamboo shoots not trees, as far as I know anyway, because bamboo is supposed to be the largest grass in the world. Ask Tapas bhaiya for more.”

“Ya really bamboo is a grass?” he’s quite surprised.

He catches hold of one bamboo shoot and swings while looking up at the leaves,

“So is this what an ant feels when it is in the grass?” he asks whether himself or me I can’t tell, but I can’t quite answer this question with authority. He’ll have to ask the ants.

I guess children are natural wonderers – wanderers too!

Sept 5,

It's Teacher's Day, and the teacher in me is feeling sad and neglected. Having walked along the path beside the MIS-assembly hall, I could hear Teacher's Day being celebrated with full gusto. But in Mirambika the tradition simply doesn't exist. I miss it. Teacher's Day and Children's Day are a part of the Indian National heritage. Perhaps they caress the teacher's ego in me that I miss their celebrations. Children's Day is somewhat celebrated here and so are the other festivals like *Janmashtami* and Independence Day, but not Teacher's Day. Why?

I share my troubled question with Dushmant, a *diya* in Orange group, where I go to 'teach' English. I've seen him issuing a lot of philosophy books – Bertrand Russell, Krishnamurti, Swami Sivananda. If he actually reads and thinks about them, maybe he'll be able to offer a philosophical reason that'll calm, if not satisfy my query. The thin, dark Dushmant who has a generous, toothy smile and not a very articulate speech, so you have to listen carefully to understand what he's saying, does not nurse my ego, that's aching for a bit of pampering.

"There are divided opinions here, as everywhere – to celebrate or not to celebrate." I tell him I'm all for Teacher's Day and I'm all for being made to feel special for at least one day in the year. What does he think? "Well, I was teaching in a formal set-up too. But here, who's the teacher? We learn from the children and Nature and each other, everything teaches. How many and who will we worship?"...Worship? Hmm, interesting. "As you rise higher these things have no meaning. The reason why we want these celebrations is that it makes us feel good when the children come and touch our feet or give us flowers and cards and so on. But at a higher consciousness, it doesn't count." "You mean all these celebrations – Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, Birthday, are just expressions of the ego?" I protest. Somehow my heart doesn't want to believe in Truth as being stone cold and unexpressive. Or maybe my consciousness is just not high enough. "I'm not saying you shouldn't have these expressions, but there shouldn't be a fixed day for it."

His views stirred my own thoughts that have been whirling in my mind for so long. It seemed so shallow to express 'love' to your beloved on Valentine's Day – not that the sale of flowers and cards and gifts was only limited to this day, but an appointed day called into focus a sense of duty. And somehow duty seems so diluted, such a poor match for the spontaneity of the expression of love. ...But perhaps, on second thoughts, an assigned day was not such a bad idea after all, because sometimes you want to express your heart and you hesitate or are caught up in the habit of hesitation. A natural expression of affection has become so unnatural that we need special days, where a gust of love breeze will not be regarded with suspicion or

awkwardness. Till that happens – *if* that happens on earth where man's mind is caught in its own cages of set-notions, we perhaps need special days.

*Memory*

*Put me away  
Pressed between the pages  
Of an old diary or book,  
Along with some half-written poem.*

*Years later,  
May be with a wrinkling smile  
You'll open it  
To pen down a full-stop  
...and we will meet again.*

Sept 8,

Another encounter with my smart friend Aseem from blue group. He's runs with his shoes in hand and enters the library. He grabs a *Tintin* comic, puts his shoes *on the table*, next to the comic and begins to read. A five year old reading *Tintin* if you please! Evidently, he's picked it up for the pictures.

I get to work without wasting time,

"Are shoes meant to be on the table?" I quiz him.

Is it a flicker of guilt I see on his face? He quickly puts them *on the chair* on which he is sitting, without glancing at me and keeping his eyes on the comic.

"So, you're suppose to put them on the chair?"

Aseem ignores me and pretends to concentrate on the comic.

"Well?"

He ignores.

"Stop trying to ignore me Aseem!"

I'm as persistent as he is – I wonder if we share the same sun sign. He then, with a quick passionless glance at me picks up his shoes and drops them on the floor. He doesn't place them on the floor gently, mind you, nor does he bang them in annoyance. He simply let's them drop – plonk!– from an arm's length, all this while his eyes glued to the comic. A tough nut to crack this one! I guess he must be thinking the same about me. Especially after I say,

"Is this how you put shoes on the floor?"

I don't know whether the expression on his young face is one of irritation or intense concentration. But he's only concentrating on the title of the comic. In a formal school I would have asked the child to pick up the shoes and put them down again – gently. The child would willy-nilly do so too, either with a positive knowing grin, or with a sulk and frown. But Aseem prefers to ignore me, I don't push it any further. He tries to read on, I watch him.

"The bl-a-ck..."

"Correct!" I try to encourage him.

"The black correct!" he reads. I'm quite sure that's a sarcastic one, his age not withstanding. I learn my lesson – again – and keep quiet. He struggles to decipher the word 'island'.

"The black is-e-land" he reads out aloud.

"Iland, 'island' is pronounced as 'iland'" I tell him "the 's' is silent."

"The black iland" he reads.

I go for lunch.

Sept 13,

Group energy has its wonders and effects... so even a lazy, never-exercising person is tempted to skip with the children in the morning. Even Sulochna didi joins in – and she must be 50 plus, and is afraid of her spondilitis flaring up. We all enjoy it.

9.30 a.m. ...music time. A time when you can truly taste Silence if you're receptive. At this time children are asked to sit quietly, even meditatively and absorb...the music,...the silence, or whatever else. Some children don't do anything like meditating, they simply continue with drawing painting or sketching. But they do more or less realise – even red group for that matter, that there are some who do try to meditate or concentrate seriously, and shouldn't be disturbed. So, even if they don't know of Silence, they yet learn the importance of being quiet.

You sit quietly and feel the cool wind bowing and music from the speakers fills the atmosphere. As the breeze filters through trees, its qualities change. It carries the essence of the trees. The wind passing from a bamboo grove has a different feel from the air from a peepal or neem tree. Strange... the things Silence makes you notice.

*Silence*  
*hangs on the morning mist,*  
*nudged by sunshine*  
*it falls onto the sparrow's chirp*  
*and becomes a song.*

Sept 23,

Today we had a series of PTA meetings in the school. PTA meetings are a regular feature in schools and this school is no exception in that sense. But the flavour is certainly different. In the various meetings where I was present, I saw fears allayed, confidence reinforced, tempers rising, dreams flowering and tears spilling over. While these are common features elsewhere, it is more visible in open places like this. Since this is a close-knit society, you get to experience fortunately or unfortunately – insights into human nature. Often my observations have led to surprising glimpses of relationships between parents and children.

Often children show greater maturity than parents, and when you see how reactive or domineering the parent is, you start to understand why a child behaves in the way that she or he does. In the process, many a times I've started respecting many a child.

Sometimes however you wonder how such polished sensitive and caring parents could have such a boisterous even violent child. But since we are only able to catch a glimpse of the surface, and do not know of what's behind the curtain, life indeed appears to be a mystery.

While on the whole the parent-teacher meetings tend to be either pleasantly informal with quite a bit of chit-chatting and sharing, or domineering and as have far as I have seen it, its always the parents who dominate. The reason being, that most of the *diyas* are yet under training, and their dealing with the children is a part of internship. If you take away the teacher-trainees from this place, there will not be many full-time *diyas* left. This has both advantages and disadvantages.

Anyhow, one characteristic of this arrangement is that parents tend to dominate the young and inexperienced *diyas*. One such PTA meeting proved to be very revealing. A mother came charged, determined to drive home her point, hell-bent on making a forceful statement. She walked in heavily and sat on one of the chairs kept for parents and guests. There was no smile – not even the hope of a smile. The cloud around her couldn't been seen clearly, but it could certainly be felt. No way you could miss it. I sat there watching her, I had no choice really since I was teaching English to that group I was expected to be around.

The lady didn't waste much time and came straight to the point that was stuck in her throat like a thorn. She looked at B bhैया, the main group *diya* or the 'class teacher' of that group and charged,

“If you don’t mind,” she began, “I’d like to say that the way you have written the report is uncalled for.”

I quickly read through her child’s class-report. The first few lines were devoted to the child’s general personality and behaviour, as it forms a regular and integral part of a child’s assessment report. Beginning with the emotional development, the group diya had chosen to highlight the ‘dark’ or negative aspects of the child before mentioning the positive aspects of the child. This was no doubt a dangerous proposition, certainly as far as this particular parent was concerned. Having worked in private formal schools long enough I knew how judiciously teachers were told to avoid this – for obvious reasons. No parents would like to be told that his or her child is a dud or ‘bad’. And of course, as the argument goes if your outlook in life is positive you’ll always find some positive trait which can be highlighted. It’s a safe and even encouraging way to follow about life in general, and about writing reports in particular. By and large I would have acquainted B bhayia with this had I happened to see the report before it was finally printed.

However, the lady said the right thing for the wrong reasons. That would make it wrong? Right? Her reasons were illogical and even harmful. And she was vociferous all right,

“How could you mention that she irritates other children? These things are not meant to be written on record. Just because you’ve become teachers you think you can do what you want. I’m forty plus, I know about life. I don’t mind if you mention about academic shortcomings, but how could you say anything about her (the child’s) personality? The diya reminded her that she was in a different school where shaping of personality was integral to the process of education, that education was not mere academics, that interpersonal relationships and behaviour were as important as Physics and Chemistry. She was also reminded that these things are made clear at the time of admission and the parents agree to aid in the process of total education which was the basic aim of the school.

While what she’d said earlier made some sense, however, it was surprising, even shocking to discover, the real reason for her hurt, which seemed rather ridiculous. She said that she had been preserving the child’s school reports since the beginning of her schooling, and wanted to preserve them for showing the little girl’s future husband, in-laws and children! She said that such a remark was so disparaging and difficult to accept that she couldn’t show it to her husband and mother-in-law. This was a prime example of over-reaction by any standards, considering that the other children in the group had also got similar remarks and not only this child.

There was no scope of reasoning with a person who was in a state of emotional and mental disequilibrium. The original point of the child's state was lost altogether, the issue was that any negative point about the child's personality is an insult to the parents and should be put down, not even in this school. The meeting made me wonder about the complexes that afflict seemingly normal people. It's said that not one of us is completely mentally healthy or balanced, to be that is to be Divine. How true! How we murder our todays and those of our children because we have planned the nitty-grittys of tomorrow. We knit beautiful dream-futures, and when they strike against life and shatter, we cry. The nature of the mind is such that it always focuses on the past or the future. The here and now is lost. This lady only t focus on the present and the question at hand and things wouldn't have appeared so bleak. But the present was significant only so far as it catalysed thoughts of past or future. Thus, the present lost its significance. That's how we waste life and our energies.

### **Holding onto Light**

*I wanted to hold  
The sunbeams in my hand,  
To clasp them tight,  
And pack them away  
In the old school-bag...  
... the sun beams of sunny days.*

*But, of course, the sun set  
As the sun always sets.  
Only,  
It left its warmth with me,  
Till the moon rose  
To give a cool, comforting embrace.  
Light comes in different forms.*

Nov, 1,

Sitting at my favourite place in the library on the corner bench covered with a green mat, leaning against a blue cushion, I pause from reading the book in hand. The scene outside draws my attention. The sun is gentle and there are the endless shades of green in the green-belt. There is a concentrated air of peace and silence in the ashram. Any sensitive person who enters the gates of the ashram leaving the stormy traffic outside feels hit by a blast of peace and quietness. The muscles loosen up, the breath becomes deeper and slower – naturally.

One could try to analyse and fathom the reasons why this is so. It could be due to the rich green plantation, the disciplined and simple life style of the ashram residents, the non-commercial nature of activities undertaken here, the creative architecture, or perhaps divine grace. It doesn't matter much the point is you don't have to make a hard effort to meditate. Meditation happens.

*Beneath the leafy,  
luminous green,  
swinging  
from nowhere  
to nowhere,  
  
tasting timelessness  
with closed eyes.  
Hot  
Cool,  
Shadow  
Light,  
Playing the eternal play  
On a child's swing.*

Nov, 15,

Yesterday was children's day. Again my heart became shrouded with a thin cover of sadness, as I walked across the grounds of the other school in the campus which is so well known and happens to be one of the better schools in the city. The teachers must be putting up a performance for the children in school. Perhaps I'm keen to have some fun and celebrate, perhaps its just the restlessness in myself which is playing up again, perhaps I miss good stage functions which are a rarity in the school where I am now. I guess for the children in this school, every day is a celebration of sorts. Then why this strange sadness in me? Possibly because I'm used to these 'branded' celebrations and since they are not there now I'm feeling a vacuum. Is it a trick of the mind? Does the mind get used to patterns that define our feelings of buoyancy, feelings that we call 'happiness'? I wonder ...

I'm reminded of the conversation I'd had with Dushmant on Teachers Day, "Why do you need a special day for this?"

In the library, Baren bhaiya and Mani are discussing Tai chi, when I come and sit myself down, before the glowing greens outside. Baren starts chatting to me, not noticing my sulk.

"Today's Children's Day. Want to do something for the children? Should we show them a movie? But no..." he answers himself in the same breath.

His loud musings were catalyst enough leading to a cathartic response,

"Well, the whole of India celebrates Children's Day, but this school is unique, and beyond celebration!"

I blurt out, surprised at the irritation in my own voice.

"Well why don't you do something about it? You're a part of the school too!"

"Nobody else seems to be interested..." I'm still in a sulking and complaining mood

"Okay, what can we do?" there's a certain enthusiasm in his voice which shakes my mind out of its negative mode, to the here and now. I respond promptly, instead of sulking, my mind is pushed in an action mode, and I spend my mental energy thinking of what can possibly be done on this occasion. I respond with a little enthusiasm this time,

"Let's dress up as clowns with drums and tambourines and sing and give sweets to the children." I suggest.

"Okay let's!" Baren responds excitedly.

At that time, it was exactly 11.25 a.m. By 12 o'clock the youngest darlings of the school, the red group children leave for the day. So if we wanted them to share the

fun – which we most certainly did, we had exactly 35 minutes in hand to execute ‘Project fun’. We dart to Art Room,

“Wait I’ll ask Bijoy to join you.” Baren suggests

“Bijoy?” I am rather surprised.

Bijoy is a good-natured, cheerful History graduate who looks after the Resource Centre and is wonderful at sports, especially gymnastics. But somehow I’ve envisaged him in a clown’s garb. Baren senses this,

“Do you know Bijoy? I mean, do you really *know* him? He’s great at making kids laugh!”

Well then there’s no time to waste! In ten minute I’m wearing somebody’s bright red T-shirt over my dull brown one. The first years and Sarika in the Art Room help to paint our faces and wrap us around in colourful strips of crepe paper, tie balloons and knick-knacks on our sleeves and ankles. Manish runs to get sweets from the store which I carry in a drum-like box along with stick to beat the thing to a tune.

In exactly twelve minutes with the bongo, the sweets, the antics and the chang-bang stuff we’re ready to storm the school. And that’s exactly what we do! Bijoy amazes me and the children with his acrobatics cartwheeling through the corridors while I beat the beat. Someone’s singing “Here come the clowns, here come the clowns”! Some kid pinches one of Bijoy’s balloons, and he jumps in the air, cartwheels, makes some funny gestures and dances on. The children go mad with delight. In the dining hall, where we eventually go with a mob of curious children, I’m almost mobbed because of the sweets. Gosh! What a lesson learnt. Never, I repeat, never go to a group of small fearless children with a large quantity of sweets unless you are adequately covered by life and medical insurance. ( Note: this is serious advice, there’s no exclamation mark at the end of the sentence.) Oh! well after ‘distributing’ sweets and entertaining the little ones we move off to the older kids and shake hands, wish “Ha ha hap happy Children’s Day!” and SCRAM from there. What a day!

For a number of days after this the children kept guessing who were the two people in the clown’s disguise. Remember, our faces were painted and we were wearing unrecognisable and unusual costumes. It was obvious that they liked a little bit of clowning around even if the clowns were their *didis* and *bhaiyas*.

Of course, this kind of spontaneous activity is more likely to happen in an open and free system like this one where there are barely 150 children in the entire school. I understand though many schools may want it, however you cannot afford to have teachers dressed as clowns, cartwheeling all over the place. It would lead to absolute

chaos in most cases. Most activities are therefore bound by the physical place and general atmosphere of the places.

### **An Existential Invitation**

*Far,  
From mad-paced lives,  
Bruised egos,  
Broken hearts,  
From loud vaccuties,  
dead routine,  
In the quietness  
that lies between  
the inbreath  
and the outbreath,  
between shadow and shine...  
The Silence is ready  
To stir and spill  
Receive it  
if you will...*

Nov, 22,

In the afternoon, one diya tells me to come to the dining hall. They are going to celebrate a child's birthday. Birthday celebrations are common feature here where children learn to enjoy sharing and celebrating together. Often parents come with goodies and there's a small treat for everyone in the group. Generally, I don't think it's a bad idea provided there is no competition or unnecessary lavishness. "It's at two o'clock, so come to the dining hall."

At two o'clock I reach the dining hall – no sign of parents or part. 2.15 – no one. 2.30 – no one. I search for the children. They are all outside the dining hall, happily chit-chatting while perched on the wall of a well whose mouth is closed with iron bars, waiting for the expected parents to arrive with the goodies. At 2.45 p.m. the parents arrive with a lot of packets. I notice that by now classes have gathered. One child's birthday, two classes, and a lot of time wasted. And I also happen to be aware of the fact that there are a number of complaints against the child whose birthday is being celebrating, for bullying and dominating other children. Is this kind of activity help the matter. I'm not very comfortable with what's happening given the situation, and I ask the diya in charge,

"Why two groups?"

"She (the birthday girl) has her younger sister in the other group..."

But as he explains he seems to feel sorry about the whole affair, and says,

"Well, we're lax, so parents are lax,"

"Who's *we*?" I mercilessly ask in my persistent persual of the matter.

"You see, when here are no set parameters, it's difficult." he says, more to himself than to me by way of explanation.

In flexible systems like these there's greater scope of interpretation – and misinterpretation. Incidents like these make you wonder – is it possible to have a flexible, free system unless the people who are running it are of a very evolved stature? I have my doubts. I feel this kind of a system is perhaps more suitable for an evolved society, where the people running the show are totally aware of what they are doing and why. Independent and aware people often feel stifled in rigidly structured system where they have to conform to a pattern, the not so independent and aware feel lost in a system lacking categorical rules and calling for discrimination.

Undated... a slice of timelessness

There is peace in the rustling of bamboo leaves; there is peace in the play of shadow and shine; there is peace in the cawing of crows and chirping of sparrows; peace in watching the squirrels standing on their hind legs before they dart into the bushes...There is peace in the gentle hub of cleaning the Art room together with others, with coloured sheets scattered all around and coloured powder spilled onto a patch of sunshine. There is peace in watching a dancing scrap of deep red crepe paper, caught a stalk of dried grass, made brilliant by the light passing through it. There is peace in me.

Nov, 29,

Today a team from a Production House has come to shoot a two minute documentary on the school and the system it follows for the National Geographic Channel. I've been asked to coordinate because my own training in the celluloid media might help.

Many children know about it because the assistant director had been around the day before to check the schedule, lighting, shooting spots and other details. Some of the children are quite excited about this, and in anticipation of their 'celebrity status' have decided to do things with extra gusto. In my English class with Progress group we are scheduled to have a poetry presentation, in which they recite and present the poems they've learnt with the help of music, action, mime and so on. This time they've decided to paint their faces to and wear costumes. While they do these things even normally but I have a feeling that this enthusiasm has something to do with the camera team.

I guess it's very difficult to catch something in a totally natural state for public view. Of course you don't have much of a choice where animals are concerned. The lion is not going to repeat his grand yawn to oblige the electronic eye! So the media folks have to compensate the adventure and feel of the real things with music, creative lighting, smart editing, special effects and the like. But the real moment is still the real moment. Somehow, it's always the tip of the iceberg which comes to the surface. We don't perhaps can't, reckon with the hidden part which is much, much larger. That can be scary, that's why the Titanic sank. But do we collide with the good and the beneficial like that – suddenly and unprepared, as we do with the disastrous? Perhaps.

Feb, 2,

I catch Subu, my four year old friend in red group walking along the corridor, playing with a paper boat. I go straight to him and complain, “Subu you don’t talk to me nowadays, are you annoyed?”

He answers without looking at me, with long pauses evidently not entirely keen to give an explanation.

“No, I don’t talk so much.....nowadays, because I don’t ....feel like talking that much. I only want to talk .....about necessary things.” Then he turned around and walked off with his paper boat, not having given me a glance. I smile and let him be. I’ve often wondered what kind of a person this dreamy, self-absorbed fellow who loves to be in his own world will grow up into after a few years.

But would I have accepted the same spontaneity if he were an adult? Probably not. An adult has duties assigned and aims to achieve. Some call it duty and honour it, others call it a job, and a tiresome one at that. It’s a question worth asking, can we afford to entertain moods and whims in the workplace? What will become of a school where teachers choose not to go in classes because they don’t ‘feel like it’? Chaos? Indifference? Is that why in schools we have defined parameters – syllabus, deadlines, compulsory homework and examinations. All neat, standardised packages?

Do we really have a choice? Let’s ask ourselves the question that has always boggled the civilised mind - Is freedom and indiscipline the one and the same? If we give our teachers and students freedom will it lead to inefficiency and laxity rather than creativity? Can there be a universal answer to this, or are there different answers possible for different type of people and different situations?

As far as I am concerned, I’d say the life of freedom and creativity shorn of rigid structures and parameters is suitable for certain type of people – the creatively inclined, the independent minded, those who seek more than the mundane in life. Of course, where small children are concerned it is not possible to discover that so easily. It takes observation and time to know the basic matrix that constitutes a child’s nature and anyway with time many changes come about. So, consistent monitoring is important where children are concerned. It may be a good idea to see in the early years whether a child is suitable for free growth and those who are likely to benefit from this should continue while the others can channelled towards a more structured system. Different systems are apt for different natures and personalities, and to put all into one mould whether it is a structured system or a free one, isn’t going to help the individual or the system. Choice is all important.

Feb,14,

Green group children – 6 year olds, are out there exploring German games. These games consist of interesting equipment – various innovative versions and forms of skate-boards, frizbees, stilts, etc which help the children to learn the art of balancing besides being able to explore its various creative applications.

I watch them, eager to join them when a peddling cycle is free. There are paddling foot-cycles of various lengths and sizes. I notice one child is teaching his friend,

“No, no, keep this leg straight and bend the other slightly. But the peddle should be tilted like this - now push.”

The other boy listens carefully and follows, but is a little hesitant,

“Here hold my hand” the young guru tells his little pupil, as he extends his hand.

This young trainer is evidently confident of his method. As the other fellow manages a few pushes, he is promptly told,

“No need to hold my hand, you can do it on your own.”

The other fellow tries it on his own, albeit staggering a little, and is successful finally. He can now manage to peddle the *peddlo* himself.

“He is learnt it didi! He’s learnt it bhayia!” there’s a leap of joy from the young trainer, as he celebrates and announces the job well learnt.

“I’ve learnt it! I’ve learnt it!” shouts the learner equally delighted with himself.

Learning is evidently a joy both for the teacher and the learner and is a reward in itself.

Feb, 26,

Standing at the edge of the small pond at the entrance of the school, I watch the fountain overflowing in ecstasy. The sun-rays danced and shimmered in delight on top of the fountain before the fell into the still waters of the pond. You couldn't trace the fountainhead as it was in the shade, so it looked as if the water appeared from no where.... much like what happens in life. Things seem to appear from out of the blue sometimes. I guess it's the same thing here, we can't see the fountainhead, the source, not that it isn't there.

Sometimes you stumble into a windfall and Alladin's lamp seems to fall into your lap without any apparent effort on your part. Sometimes you fall flat on your face, or worse are cheated, hurt, robbed by maniacs or vicious stranger or cruel nature. It all seems so arbitrary and unfair and we become, "as flies to wanton boys they kill us for their sport". Is this really so, or simply the outpouring of a distressed and depressed heart? Is there no Divinity that shapes our ends? Is everything chaos and madness?

Yet the sun rises and sets, the earth turns, the stars shine, flowers bloom, babies are born... everything is chaos and madness? Could it be that apparent arbitrariness be because we can't see what's hidden in the shade? We live smug in our Titanic hopes, seeing only the tip of the iceberg. The unseen that lies under the water punctures or complacency, and we drown or at least our dreams do. Why? Is it because of a cruel and blind fate? Or because of our inability to the see the whole? I vote for the latter. It makes me responsible for my bruises, but it also gives me a shot of hope. If I am the cause of the bruise, I also can be my own healer. Fair enough.

I watch the surface of the pond again. Now, the fountain is flowing even greater exuberance. The sun is shining on the surface of the water as it breaks into reflection....ripples....reflection...ripples. The light is now falling on the fountainhead. I see for a moment – the Whole.

March 6,

Today is Id. It's a holiday for the children, but the teachers are here for a meeting or to do some work or the other. I'm sitting in the library and looking out at the greens.

Ekansh of red group is riding his bike on the empty campus road. It's quite common to find the children here on holidays and in the evenings playing and running about all over the place. In busy metros like this, green clean places which are a joy for children and are safe are difficult to find. So in the gentle sunshine and cool air, a child who studies here often comes to play and run on holidays. Ekansh is cycling away to glory. He's had a hair-cut, so his curly hair doesn't swish around anymore like it used to when it was an unruly mop. He's going around in circles on the ground, now he's racing along the track, and now he's reached the top of the 'hillock'. Then he stops, right on top of the mount. I'm watching him from the library window. He raises little leg and gets off his bike, putting it on the stand. Something on the ground has evidently caught his eye. He squats, and peers down on the grass. He bends his head low and continues to gaze. Then he picks up a dry leaf and apparently turns the object of his interest to examine it in greater detail. It's impossible for me to see what it is from where I'm sitting probably an insect or a pebble. Anyway, after the little further observation and examination, he's satisfied. He mounts his bike and is off again.

Curiosity...spontaneity...natural learning, have they become extinct, entirely chased away and wiped out from our education system? In a normal situation if a teacher is taking children out in nature, which in itself is rare and difficult to come by in India, the child will not be permitted to gaze at something which has caught his fancy. Probably because the teacher has to monitor too many children and has a rigid framework to follow and rules to adhere to which have outlined and given to her in an official package. I find it difficult to blame teachers, I also understand the restrictions and pressures on the management. But then where does it leave us, should we give in to pressures and limitations and let things be? It is difficult to bring about a change no doubt, but is it impossible?

Agreed that every school, at least as far as a highly populated country like India is concerned, cannot have a utopian student-teacher ratio. But does that necessarily spell doom? Let's talk practically. Beginning with the Principal, because it's easier to bring a change from the top to the bottom rather than vice-versa. If we take the common problem of 'too much noise in the school' almost a universal problem in large schools, what can be done without drastic changes? A few suggestions –

### Identify what is 'noise' –

- ✳ idle chatter,
- ✳ children talking too loudly,
- ✳ too many people speaking at the same time,
- ✳ students vying for attention
- ✳ students not getting enough time to talk leisurely with each other, restlessness.....

It may be any one or more or all of these or other factors.

Have brainstorming sessions as to **find the feasible solutions** for the school to opt given their resources and situation –

- ✳ introduce an extra break where children can talk to each other,
- ✳ introduce 'silence periods', small time-slots where in the entire school practises silence perhaps with some soothing music in the background if possible, when the children either sit quietly or work silently,
- ✳ introduce the concept of loudness levels and train the children to talk at various loudness levels, e.g. normal level as in normal conversation, high level as when answering a question or reading before the entire class, whisper-level as when they may talk to their partner without being heard at the next desk.
- ✳ Introduce a school sign language for things like asking a question, keeping quiet, writing, permission to go out etc.

March 21,

In the garden with the huge banyan tree and pond, I spot Dheeraj of Sincerity group holding a bird which seems either badly hurt or dead. There are two other boys with him and also Rohit, Progress group diya. Rohit is digging the ground with a spade. I run over to see what is happening. Rohit was digging a grave for a dead pigeon. Dheeraj put the pigeon gently into the hole.

"We found him in the group. He must have banged himself against the window Pigeons always do." Dheeraj volunteers to tell me.

"Yea, pigeons are kind of dumb. It's difficult to get a trapped one out of the room without it getting hurt." I tell him remembering the umpteen number of times when I'd tried to chase out pigeons from rooms they'd got into but didn't know how to get out.

Karna plucks a few marigold flowers from the garden and puts them on the dead bird. Rohit asks everybody to put a fistful of soil over the bird. One by one we all do. He uses the spade cover up the bird. There is a flat stone that's been dug out. Pranit places it vertically over the pigeon's grave. But we don't engrave an epitaph.

"Now a plant that grows here will have wings" I comment

“And will be dumb!” Dheeraj completes my sentence.  
We all go back to what we were doing.

*From the inner caverns –  
a spark,  
The darkness outside  
is shocked.*

*Light bewilders.*

July, 23,

The total experience of a school like this is gained when you get stay on the quiet, green and beautiful campus. A campus that is loved and looked after. Anyone can see that, looking at the well-mowed lawns, neatly clipped hedges, watered plants and flowers and trees. I guess love causes green things to grow...

The teacher-training institute here offers a three-year residential course and is directly connected to the school. So the young teachers-to-be stay on the campus and their activities are planned for the entire day. Come 5 o'clock and all the teacher-trainees are on the sports-ground for the evening sports. This is followed by evening meditation and dinner.

After the evening yoga class, I take a walk around the ashram-campus. As usual 'the neighbourhood gang' is there. These are the school children who live nearby at a walking distance. In the evening, while their mothers take a brisk walk around the track they're back here to play and watch their diyas playing. The campus is a virtual home for them, like a residential school. They are the kings of the campus – free and familiar with the thing and people around them. I'm almost envious. Wish I'd grown up in a place like this!

Their shuttle has got caught in the branches of a tree. They throw a racket to rescue it. But even the racket gets caught there! Now they decide to throw the other racket. And yes, this time they succeed.

Ujjwal, he's five, complains as he hops along with me,

"There are too many mosquitoes here. I've just killed four!"

"You've killed mosquitoes, now you'll go to jail!" I tease him.

"What's jail?"

I'm a little taken aback. It never occurred to me that a child of his age may not know what jail is, especially since he studies in a place that's all for freedom!

I guess imprisonment is an adult concept...I wonder when we started formulating it...in school?...at home? I hesitate in answering and in the meanwhile he runs away to his friends. He's evidently not too interested in finding out what jail is – thank goodness! But what if he'd persisted and insisted that I explained what jail is? How do you explain 'jail' – not just the physical place but what it stands for to a five year old? That too to a child who doesn't have to wear a defined uniform, or sit at an allotted desk, or sit for an exam, or *have* to do something someone else tells him? Tough, huh? And if some one hasn't experience being jailed, will that person end up imprisoning others – a spouse, a child, an employee...?

August 2,

Today the younger groups were making *ladoos* for *raksha bandhan* that they are going to celebrate tomorrow. All the four to six year olds in the school were gathered together in small groups of five, sitting with a diya, with a *thali* in the center which contained a delicious mixture of roasted *basin*, ground sugar, *ghee* and some other stuff which was to be rolled into tight balls called *ladoos*. It was a preparation of celebration in the true sense. Something quite extinct in large metros.

The parents of the red and blue groups (4 and 5 years old) brought the ingredients and this was a joint effort of the diyas and parents to involve the children in the celebrations. As *basin* was roasted in the *ghee*, tempting waves of the delicacy in the making wafted throughout the building. Finally it was mixed with the sugar and the mixture was ready to be moulded into round balls or *ladoos*.

The little children are made to sit in groups of five with a diya or a parent where they make *ladoos* with their tiny hands. Involved, animated, excited, they feel important about being a part of the making of something sweet and liked. I see them, some are better at rolling out balls of *ladoos*, while the others are a little clumsy. Most of them show the *ladoo* to their *didi* after making it, waiting for a smile of approval before making another. In my group one boy makes rather big and oval *ladoos* rather than small and fine ones. The girl next to him quietly picks up each *ladoo* he makes and rolls it in her hand giving it the perfect shape and finish with her midas touch. While yet another girl teaches the young learner very much like a teacher, “No, no you should keep your hand like this (she cups her hand) then they will be round.” This one is not interested in quietly mending bad work, but in teaching the other guy to get things right while the other young lady of four is just quietly mending things. I guess kids are adults we don’t seriously enough because we think they’re just children!

The session ends with a fitting finale -- licking lips and fingers!

Sept, 5,

Today is teacher's day, and like last year I'm feeling sad. My teacher's ego needs petting, and of course, this school stands on the belief that there are no real 'teachers' here only guides and diyas. So, be it. But I can't help sighing all the same. All those years in formal schools in India have no doubt had some effect. Since I yet seem to be dwelling on a lesser plane than others, I decide to sulk silently instead of throwing a fit.

My first class is with the first year teacher-trainees, this year I'm helping to conduct the teacher-education programme too. There are only four students now, in the first year for some reasons, usually there are ten to fifteen. I go for the class feeling a little low. To my utter surprise I find a hand made card with a flower wishing 'Happy Teacher's Day', and a small gift. Okay, I confess I felt definitely surprised and pleasantly so at that, because I never thought these students even knew much about Teacher's Day.

I expressed my surprise and pleasure and unwrapped the gift. I was surprised to find an alarm clock. Now that was too much, I could have accepted a chocolate, but an alarm clock is too expensive and absolutely uncalled for as a gift. I realised that they were not from very economically well-to-do families and had saved from the stipend they received from the ashram. I can't accept it, "I'm sorry" I tell them. They shouldn't have done this. They tell me "it only cost us two ice-creams". A card was enough. I tell them to return it and get something small. "We can't return it didi, please take it this time we won't do it next time."

I'm reminded of a time when I tried to return a small gift a seventh class student had brought for me in my first year of teaching. I remember the tears in his eyes and his hurt expression when I told him that there was no for a gift. But then I thought it was idealism gone too far and a child's feeling shouldn't be hurt, if the intent of the gift was not to bribe or polish up. So, I had accepted simply saying, next time, gift me a self-composed poem. This time too, I told the teacher-trainees not to buy anything expensive in future and accepted. This question whether to accept or not to accept gifts from students is something which every single teacher has to ask herself or himself. Some school managements make a policy-decision to not allow the exchange of gifts because it encourages partiality, commercialism and some other problems. Others leave it to the discretion of the teacher concerned. Personally, I do not think taking or not taking gifts means anything as such in general, it depends on the individuals concerned and the situation. A policy-decision by the management imposing non-acceptance of gifts from children can hurt the dignity of self-

respecting teachers who are guided by self-interest or vanity in the first place. Rules are made where enough understanding and sensitivity do not prevail. If a problem is overbearing you need rules and official guidelines. Here, this was hardly the case and I let things be.

Sept, 5,

The diyas are putting up a short stage-performance, a play on the traditional Shiva-Parvati and Ganesha saga of Hindu mythology. All the children are seated in the hall along with the diyas. All except two naughty four year olds from Red Group, who are running around near the steps of the stage and don't want to settle and sit down with the rest of their group.

The play begins. There's a solemn chanting of 'Om' when everyone joins in, everyone that is, except for Ayush and Raghav of Red group who are still chasing each other and are now on the stage. Shilpi and Asha, I mean Shiva and Parvati come on stage dressed in their classical glory, and behind them is Nandi the bull - that's Shashi bhैया wearing a bell and funny horns and make-up, dressed in white and bobbing his head about while on all fours. All the kids in the hall laugh when they see him crawling, the shloka-chanting in the background notwithstanding. Ayush and Raghav are especially delighted and go right in the middle of the stage and try to enrage the bull. The bull shakes its horns fiercely and the two children let out a cry of scared laughter and quickly scam across the other side of the stage to safety. All this time the play is going on, mind you. Some people tried to beckon and persuade the children to come off, I send two older children to try their luck. No use. The only way you could get those boys off stage is to forcibly carry them. Something quite unthinkable in this school! So they are left to their whims and the play goes on.

Meanwhile, Shiva has chopped off Ganesha's head and Parvati has just come to know about it. She asks in her agony and outrage "Who has done this?" Raghav and Ayush who are now point blank in the middle of the stage and have been witnessing the drama from a distance of two meters now look at each other. Are they going to be blamed for this gruesome killing. Raghav is quick to defend himself and his friend and point out the real culprit lest they be blamed for the mischief and blurts out "He has!". The whole hall bursts into laughter. Myths seem to have taken a creative turn all right!

There has been a general hub of criticism about this system of education, that because of too much freedom children are not disciplined. Even though I enjoyed

the young child's funny remarks on stage, I can understand this criticism. It's true that the children here can't really sit still for very long. The normal

class-room discipline of staying at the desk and working with books is not instilled very strongly here. So, when they go to formal schools later, they feel incredibly restless, when their space is limited to a desk and chair. I too have often been irritated at their restlessness in class while teaching, especially if one of the children is reading a composition that others don't like. They will say point blank "it's so boring!".

The inevitable results of having this kind of a system is that some children will be fearless and frank to the point of being arrogant and inconsiderate of others' feelings. Of course, the plus point is that they will not become hypocrites and not be manipulative or cunning. That's another trait I've noticed in the children here is that they are generally quite innocent and open, meaning what they say, and not saying what they don't mean. As children here are not taught specifically norms of behaviour in certain situation they react spontaneously, or as per what they observe in people around them or even in the media for that matter.

Frankly, I feel a child should at least be made aware of expected norms in given situations as far as possible and be able to observe them if so required. Whether they *choose* to observe norms or flout them is altogether another matter. However, it need not be a case of ignorance being bliss.

At the same time I realise it is not easy, especially where small children are concerned. You simply can't tell a four or five year old to behave in a certain way in a certain situation, when that behaviour is otherwise not observed in the normal course of affairs. So it happens that in institutions where very little or no freedom is allowed, children do not have confidence to speak in public or deliver a stage performance. In systems like this where freedom is a way of life, some children won't even realise the implications of a stage performance and go up anyway, and given the play a dimension altogether.

Can we ever have a balanced system? I wonder....

Sept, 5

Later on, that day Shilpi, who was playing Shiva told me that one or two of the children of her group refused to talk to her and looked down upon her as she was 'bad' because she hit and killed people! It sounded funny at first, but then even after

two days the matter hadn't cooled with at least one child, as he still condemned her for her deplorable action. When she told me about this she sounded concerned and a little worried and asked me if it was appropriate to show such a play to such small children. In retrospect perhaps not. A few days ago, the diyas had shown the red and blue group children a puppet show which the children thoroughly enjoyed. But when the 'monster' was laughing wickedly (in Bijoy's booming voice!) some of the kids got a little scared and one brave fellow told a scared one, "It's not a real monster you know."

We often forget and don't always realise how the inner world of a young child unfolds. A child cannot often tell the difference between fact and fiction, that is why stories with noble messages help to shape a child's character. A child can get hurt or be influenced so incredibly deeply by the smallest of things, and sometimes these impressions last a lifetime and shape the character of the person. All the more reason to tread softly.

I remember, I was nine years old. That afternoon we children were alone in the house, so I switched on the T.V. There was the theatrical version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that was being screened. Of course, I didn't know that then, all I saw was a blank floor (it was a prop-less stage) with four people, two unfriendly looking grown men, a lady and her son. One of the men spoke something nastily to the lady who looked bewildered and scared.

I couldn't understand what he said but by the tone of it, it certainly seemed unpleasant. The small boy protested, evidently quite offended by the way they way they treated his mother. The other nasty looking man who was kneeling on one knee, roughly drew the boy to him so that boy's back hit against his hand. The brave young face squirmed in pain and all he said to his mother was "mother they have killed me!". Then the boy fell on his face and you could see that he had been stabbed on his back.

When his mother saw this, she let out a scream of agonised horror, and as she did so, her head turned back and her throat slit with a dagger. This histrionically laudable depiction of Lady Macduff's murder in the play *Macbeth*, left an indelible picture in my mind. I can see Lady Macduff's throat being slit even today. It was one of the most shocking things you could show to a sensitive child. And by the way children generally go, they are very sensitive.

Oct, 3,

I spot Subu outside the 'living museum' struggling to put his shoes on, quite alone as usual. I run to chat with him. He's probably five now, and has moved from red to blue group. I say what I always say to him,

"When will you tell me a story?"

He ignores the question. So I ask him another, just so as to make him chat a bit.

"Where are the other children?"

He chooses to answer this question,

"They are in the group"

"How come you are not in the group?" I persist

"Because I'm not."

"Yes, but why?"

"Because I'm not."

"Okay, so tell me a story." I come back to my original stance.

"How can I think, it's not even lunch-time?"

Of course, I know Subu takes the longest time ever when he's taking lunch. During the ritual of taking lunch he loses himself in his dream-world. Everyone assumes it's because he doesn't like the food and as a result he's the last to leave the dining hall.

But I yet ask,

"What does thinking have to do with lunch-time? You can only think at lunch-time or what?" I ask, both perplexed and amused.

"Yes"

"Why do you only think at lunch-time?" I'm curious.

"Because God made me that way" he smiles and runs away.

Food for thought?

Oct, 8,

I've just returned from the drama class with Receptivity and Peace group and they are all anything but peaceful! But today I was disturbed by the class and not just a little irritated at their naughtiness. Perhaps I was disturbed by all the reports of violence and the possibility of a war breaking out between India and Pakistan was there at the back of my mind. So, when I went in the class I was in no mood of tolerating any kind of violence or disturbance.

Louisa, who's a gap student from England and has studied drama helps with the classes by sharing the drama techniques she's learnt. She's very gentle and quiet and knows some very interesting drama exercises. She was conducting a 'walking exercise' with the children, when they had to walk around the hall at varying paces changing directions when instructed without bumping with each other. Not entirely an easy task for such a restless group! This time it was even more difficult because all around the hall there was the remnant of an exhibition on houses. So all over the hall there were placed small models of houses and toy vehicles and soft toys which they had to avoid bumping into.

I then saw which was a canker in my eye. There was a teddy bear which was on the floor and was kicked by one child because it was in his way, it reached the foot of another boy who casually kicked it too. The one after him did the same. Someone else dragged the stuffed toy on the floor, so it wiped the floor clean and gathered dust on its coat. As I sat and watched while the exercise was being conducted, my first reaction was to go to the boy who was kicking him and give him a jolly good scolding. But then I saw it wasn't just one boy, it was almost all of them. So, for that moment I refrained from reacting, and waited till there were only five minutes left for the class to be over.

I then asked all of them to sit down and held the gentle looking teddy-bear in my hands. I asked them, "Can you think of something you've written or made where you've put in a lot of hard work and really liked the thing?"

"Can it be something we've made at home or in the earlier groups?"

"Yes, but something you really liked"

"Ya, I made a model of a mandir" someone said

"A boat"

"I wrote a very good story once!" another enthusiastic response.

They all had something or the other to share. I went on,

“Okay now sit straight and close your eyes. Imagine that somebody is coming and break that precious things into bits, tearing it to pieces, ripping it apart destroying it. Now open your eyes. How do you feel?” I asked them.

“Sad”, “Angry” “Very bad”

They all looked it to.

“I know what you are going to say!” Ishan volunteered.

“Really tell me” I seek his participation. He too had been kicking the soft toy.

“You’re going to say that we shouldn’t kick the teddy-bear” he answers.

Well they are quick at getting the point all right.

“Would you have kicked the teddy-bear around if its owner had been around. How do you think he or she would have felt? What if the teddy-bear was alive and could talk what do you it would have said?”

We had a brief discussion on this and they spoke of how their cycles were taken by some children of the other school during break-time and sometimes abandoned just about anywhere. We spoke of how wars start from not caring for other people’s feeling and being inconsiderate and insensitive. It was a brief but intense discussion. Will it make a difference? We’ll see.

Oct, 9,

I'd just had my lunch, and was going to wash my plate, when Bandita of red group, she's four, caught me throwing a potato in the waste-basket. In this school I've seen children seldom waste food. Not they love what's served all the time, that's rare but they take very little only as much as they can consume and finish it. Children are encouraged to understand the importance of food and not waste it. I'd say the school has been relatively successful in achieving this. So, if a diya is seen throwing any food by any child then that diya's really had it. This time it was me and I was taken to trial by this red group kid. I moved the motion for my defense.

"That potato is bad (that's true, it was semi-raw), I'll get a stomach-ache if I eat it."

"You also threw a green chilly!"

Now that was true, but the green chilly was so hot I couldn't possibly have consumed the whole of it.

"Yes, but that's half eaten and it's too spicy to have the whole," I offered my explanation.

By this time the little task-master had turned to the plump Suresh who brings food from the ashram kitchen everyday.

"You bring rotten potatoes here?!"

"Huh?" he was dumbfounded, not quite following anything.

"You brought a spoiled potato, see she threw it there!"

"Huh?" he said, whatever it might have meant.

I was rather taken aback at the alertness and awareness of this four year old. She certainly had her basics all clear and sorted out. She knew it was wrong to waste food and was alert enough to see this and bold enough to question me about it. She analysed my answer, saw the plausibility of the explanation and then turned to the person who was more directly responsible for it and questioned him about it. Some manager in the making this one! And all the time we think children are 'just kids'!

Nov

I'm free, and decide to hop into red group where Rasmita didi is telling them a story. She's telling them a story about a boy who got lost. Most of the children are listening very attentively. I wonder how they got them to be so quiet. Diya, a chirpy little thing is sitting on Shilpi didi's lap, and both seem fairly comfortable. Raghav, the outspoken, rough and tough four year old guy of the group is sitting right next to Rasmita didi, Arnav is sitting next to Raghav and playing with a *GIJoe* toy while listening to the story or not listening for that matter. He now wants to sit next to Rasmita didi and tells Raghav so.

"But I was here first" Raghav protests loudly "you can't come here now!"

All this time the story is being listened to by wide-eyed children who wonder what will become of the boy lost in the jungle (in the story).

"Why should I let you come here?" Raghav shouts.

The diyas look at them, smile, but decide not to say anything directly.

Raghav and Arnav seem to mumble and argue. In about ten seconds I see the matter has settled on its own. Raghav and Arnav have swapped places. The *GIJoe* is in Raghav's hand and Arnav is sitting next to Rasmita didi. Who needs adults to settle matters?

Jan,

The school had a tradition elaborate of writing long reports by way of giving feedback or assessment on the students to the parents. In many cases especially the younger groups, the diya would often ask the child what he/she learnt. Here's one rather interesting interview of 5 years old child Bharat by Shilpi *didi*.

**Didi: I want to take an interview of you. Can you give?**

Bha: Yes. Ask me (sitting properly in a adult manner).

**What have you learnt in the school?**

Well, In the school I have learnt how to draw, how to paint.

To sit quietly and do prayer.

I have learnt to do exercise.

How to eat lunch myself.

I know the time that now it is lunch time or music time.

I have learnt that I should not pluck the plant.

I know the school way - that where is duck pond, dining hall, junior park.

I have learnt planting.

Whatever you tell me I know.

If any one gets hurt we should not hurt them I know that.

Also I have learnt how to make paper airplane and I have also learnt how to make this (indicating on display board) paper fan.

**What do you do in the sandpit?**

I build big-big castle and make *laddu*, cake.

**Your favorite animal?**

Tiger, because it is golden and black

**Favorite flower?**

Sun flower. Because we a sing song of that.

**Food?**

Milk.

Milk? Can you drink that? Say some thing else.

Then, write bread.

Story?

Funny story.

Color?

Yellow.

**Why?**

Just. I can't explain.

**Film?**

*Mahabharata*. That only I know. It comes on T.V. I don't have any idea about films.

**Whom do you love most in your house?**

I cannot tell (but after a few seconds) - person who plays with me. I like my brother because he plays with me. I also love my mumma, papa because they teach me.

**Which game do you like most? Gymnastics, trampoline, German games, fun games?**

Brain vita, fun game, German games and sometimes swimming.

**Do you like to come to school or not?**

Yes, I do like.

**If you will get some toffees will you like to share them with others?**

I can't say.

**Do you like to sit with your *didi* (teacher)?**

Yes.

**In the group whom you like most?**

Me first, then Soraya, then Meera, then Shilpi didi, then Neelambari, Naman, Jayu, Ankit, Arnav, Shubha, Rashmita didi that's all.

**What things you dislike most?**



Bad man



When my stomach is empty.



When mumma and papa are not there.



When I miss fun.

- ✳ I don't like my brother's school (because there are many people, very crowded.)
- ✳ Breaking promises.
- ✳ Breaking things.

**Do you like to play alone or with friends?**

With friends.

**Whom you fear most?**

- ✳ Animal ?– No
- ✳ Dark ?– No
- ✳ Death? – Yes, every body have fear about that.
- ✳ Separation? – What does mean?
- ✳ If your mumma and papa go far away from you? -Yes.
- ✳ Illness? – No
- ✳ Fight?- Yes, people get hurt.
- ✳ Ugly looking thing?- No, it can't do anything.
- ✳ Someone gets hurt? - Yes,
- ✳ Blood? - Yes.

**What are the things would you like to know?**

- ✳ When people are feeling happy, why?
- ✳ Learn how to do things very well.
- ✳ About friends - what all do they know.
- ✳ I want to know, if people can count big – big numbers.

**Do you like to copy others?**

No.

**In which language do you like to listen the story?**

English.

**Who is your best friend?**

Me and Akshay.

**In which place do you like to play? (Junior park, jungle gym, neem groove, sand pit, trampoline?)**

Junior park.

**If someone falls down, do you help?**

Yes I do.

**Do you help your mama in doing her household work?**

Yes, carrying heavy things.

**Do you take care of your own belongings?**

Yes, I do.

Jan,

It is lunch time and having taken my lunch plate full of rice, dal and salad I sit on the sunny part of a stone bench next to red group children. There are all willy-nilly chewing their food and chattering like monkeys. Diya, a vivacious little kid, notices my generous helping of the salad and asks, "You like salad?"

"Yes, that's why I'm having lots of it."

"Then can I give you some of mine?" she asks, her voice suddenly and surprisingly sweet.

"Certainly not I have lots already!" I see through her sweetness, and jolly well want her to finish her own food instead of loading it on to my plate.

"But if you have so much can't you take a little more, what difference will it make to you?"

I impressed by the cogency of her argument, but decide not to be fooled by the sophistic logic of a five year old.

"You have to finish your own food!" I tell her defiantly, and go on munching my carrot.

As I turn to get my glass of water, I notice Diya's five year old fingers putting a few chopped carrots and cucumbers on my salad heap.

"Why you clever little...!"

I grab hold of a fistful of carrots and cucumbers with one hand and with the other I grab Diya's collar from the back as she's trying to run away and put a double helping on her plate. Take that!

**MORAL OF THE STORY:** Do not be awed or hoodwinked by the faculty of logic or nimbleness of five year olds, and let them pile their salad on your plate. They must eat their share and that's that!

Feb,

I'm chatting with Srila who is presently the vice-principal of the school and an ashramite, who's been living and teaching here for almost two decades. She's quiet and unassuming, and has seen many experiments and people come and go. She's sharing some of her experiences or anecdotes about this place.

She recalled one about when there were as small as three year olds in the school. They were all doing gardening with Vijay di, all the little ones planting tiny plants in the brown earth with the sun shining happily above them. Each child had just about finished planting his or her own special plant when one child accidentally stepped on the plant of another kid. The owner of the trampled plant flew into a furious rage and could think of nothing but revenge. In a fit of blind fury he deliberately trampled the plant of his neighbour as a fitting response to the latter's negligence. This led to the destruction of yet another plant and consequently another scuffle, followed by another and yet another. Before the diya could even realise let alone do anything about the war that had broken out on the blessed soil then and there. A war that led to total death and destruction (as it always does) of the tiny innocent plants who's very lives they sought to protect and propagate.

I presume the group of three year old warriors went back feeling not a little disappointed and the diyas too may well have jumped upon this opportunity to discuss and preach the evils of violence and war. However, the story has a tailpiece. One smart three-year old came up to Vijay di and surprised her, "Didi you know I saved my plant?" Vijay was undoubtedly surprised as to how the little girl could have managed such a feat amidst the chaos. "Just how did you do that?" came the genuine curious reply. Imagine grown-ups being curious about children like that!

"When everyone was fight and spoiling all the plants I covered mine with the soil and sat on it!"

This was found to be true. In the ravaged wasteland of heartlessly killed plants where the battle had been fought and forgotten stood one tiny plant still alive albeit a little dusty, that owed its life to the presence of mind of a three year old girl. It was a lesson well learnt on how to save a life when everyone else is hell bent on blindly destroying it. Thanks kid!

Feb

I have a class with Receptivity group, there are only five ten year old boys in the group. They are all basically bright and can't stop talking. Like most young boys, they find it difficult to keep still too. If I want to concentrate on vocabulary or something which needs practice I don't have much of choice but to device some method which will hold their interest long enough.

Well, this class we're going to do adjectives, because they need to become more conscious of their use to improve their creative writing compositions in particular. But they're kind of exciting and puzzled when I tell them to move to the basket-ball court with a basket-ball. They certainly do not find it easy to accept that I am giving the English class to play basketball, so we pause in the lobby where I explain the intended exercise. "Today we will combine basketball with English, and play 'adjective *antakashani*' ". *Antakshni* is a popular game in which people /individual sing songs in teams/individuals and the letter with which the song of one team ends is the letter with which the other team has to begin the next song. I decide to adopt this game by replacing songs with adjectives, so instead of a song one person has got to say an adjective while dribbling the ball (everyone stands in a circle) and then pass it anybody else in the circle, who will now say an adjective beginning with the last letter of the previous word.

I try this out with these boys and in between I ask them to use it in a phrase or a sentence. By and large they like it but when they tend to repeat adjectives, I change it to nouns, then to verbs and finally to spellings of words. In the spellings variation, one boy says a word and passes the ball to another boy, but the catch is that you must know the spelling of the word you give to somebody else. Since I'm playing along I get the most difficult words! Of course you can well play the language game without the basketball bit, but if you have restless young brats then it helps to get them interested and to hold their attention and I guess their dribbling also improves.

I have felt that it generally helps when you combine one or two skills or even subjects, provided of course you are clear about what you want at the end and keep your eye on the ball...I remember an old quotation I'd read somewhere-

*In life as in golf here's wisdom for all  
If you wish to aim straight  
Keep your eye on the ball!*

Feb

I hop into Blue group who are apparently sitting with their diyas and having a session on the months of the year. There is a paper train pasted on the wall with ten compartments, and each compartment of the train has a month of the year written on it. The diya says “Rahul will now run and touch the fourth month of the year”, promptly Rahul runs hesitates a little and puts his finger on the “April” compartment. “Now Abbu, go and touch the month when it starts raining” I add on. Abbu is about to place her finger on August when someone says “No Abbu, it starts raining in July remember when you forgot your umbrella on Ujju’s birthday and got wet.” The class goes on, the children instead of being made to sit in chairs behind desks are on the matted floor and run and touch. With small children this is rather a good idea as the children don’t get restless and use their bodies and mind together. Moreover the mode of teaching is question-answer form rather than straight information given such as “July is the sixth month of the year when the monsoons start”.

While the sessions are going on I note that few children are in the other part of the spacious classroom running around chasing each other, one child is at the desk doing some kind of art-work. “Why aren’t these children involved in the group discussion?” I ask the concerned diya. “They are not interested” I’m told simply. I look puzzled and disapproving and my look is answered with further explanation, “Well you’re not supposed to force a child and they are not interested so we let them do whatever they are interested in.” Most of them don’t seem interested in anything in particular, and could do with a good scolding to make them see sense. But I know I would have been told, “you’re not suppose to scold the children!”

While I agree that a child should not be forced and you need not force a child to attend a class in which he or she is going to distract and disrupt however there’s more to it than that. Some children do have an abiding passion in life most don’t besides merely playing around. If you let children be all the time and mistake a child’s whim or laziness to be his natural inclination or nature, I think you’re not being of much help to the child. This is where discrimination on the part of the teacher is called for. There are times when you should not force and try to engage children naturally without imposing. However, if a child is simply misusing freedom and not interested in anything in particular then what? Sometimes simple, straightforward discipline is what is needed. A child will only thank you for it later. Being indisciplined and incapable of hard work only deteriorates a child further.

The problem with 'free' cultures is that one doesn't know where to draw the line. The difference between the inner voice of intuition and the inner voice of desire is thin. One may well be mistaken for the other. That is why it is important to have teachers who understand this. It is also extremely important to have teachers who are naturally able to arouse curiosity and a thirst for knowledge in the child, otherwise the children may well remain blissful ignorance. The notion of the teacher as the facilitator, is now gaining momentum, but it must be realized that unless the facilitator is also a store house of enthusiasm and curiosity himself. The fact that a teacher should not impose or hand down information should not imply that the teacher **has** nothing of consequence to offer.

## March

We've had our annual Thanksgiving function, and it is time for the final year teacher-trainees who are the group *diya* to decide about their future. They have to inform the ashram authorities whether they would like to stay on as volunteers or move on and try to get a job. Every year this is how things move.

Most decide to move and get jobs, few like to stay. Generally the annual turnover is very high because the entire institution is based entirely on volunteerism – something worth talking about. The management or initial policy makers held that education should not be in the hands of the money-minded people who are only bothered about their salary and not real growth. They were also devoted to spiritual figures, hence, the whole exercise of teaching was supposed to be an act of *sadhna* or devotion where the returns are spiritual growth and not money. As a full-time volunteer you could stay at the ashram and would be provided with board and lodging and pocket money (a few hundred rupees) for very basic amenities like soap and toothpaste. Sounds good? Idealistic? Impractical?

I thought it was impractical. In the three years I was there I saw three principals changing and a pretty large turnover of teachers. However, I must add that such turnovers are so, even in paid institutions and can be due to several reasons. It was not that they didn't have volunteers, in fact, sometimes they were too many, but most did not have a teaching degree, which again didn't seem to matter because the focus was on learning rather than teaching and the teacher was supposed to be a mere facilitator. The problem here was that the people who were there either did not have the capacity to do a good job, or those who were would not be willing to put in the effort or time of a full-time teacher for very long for free. Their logic was, if professional performance, with regular time and effort is expected of a volunteer then there should be a professional pay and perks package to accompany it. Since it wasn't so, the people who came were ones who either could not meet the demands of a professional job, or didn't want to. As a result it was only once in a while a capable and well qualified person would come for some reason, but would not stay for very long or at least would function as a full time professional, because that amounted to a regular job anyway, for which you might as well be paid.

Many of the volunteers were people who didn't want to sit idle at home – retired people or housewives and didn't have the onus of supporting a family on their heads. However, since they weren't interested in taking on the responsibility of a full-time job there was no regular faculty to take up the task except two odd people from the ashram who acted as coordinators and teachers. But to run a school on

purely a visiting faculty and teacher-trainees, who in turn haven't been selected or trained professional basis is both unworkable and undesirable.

## **WHAT I HAVE TO SAY ABOUT IT ALL**

It is difficult to call this chapter a ‘conclusion’ because nothing really concludes here. May be ‘Beginning’ would be a good title. When I started writing this book I shared my initial writing with two friends of mine who are teachers. Apart from generally pricking at my ungrounded ideas (as all true friends inevitably do!) they asked me point blank, “Are you **for** alternative education **or not?**” I felt cornered because I didn’t quite know which side of the fence I was then. However, in the process of the writing of this book I have had my moments of serendipity and I seem be a little less confused about a whole lot of things. I think it may not be a bad idea to touch these issues and share my thoughts.

For one, I would like to avoid labels like ‘alternative education’ and the like because you can get caught up in arguments about terms and go around in circles without touching the real issues. What is ‘Alternative’ can become mainstream with time and the wheel turns on. So let me just focus on the issues with as little terminology as possible.

## **STRUCTURED SYLLABUS – TO BE OR NOT TO BE**

To come straight to the point, I think it is important to have a syllabus outline or comprehensive guidelines for every class/level for individual subjects. To not to have any guidelines and leave it to the teacher to plan out everything – from which textbook or reference material to use, what to include in class-room teaching, decide the methodology, execute the plan, and then assess whether the objectives have been achieved and follow up, without any base, is too much to hope for. If any school has such teachers they should be grateful! However, such teachers are too few and even those who are capable of it may not always be able to sustain it. We often forget that teachers are also human beings who have limits to their time, energy, patience and skills. When we make policies at institution level it’s a good idea to remember this. While it is important that the teachers should not be pressurized to conform to a rigid pattern but should have the freedom to chop and change.

The reason why creative freedom is not introduced in most schools is because the teachers are likely (and often do!) tend to take the easy road at the cost of the students. It is sad but true, that conscientious work is hard to come by. It must be realized that while flexibility and freedom can allow great scope for great good it

can also be misused. It is important to have accountability and open discussion along with creative freedom. The point is how do you go about it?

For one, a teacher's passion for a subject should never be dampened. Of course, many managements will complain that most teachers do not have any deep or sustained interest, but are teachers by necessity or accident. While this may not entirely be false, it is quite likely, that a teacher may be good in certain areas of a subject and not so in others. Or, they can be encouraged to develop a sustained interest and proficiency in a particular subject area. Managements and heads of departments should use this to their advantage and ask the teachers to share innovations in that particular area with other teachers and possibly with other classes. This encourages and inspires teachers in general. Of course, common sense should never be abandoned and it should be noted that while some areas are highlighted, the others not entirely neglected. So, someone who's particularly good at Geometry may teach it in more than one class, but don't forget about algebra!

### **WORKING RELATIONSHIPS IN A SCHOOL**

Schools often present a living picture of tug-of-war between the supervisors and the supervised, a miniature of the bourgeois and the proletariat! Breathing down a teacher's neck is unpleasant for both the teacher and the supervisor, moreover, nobody feels inspired by an attitude of mistrust. Is there a way out?

It may be a better to focus on innovation and positive trends without making innovation a chore or obsession in the staff-room. This is quite feasible, especially in junior classes, where the burden of a rigid curriculum is not too much. Sharing sessions also help. Often teachers talk about a lot of things but somehow miss out on each others' positive points with respect to teaching. I have a friend and colleague who finally got down to asking me ways of teaching creative writing almost six years after we'd known each other, even though we'd been teaching English all these years. The reason was simply that there was no formal time or platform, or even encouragement to this from the people we reported to. It was almost that an idea never struck anyone. So we were all blissful in our own ignorant worlds and never quite got down to sharing and learning from each other. The point is so simple that nobody realizes the world of difference it can make to a school, when teachers actually share their findings and strong points with each other. Department meetings focus on organizing syllabai largely and at making sure work is being done smoothly. Pretty good, but not good enough. If energy is focused more on emphasizing and reporting that "Mrs. X has been teaching prepositions

very effectively to the seventh graders, while Mr. Y has been a whiz with teaching Shakespeare to the ninths” rather than saying, “Mrs X please try to improve your literature classes” there is greater likelihood of improvement. Then teachers try to excel rather than be on the defensive.

Of course, even this can be reduced to a meaningless exercise if it is not accompanied by the right understanding, attitude and atmosphere. Even this should be done in a friendly, non-threatening, non-imposing environment. Maybe an informal tea-party meeting with cookies and *samosas*, maybe even with music! It depends what would be more suitable with the overall atmosphere of a school. A school with a more emphasis on spiritual or religious ethos, could begin with a prayer/meditation followed by reading some interesting piece and so on. The idea is not make things too hard or too soft, as is the case with the other dimensions of life.

In order to create an aura of cooperation and friendliness in a school there is one true way – sincerity. Superficial techniques don’t help if the basics are not right. No magic works where there is insincerity. If you under pay and over work your teachers, if you over-charge or fleece students and parents for fees and then hope to have a friendly and positive environment by hiring resource persons, and introducing techniques, you are fooling nobody – and you shouldn’t be reading this book then. However, where the efforts are sincere, where the objective is to bring about a sincere and positive change and create a truly encouraging atmosphere that innovation works. There is no escape or substitute for core basic values of sincerity and honesty. If you don’t have these please forget about educating children, you’ll be doing a lot of people a great favour.

### **DOES A RICH TEACHER MAKE A POOR SHOW?**

What needs to be addressed is the notion of the teacher and money and even spiritual journey and wealth. That is the crux of the matter. For one, I do not accept that just because someone seeks to be paid well for work rendered – whether teaching or any other profession that implies that the concerned person necessarily has a mercenary attitude towards life. It has been almost an unquestioned tradition in India to regard teaching as a work of honour, something meant for the wise and holy, meant for those who have risen above needs and desires.

There is no denying that the rewards in teaching are more in kind than in cash, however, to make them solely or predominantly on ‘kind’ rather than cash has done

the student-teacher community enough harm. Concepts and idealistic (and unrealistic) notions are poor substitutes for a bank-balance, and a dignified standard of living. To have a non-materialistic attitude is one thing, but to not to be able to afford a life-style of your choice is quite another. There is a crisis world over in education, creative, intelligent people are not ready to opt for the teaching profession, if they do, they quit soon enough. Teaching is regarded as a 'soft' or secondary profession which at least young men in urban areas don't always opt for because it regarded to be a woman's profession, a supplementary source of income which cannot be relied upon to run a house or life.

The problem of why the right kind of people are not interested in the teaching profession is not a simple one and there are several factors that contribute to this which may well form the subject of a book in itself. However, of others one major factor is that teaching is low paid and is very slow to imbibe change and innovation. These are important factors and issues needing urgent addressal if we want to attract creative, intelligent minds to the field of education *and keep them there*.

Ideologically, it has generally been held in India at least, that the teacher should not have a materialistic approach. While there can be no two views about the harm that can be done to students by money-minded, mercenary people whose only passion in life is how to make the pay-cheque larger, this however is not the end of the story. In order to dissuade the entry of such characters in the teaching profession low salaries and poor compensation have been kept and in extreme cases none whatsoever and made it into a spiritual ideal. Is this the less of the two evils? Maybe. But what has happened as a result of this low-key, low-pay approach?

For one let us not forget that teachers are normal human beings and if human resource development and motivational techniques hold true for other professions they cannot be entirely useless for people in education. Yet the education sector has not really worked on employee motivation, it has been a neglected area whose potential remains largely unexplored. A teacher needs motivation just like anyone else. To merely paste the label of 'noble' or 'respectable' on the profession doesn't change things. Labels don't matter beyond a point, what's inside does. Education has been relegated to the least-priority columns. Educationists are supposed to shape generations but little has been done for those in education.

Of course, I do not intend to imply that blindly increasing pay-packets is going to change everything for the better. There is a need to pay attention to the complete and all round development of the teachers and students both. HR researches have

revealed that happy satisfied employees perform better. But looking into teacher-welfare a little more seriously would improve the quality of education in a big way.

### **WHERE'S THE MONEY, HONEY?**

The problem of practicality is not an easy one. It's not that sincere and honest people are not interested in education – many simply don't have enough money. So, how to run an educational institution if you don't have money? Frankly, it's tough.

People who want to try something innovative and different prefer to be free and unencumbered. Sometimes, people who have a vision want to be dangerously free, and don't want anything or anyone to stand in the way of realizing it. This has found expression in the maniacal zeal of the artist and hence, has been the force behind great works of art; it has also been the cause of great social service rendered such as caring for the sick and abandoned; it has been the way of masters who have become instruments of Existence or God, and who because of this are able to transform lives. But, it is also what makes the matrix of fanaticism and has been the cause of the horrors of war or violence in the name of some 'ism' or the other. I don't think education is an exception. A person who's sacrificed everything to a vision which is to be attained unalloyed at any cost is dangerous and powerful. It is the stuff revolutions are made of, the seed for the giant beanstalk...

Without trying to be judgmental, without sticking the labels of right or wrong if we see how a vision or idea takes form, we will realize that often the idea is absorbed, agreed upon or accepted (blindly or otherwise) by the person himself or herself, and other people who are willing to put it into practice. For those who has deep spiritual beliefs, they will say the forces of the universe gather to give a ready and ripe idea its manifest form. The spirit readies to manifest itself.

The point is, if one has an idea, a vision, a desire to do something, then one needs to adopt practical measures to give it a shape. If the person who has the vision also has the financial and other resources to give it good try then it's a perfect situation. Perfect, but unlikely. So, if we agree that teachers should be paid well in a school and students should have decent space and facilities, the overwhelming question then is – Where's the money to come from? One, from the government. Two, from moneyed individuals, such as industrialists. Three, from the students/parents. Four, could possibly be the school generating its own sources of income and finally a combination of one or more of these. Every option has its plus and minus sides.

The government will give aid but will have its long list of rules and regulations which may well be like an iron ball around the feet, that tie you down from flights of creativity or fantasy! The people who have money, such as businessmen or industrialists often want to give money as an investment with an eye on profits rather than values or creativity as such, unless they are likely to yield profits. Steep fees could be another option, but then that would make quality education the domain of the rich, and many deserving children from middle class families would be deprived of what they may well deserve otherwise and can put to good use.

Given these restraints, let us examine the positive possibilities of each option. When we take aid from the government if observing government rules does not affect the original vision and purpose of the exercise it helps to a great degree. The government is duty-bound to adhere to spelled out norms, so there can be little or no compromises on basic policies. The government has a long list of rules about qualifications, pay-scales and the like which are elementary to ensuring misuse of human and other resources. Usually this should not be a problem as such unless the management wants to or has to (!) underpay the teachers, or over-charge the students. This will ensure some kind of steady aid coming in and a venture which may otherwise not even take off would gain the initial momentum.

There is greater freedom in an unaided institution of course, but then if it is being sponsored by the rich and powerful, one must be clear about the intentions of the investors. Is it investment made due to a die-hard desire to make money, a pure business option, or are profits secondary. What if a choice has to be made between running an value-based institution without monetary rewards and a profit-making venture at the cost of values. It's silly and defeating, even though it is practiced in a number of places to preach values of honesty and sincerity in the school assembly and then admit students who do badly in admission test for a 'donation'.

I think it may not be entirely impossible to find people to invest for genuine concern for education. There are people in the world who have learnt to look beyond materialism. This is not to imply that running educational institutions has to be necessary a monetarily losing proposition, if it is to be honest one too. Sincerity and honesty are not at war with material prosperity, it's just that you have to have your priorities right.

The other option if one doesn't find a sponsor of substance, is to begin small with whatever resources one can gather at individual level and to charge the required fees from the children/parents. This generally amounts to a hefty fee however, and still

calls for initial investment for providing infrastructure even if you begin with a single class school and slowly go up. Of course, this would mean catering to those who are able to pay, and often living with the label of being 'elitist'. If this is a concern it can be remedied to an extent by introducing scholarships for deserving candidates. One could also experiment with a mix and match of all these options depending on the availability of resources.

Any beginning is difficult and has its limitations, however, that doesn't mean we don't make beginnings. An educational institution cannot be isolated, and it will inevitably be influenced by the dominating trends in society and the mindsets of those who sponsor the organization. Ultimately there cannot be an organization without strings attached. It's only the nature and number of strings that change.

## **THE ROLE OF PARENTS**

When we speak of education we think of everything – curriculum, school infrastructure, exams, career options, teachers ... but we often forget those who are fundamental to a child's growth and education – parents. In today's world of nuclear families, where in urban areas, both parents are often working and seldom have time for children, the school's role has gained importance and often schools try to assume or compensate for the time and even role of parents to the extent possible. Day-boarding, residential schools are growing in demand. Especially in homes where the home environment is disturbed due to one reason or the other, it is preferred that the child be sent to a boarding school. Sometimes where there simply aren't suitable schools in some places and in rare cases, parents truly believe the child will grow into a better and well-formed individual in an idealistic residential school.

While modern life and changing values has its pressures and demands on couples and the responsibility and scope of the school has increased manifold, however, it remains that parents are yet parents. You cannot underestimate the role of parents in a child's life. The two young people who give birth to a child cannot assume responsibility and try to push it onto an institution let them not be deluded about the consequences. As far as I see it, parents are irreplaceable, whether they like it or not. When parents play truant it will inevitably affect the child. Of course, in abusive households where the child is subjected to violence or abuse in some form or the other it is best that the child be removed from there. However, I have been sad to note that often couples are "too busy" to give sufficient time to their children. The notion of being not wanted enough has eaten into the heart of many a child and affected his or her growth. It is essential for a child to know he is loved and wanted

by his/her parents, and not a dragging on their time. If people can't give time and attention and affection to children they simply shouldn't have them. But it is a lesson learnt too late alas!

While teachers, residential, day-boarding schools may be successful in preventing the child from getting into bad habits, encouraging talents, educating et al. However, they should not be regarded as substitutes of parents. In one residential school I'd taught some children had managed to get the question-paper leaked. There were a series of staff meetings for remedial measures to this. The argument was that if the children are staying nine months on the campus and only three months at home why is it that the school has failed to instill good values in them? Good question. What is often forgotten in similar arguments is that it is not a matter of measurable time, but the Herculean role that parents have in a child's life. If a child is irremediably 'bad' the parents are simply told to take their child out of the institute. Parents are the providers, if fees isn't paid parents are held responsible. Overly simple as it may sound, you can negate nature. Parents cannot afford to pass the buck. Merely paying fat fees doesn't do the trick.

While some schools strive to find laudable substitutes and sometimes are successful, the fact remains that there is no substitute for parental love and care. I think it is a school's duty to make parents realize the importance of their role, even as they may be trying to find a substitute for it. Parents must try to take interest in a child's growth and evolution. Of course, it is not possible for parents to master difficult academic details and directly help a child in that area, but concern and care is essential. Wherever parents have neglected giving sufficient affection and attention to a child, the child's emotional self and personality have been deeply affected. The school can try to do its level best to compensate and remedy this, but miracles shouldn't be expected. The role of good parenting is something no school has been able to completely replace. If it is so, please tell me about it.

Schools can however be more enterprising in involving parents in the education of their children. If the school is a day-boarding or day school where children go back home, parents are inevitably involved with their child's education. Those parents who possess necessary skills could be asked to cooperate and contribute to the various activities or even academic areas working in liaison with the teachers. It is important to orient teachers and keep this activity organized to avoid problems of misunderstanding. The school can also help in facilitating the education of good parenting among parents through workshops, lectures and similar activities. A healthy interaction and contribution on the part of parents generally contributes to a warmer and more cooperative atmosphere in the school.

## **THE PHYSICAL ATMOSPHERE**

The physical building or place where education happens is the manifested presence of the spirit that drives and sustains it. A school ideally should be spacious and in a place where nature provides its bounties for the children to observe and learn from. Schools situated in places such as hills or valleys where nature is at its beautiful best often have a deep impact on the development of a child's personality whether the child is conscious of it or not. Nature makes learning richer and easier, it also helps to make a child more sensitive and appreciate natural bounties. Of course this has to be supported with suitable education because hills and valleys and the sea or whatever else are meaningful only to the awakened and sensitive mind and that is (or should be!) one of the basic aims of education.

This is certainly a tall order if the school is set up in a city. The advantages and richness of a city can hardly compensate for a childhood spent in the wonders of nature. However, school authorities should do their level best to compensate for this by adopting whatever measures they practically can. If a child can grow with a plant and associate with it, care for it, and spend time with it as he would with a classmate, he will make friends with nature for life. Such a child will undoubtedly be a better individual than if he or she had grown without a tree. If one child can have one tree in or around his school which he looks after and cares for, he will establish deeper bonds with his or her school.

The powers of nature and its role in the education of children are yet not explored fully. Though awareness of environment and the threats it is facing is now spreading fast, the integration of learning with the natural environment around us is practised by very few institutions. Some schools have the good fortune of having farms associated with them where the children have an opportunity of experiencing life as it really is. They get to see and experience animal and plant life in its living and breathing form and not as text-book facts learnt for the purpose of examination. Leading a life where education is much like the packet of factory packed potato chips and chocolates, is grossly inadequate - to put it mildly. Allow children to be associated with the entire process of the making of potato chips. It is this whole process which helps a child to figure out and understand life as a whole. Otherwise they subconsciously shy away from some aspects of life and limit themselves. This makes a child weak and dependent. Children should be at home with cooking as much as with doing trigonometric sums.

*Would you  
ring the temple bell,  
If,  
A butterfly  
was sleeping on it?*

*Would you  
wake the child,  
Who slept on the step,  
that led  
to God's altar?*