

# MY EXPERIMENTS WITH GANDHIAN MODEL OF EDUCATION: A FIRST- PERSON ACCOUNT BASED ON TWO DECADES OF WORKING IN RURAL EDUCATION

Meenakshi Umesh\*

## Introduction by Editor

*"I sought to know from the assembled scholars the meaning of education as understood by us. Is it merely the craft of reading and writing, or is it something else? ... Sri Samdhong Rinpoche ... took up the question of defining what we call education....*

*(he) said that ... he did not know the meaning of the English word 'education'. ... But he knew what it meant by the term Siksha. And Siksha in his tradition, according to him, meant to acquisition of the knowledge of Prajna, Sila and Samadhi. In rough translation, these terms mean right intellect, right conduct and right meditation. According to Sri Samdhong, knowledge of these three was education. The learning of various arts, crafts, and various physical techniques and sciences did not come under the term Siksha. ... Now, if this is the Indian definition of education, then it needs serious consideration. ... then we have to understand this form of education. We also need to find out how many amongst us are educated in this sense of education."*

– Dharampal, Bharatiya Chitta Manas, Kaal

*The Gandhian Historian, late Dharampal had written a famous book called the "Beautiful Tree" first published in 1983 and subsequently published in 2000 as part of the collected writings of Dharampal. This book has acquired an iconic position as it had broken several British promoted popular myths about the prevalence of education system in the pre-colonial and early colonial period in India and also had contrasted them with the public-school system in Britain around the same time. Using British archival documents, he had established that there was a far superior system of education prevalent widely in Indian context. In his own words, "Since these observations were made, they have been treated very differently: by some, with the sanctity reserved for divine utterances; and by others, as blasphemous. Naturally, the first view was linked with the growth*

---

\* Smt. Meenakshi lived in Mumbai till she finished Architecture from JJ College of Architecture in 1989. Found Mumbai life meaningless and the rich-poor disparity disturbing, got influenced by Gandhian ideas. Decided to leave the city and live a simple life close to the land and get involved in growing food. She came to Dharampuri in 1992 and started doing organic farming and rejuvenated a wasteland of 20 acres. Started a work based alternative school on the lines of Gandhian education vision of NAI TALIM in 2000. Today the school, Puvudham is an alternate education centre for all of India. She practices earth-friendly Architecture, teaches and travels to share her experience and insights on education. More about her in the website Puvudham.in

*of a vocal Indian nationalism. Its exponents, besides prominent Indians of the late ... have also included many illustrious Englishmen... the second, the blasphemous view of them, was obvious held by those who were in the later period, in one capacity or another concerned with the administration of India; or those who felt impelled, sometimes because of their commitment to certain theoretical formulations on the development of societies, to treat all such impressions as unreal.<sup>17</sup> This tendency if anything has become more amplified and exaggerated since.*

*Today, it is no longer a matter to be proved that India had far superior domains and modes of expertise in diverse areas. That the system of education was far superior to many other parts of the world and had evolved over long periods and had attracted scholars from far and near who visited, stayed in India, interacted with the scholars here and studied here. However, how far has this knowledge of history impacted our education system or method of education is another question altogether. If anything, we are even more enslaved in our minds on the educational priorities. Our real challenge seems to be our capacity to overcome the inequalities that are embedded in the access to knowledge in learning, teaching and practising the knowledge that is relevant to us in our daily life. What form of knowledge is it and how does not acquire the same? Here is Gandhi explaining it in his own words –*

*“Just as there are laboratories in schools, our kitchens should be our laboratories. For instance, germinated pulses are rich in vitamins, but when we cook them with spices all the vitamins are destroyed. How much heat and how much time will food require to cook so that it is easily digested and also preserves vitamins? How much food in calories will a child, a student, a grown-up man, a moneyed man, a worker or a common man require? How much ghee, oil, milk or grain should one consume? If all this is taught to the students while cooking, they would become experts in the science of nutrition.*

*There is similarly a science in the charkha as also in nursing the sick. Today, boys of twenty become graduates and can speak a foreign language as fluently as their mother tongue. Although history, geography, arithmetic, geometry, Sanskrit, etc., are taught through a foreign language they pass the examinations. This shows that our boys are not dull or incompetent. ... But we must not be content with getting degrees in English. We must learn hygiene, chemistry, economics, etc. And that not through books but through crafts. Students should diligently acquire knowledge. When there is knowledge to be found in cooking, in disease, in recreations, what need is there to pore over books? If you take chillies in excess you will get dysentery. So from this, we can gain knowledge about the cause of dysentery. Thus, we can make experiments on ourselves and gain knowledge from our experiences. This knowledge is permanent.*

*Why need one cram the dates of Lord Curzon's birth and death? ... Of course if one wants to study these dates because of interest in them, that is a different matter. But today we do not need such an education. If therefore the flame of freedom is to be lighted in India the very first need is a*

*revolution in education. After all, students are the real wealth of the country. Teachers, in so far as they mould the students, are the silent servants of the country. ... Parents commit a grave sin when they address teachers disrespectfully. The teachers can impart no enlightenment to students till we learn to show towards them the same respect that we show to the priest in the temple or to our spiritual preceptor. ..."*

*- [From Gujarati] Dilhiman Gandhiji—II, pp. 71-4*

*Talk with Students and Teachers, Birla House, New Delhi, Dec 10th, 1947.*

*Meenakshi is the founder head of Puvudham School in Dharmapuri in rural Tamil Nadu and it is one of the few really alternative schools that have adopted Gandhiji's idea of Nai Talim in its essence both content-wise and also in methodology. Leading by example, Meenakshi today has become a leading practitioner of sharing her learning with other educators by living and working with rural children. Her first-person experience-based note below is an example of what an individual driven by a dedication to manifest an alternative can achieve through sheer determination, dedication and humility. In this article, she explains her journey and conviction, she does through examples of methods of learning and insights, she has in the process almost produced a manifesto for education change that may be perhaps verbatim adopted if there were courageous enough policymakers.*

### **Relationship Between Education and Work: Traditional Craft and Modern Skill Development Programmes**

The burdens of schooling in the present system are many and they are burdens that bring no delight or enlightenment. In the formation of the National Education Policy (NEP), one has to cater to two fundamental issues - the first is the conservation of humanity and the second is the conservation of resources.

The conservation of humanity will address and include the study of the self, the society and the environment through the activities provided in the school campus. The conservation of resources will address and include the change in the attitude of the school as an entity from being a propagator of consumerism and competition to an enhancer of understanding the unity of life and fostering compassion and care for the weaker participants in the web of life.

For this, the first step would be to approach learning through the eyes of the child. A lot of studies are available as to the fact that learning is an instinct and that all the five senses play a definitive role in the development of the brain. Yet, we end up focusing on the academic learning alone in schools! To emphatically revamp the attitude of the system to the child, one has to get rid of the subject studies in the early childhood learning.

The child of 5 to 11 years of age (from pre-KG up to the 6th) can be easily made to learn languages, scientific and social concepts and math through stories, songs and hands-on activities, thereby unifying the entire learning in to the five elements of life which can be experienced directly

and will integrate the learning of resources with the study of the self, society and the environment. At this age group, the only real learning outcomes can be the joy in learning and the continuous and comprehensive evaluation by the teachers. The reading and comprehension skills, illustrating skills and basic mathematical skills can be continuously assessed in the classroom.

The children from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> level (11 to 16 years of age) would learn a great deal more through the process of making things. Activities of growing food, cooking it, growing and using herbs for healing, growing cotton, spinning and weaving it, natural dyes, traditional painting and pottery, mat making, basket weaving, carpentry, stone or wood carving, making herbal soaps, cosmetics and health drinks can be absorbing activities which include the whole realm of science, social science, math and language while understanding the history and processes and recording and expressing their own experiences and feelings. This will also take care of the vocational training and increasing violence in adolescence and youth giving them self-worth and providing a purpose and direction to their personality. At this age group, the learning outcomes can be evaluated through the product of their effort, their description of the experience and the costing and design work involved. Writing stories and songs, illustrating them by drawing and painting, research on the history and origin of the craft, the enhancement of the same through the student's efforts all are indicators of learning outcomes.

After this kind of holistic learning experience, the child is now capable of understanding the pursuit of subject studies. The mind is now capable of classifying and unifying at the same time and

therefore understanding concepts and applying them becomes much easier. The division into the sciences, arts, commerce or vocational training can happen now. At this age group, the children should be brought face to face with the problems of the society and should work towards finding solutions for these. They can be social, technical, entrepreneurial, health-related, food-related and market-related or environmental. This would involve the teacher and the student in the learning and research work as partners and would entail the development of both. These projects should be exhibited and explained in public hearings and the students shall be evaluated by the number of questions generated by their solutions and the acceptability and convincing ability of the students.

This kind of education would provide leaders for sustainable development and swaraj!

**SUSTAINABILITY is a WAY OF LIFE- a culture that is handed down through generations!**

Most of the problems of the present system stem from the distance that it has decided to maintain from nature. In nature, everything is a process. Nothing is permanent. Nothing is separate. Continuity of life is at the core. Everything else succumbs to this law. The whole is nurtured by the parts and it nurtures and protects the parts in return. Every creature's need is met to the full by the bounty of nature. There is no paucity of food and when there is; the creatures discover new ways to survive. Everything flows in cycles even the hardest of rocks erode, sediment and melt again. Nothing is static.

Gandhiji saw that the traditional Indian way of life had been sustainable. He realised that the

education system that we had before the British, had been very efficient in making all knowledge available to the common people. Each village had been an independent entity that could govern its own needs and create its own resources. He realised that the human being is the most crucial of all resources and could create or destroy. He wanted to create individuals that could bring back the traditional culture of sustainability without the division of caste and colour.

The education system that Mahatma Gandhiji dreamed was far ahead of its time. Gandhiji realised almost 100 years ago that **education is not just about literacy but it gives the child a way of life, a culture!** He advocated the inclusion of work in education to give the child the opportunity to create something and while doing so learn critical thinking, deductive abilities, observation skills and finger dexterity without mundaneness! In his time, he foresaw the destructive path of the economy that was being fostered and thought out "An economy of permanence." Around hundred years ago, he realised that the way of life fostered by the West was unsustainable and he asked us to follow a way of life that demands less from nature and lead lives of zero waste and productivity since childhood and his mantra was NAI TALIM. It was supposed to imbibe in the children a love for nature, an understanding of the need for simple living and a vision of equality and justice to all. But sadly, we did not listen to him!

Since then, there has been elaborate research on how children learn, how the human brain develops and how behaviour is learnt. All the studies point at allowing the child to use all his/her faculties at his/her will to create something using both his/her hands to develop both sides of the

brain and to become industrious, empathetic and compassionate while building the child's stamina and immunity. And this was exactly what Gandhiji proposed through Nai Talim!

Mahatma Gandhi dreamed of an educational system where children learn by doing different constructive work and derive learning, a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction from doing the work apart from being economically independent.

"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." – Albert Einstein

### **Creating a Society that Cares**

"We have not inherited the earth from our ancestors. We have borrowed it from our children"

– Native American saying

Our children are born through us, but they are not ours. They are the manifestation of life's longing for itself. They are like flowers, each special in their own way. They are like mirrors, reflecting our thoughts and actions. They are like birds wanting to fly and explore the world. Children are learners from the minute of their birth.

They are curious, intuitive, creative, inventive and a lot of other things. Unfortunately, their wings are soon clipped by the restrictions of our societal norms.

Children need time with themselves and with each other. They need to communicate with each other; they want to share and they want to do/ explore on their own. The role of Nai Talim way of education in the growth of self-reliance, autonomy, simulation of the world in their minds and to make

abstract concepts comprehensible, is irreplaceable. The children should have the freedom to do constructive work on their own. The process and procedure of handling the material and completing the task inculcate self-discipline, and responsibility towards the environment. Our attitudes and concerns are influenced by our education.

In the contemporary educational system, children are forced to memorising information. They are pushed into a nail-biting competition to be 'on top'. It is a fight for 'survival of the fittest'. There is no time for contemplation and reflection. And, they fail to learn to take responsibility for their actions and the consequences thereof.

This kind of education not only estranges the children from Mother Earth, it also makes them insensitive about their connectivity and dependence on nature. It removes them from the importance of life-values and empathy for other people. It leaves them distraught, helpless and self-centred. From the first day of school, they experience the first restriction, in their freedom of movement, in the confinement to the desk and chair. Energy, which is normally consumed by children in running around and laughing happily, is dammed up. The children feel frustrated and express it either through tears or by show of violence. Frustration is a common emotional response to opposition. Related to anger and disappointment, it arises from the perceived resistance to the fulfilment of the individual will. Frustration can result from blocking motivated behaviour. Each individual may react in a different way. He or she may respond with rational problem-solving methods to overcome the barrier. If unsuccessful, he or she can become frustrated and behave irrationally and aggressively.

We need to create awareness of how the present educational system affects the personality of the children and through them, the society. The internally assimilated lessons from the present educational system contribute to the callous attitudes of the children towards other human beings, animals and trees. In the present educational system, there is a place only for competition. This is an extension of the 'divide and rule' policy introduced by the British in India. Competition fosters jealousy, hatred, injustice, greed and carelessness.

No wonder the attitude of some of the youth today, especially in the cities where competition is more emphasised, is either suicidal or homicidal.

In the prevailing conditions of large classroom sizes, and apathy in the attitude of the teacher, the teacher is trained more to criticise shortcomings rather than develop a motivating relationship with the children. He or she is insensitive to the emotional and psychological needs of the children. Even if the teacher recognises the children's desire to express themselves, they are put in virtual boxes and given statistical work to keep themselves engaged.

It is our responsibility as guardians of our children to review, re-examine and re-design the educational system itself and not just the content. We need an educational system that will help our children to become what they were meant to be for a society where cooperation, love and harmony will be fostered through care for the Earth and all forms of life. There is only one Earth and now is the time to care for it by redesigning our curriculum to inculcate caring.

### **How Children Learn**

Look at the child with wonder! Look to see that the child is not just your offspring or your student but an entity in itself!

The child is born through us but the child is closer to the creator than us. According to folklore, the child may fall but does not hurt itself because the Mother Earth puts out her palms to break the fall of the child. The guiding hand of nature or what is called instinct and intuition, is in the grasp of the child.

The body is the child's first tool for learning. Its various attempts at learning to see, to hear, to feel, to talk, and to move are made without conscious emphasis on the learning.

Only through the body experiences does the mind learn to recognise its parents and loved ones and other good-natured people. It learns to classify and identify sounds and expressions. It learns to use its body to move in the desired direction. It learns to use its tongue to make the various sounds it hears. It learns to recognise the sounds of various animals and humans in the vicinity. It learns to walk. It learns to talk.

After the child has made such an effort to learn the ways of the world and learnt to communicate with it - as soon as the child can speak well and walk well and eat his/her own meals - we decide that it is now time to teach the child something. So, the child must go to school.

So far, the child has been learning as a response to the stimulus it has been receiving from its environment. Now, suddenly there is a break. Now, suddenly it must learn things that have no

connection with everyday living. It must learn to separate the learning from the living.

The very nature of learning is tampered with. And artificiality begins!

Instinct, innocence, creativity, thinking and intuition all get affected. All become maimed. All become servants to memory.

But memory is limited. Memory is short. Memory is useless in the face of a new situation. Memory is dependence. Memory is monotonous.

We have no use of memory if we cannot adapt from it to the real-life situations. And the adaptation will come only by doing and living.

Observation, intuition, innovation, sensitivity and sensibility are the building blocks of wisdom.

If the school is designed to give the body varied experiences, the mind learns without effort. Like Rabindranath Tagore, one of the forerunners in emphasising the difference in learning and teaching said, "We don't remember much of what we were taught but only what we learnt!"

The complete cooperation and intimate observation of the body and its responses build knowledge that we may not know exists. We should enrich the experiences of the child and provide the learning as a response to a search beginning within the child. Is it possible to create an environment where learning is continued in the same natural way in which we learnt to walk and talk? Is it possible to allow learning through discovery and observation, discussion and dialogue?

Each time a child discovers something about the world, he/she also discovers something about himself/herself!

### **Learning from my Children**

I learnt a lot from my children too as I observed how they learnt without being taught. The child learns through the sensations experienced through his/her body. The actions impress the mind and the mind builds a world of pictures, experiences and actions that the body is involved in. The body's experiences are instrumental in constructing the image of the outside world in the mind. Trust, self-confidence, cooperation, honesty, truthfulness, sensitivity, autonomy and other positive attributes (just like negative attributes) stem from personal experiences. I have observed that children learn fastest and best when they are interested in something and decide to learn it. Learning is a challenge every child enjoys. The present rigmarole of the educational system only aggravates the aversion for learning. Its methodology propagates accumulation of data and information. But real learning is dynamic and fulfilling!

### **Puvidham – the Beginning**

I am no expert about education, and I am still learning. My ideas on what a school should be are based on my memory of my experiences in my school. When I decided to start the school, I wanted to give children the kind of freedom to move, inquire and learn that I would have liked during my childhood. I read about Maria Montessori's experiments and I decided to adopt some of the Montessori principles. The idea of children working independently using their hands, and in the safe environment of the classroom, was very appealing. Making vegetable beds, composting, mulching, herbal sprays and selection of seeds meant interesting activities and was like second nature to the children and to me as we were all farmers either by nature or by practice.

I started the Puvudham Learning Centre, not knowing how the children should be taught or what kind of an environment the children needed. I only knew that I did not learn anything of value in my classroom during my school days. I presumed children do not learn in such an environment. I realised that most of my memories were those of anger and resentment for my school and for my teachers. I did not want any child to look back on his or her school life and remember me with resentment.

It was then that I came across the tale of a famous teacher: A young monk asked him, "Tell me master, what are masters for?" The master smiled and replied, "Well! They're for nothing at all! They teach you what you already know and show you what you have already seen." This struck home in my mind.

I read Gandhiji's biography, "My Experiments with Truth" again and the school came alive in my mind! The objective of education is defined by our way of life and the purpose of our life. What is the purpose of human life? Many philosophers have tried to answer this question. They have all arrived at their conclusions through different theories. But the fact remains that purpose was born before man – so to speak. The purpose is that of continuity of life, the purpose is that of harmony of living beings in any biosphere, the purpose is that of one life feeding another, the purpose involves the Sun, the Water, the Sky, the Earth and the Air. Evolving from this, the only purpose of man's life would be to support all these other purposes within his potential means.

The following description of an educated person also influenced my perception about education: The only person who is educated is the person who has learnt how to learn; how to adapt and change, who has realised that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge

gives security. Reliance on the process rather than on static knowledge is the only thing that makes sense as the goal for education in the present circumstances.

### **The Philosophy in Puvudham**

The philosophy and the environment of learning in Puvudham were based on these perceptions. The focus was on creating an environment where the inherent sensitivity and intuition of the child was sharpened and encouraged. Sensitivity to the animals and the plants and to nature as an entity, to other people and to the personality or the inner self, is sustained through working with nature. We try to understand the child. We have complete trust in the child. Our empathy and confidence in their good nature is reciprocated by the children. We, the adults in the environment are open to sharing our fears, and learning from our mistakes.

Puvudham Learning Centre is based on the ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and E.F. Schumacher (thinkers). We use methods demonstrated by Maria Montessori, David Horsburgh, Rudolf Steiner and Janet and Glen Doman (educationists). We had seven children in 2000. We now have ninety children in our school (in 2017). The school fee is decided on the principles of equitability- depending on the occupation of the parents and the economic status of the family. We also run a hostel for children of migrant labourers. There are thirty children in the hostel. The children live and learn with us. The day scholars are children of farmers, living nearby. Most of them are first-generation learners.

Each one of us in Puvudham is accountable for our actions. Anyone can challenge or question any

of the actions. There is a great spirit of community living as we share the work of maintaining our campus, including the toilets. Cooking, cleaning, laughing, teasing, we all have a happy and fun time together.

In conventional schools, learning has become fragmented and removed from real life. It has been made as abstract as is possible.

Our intention is to integrate life, work and learning and help children to synthesise knowledge through observation and experience, made available to the child in the school environment or the real-life environment. We do not subscribe to segregation of learning into subjects, because real learning is a holistic experience.

Can education be designed so that we understand that our action towards positive changes in society begins with a change within us? Can it help us realise that if we cannot control our actions, it is futile to complain about or try to control those of others? The focus of change around us is ourselves. If we trust, we are more likely to be trusted. If we respect, we will be respected. If we are happy with whatever we have, no one can hold a stake in our happiness. If we understand that everyone is doing the best within his/her means with respect to his/her life experiences, then at least we can, in our interaction with others, give them better experiences to refer to in future.

To understand the world around us, we need to first learn about ourselves. We should be able to talk freely about our likes and dislikes, about our abilities and interests, our fears and inhibitions, our strengths and aptitude. We should recognise that

others are our partners in our understanding and in our world.

The environment and the activities in a school must be such that they allow the children to explore for themselves without judgment and comparison. The activities need to be meaningful and constructive. Every inmate of the school should have the experience of freedom, and the initiative that comes with it. When we understand our role in maintaining harmony in our environment, we learn a lot about ourselves and learn to respect one another.

Education must make individuals sensitive to others and their own inner self. Sensitivity is the door to a wholesome philosophy in life and is the guiding hand for self-discovery. Sensitivity gives space for creativity, scientific discovery, contentment and happiness.

We need a system of education that teaches care for the earth, non-violence, equality and autonomy. We need to redefine the basic needs from food, shelter and clothing to more basic things; clean air, clean water, healthy food, simple earth-friendly shelter and handmade clothes.

Sustainability in education means, teaching principles of sustainability of life on Earth.

Many of us are disturbed by the violence in society. We are horrified at the kinds of crimes committed. If we take time to understand why such things happen, we shall realise that the seeds of crime are sown in the schools! The emphasis on success leads to extreme selfishness. This selfishness makes us insensitive to other forms of life and other humans. It ends up propagating inequality,

unfairness, dishonesty, fascism and destruction. So, if we want to change the society, we should change the schools.

### **The Glaring Problems of the Present Education System**

**Desks and benches:** What we all love about children are their infinite energy and their profound observation skill! At home in a rural setting, the child is running about freely and doing everything that it wants to do. But as soon as the child goes to school, it is made to sit at a desk and has to keep sitting the whole day. Can we imagine what the child goes through being unable to do anything according to its will? This creates frustration and becomes the seed for increased violence in the action and words of the child.

If a school has space for taking the children for walks and allowing them free play in the early years, the children develop into very responsible and creative individuals who can handle any problem with ease.

**Subjects:** Why are the subjects taught? What do children gain by fragmentation of learning into subjects? Can life be approached subject-wise? If there was no fragmentation of learning, would it be easier for the child? Do children learn better while interacting with adults at home and working with them? Do children learn better while interacting with other children? These are questions that we as parents need to find answers to ourselves.

### **The fragmentation of learning serves only one purpose – the fragmentation of the mind!**

Fragmentation of the mind leads to lack of means to make connections to understand the

world on our terms. This leads to a meek following of what others have laid out for the child. The child does not have the confidence to assert himself/herself because he/she has not made sense of the world and cannot understand his/her purpose in it! When people do not have a positive self-concept and lack faith in themselves, they make good slaves! The few who survive the brainwash and moulding sessions lack the courage to speak what they think or do what they would like to do. By the time they gather the courage, they are entrenched in the consumer world and find it hard to let go of all the comfort. So essentially, they waste their life looking for happiness and contentment in the words of godmen and in the shadows of consumer goods!

If learning was integrated into life, everything would be a learning resource. For example: when a child picks up leaves with wonder one can use them to teach anything from poetry to diversity, from writing essays to mathematics, from counting to patterns, from painting to aerodynamics, from photosynthesis to classification, from soil formation to geography, from why there are seasons to why birds can fly ..... I am sure you can think of many more topics deemed necessary to be learnt till the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, but the difference is that when the learning is integrated they can be understood much earlier – even a class one student can understand the connections between seasons and leaf colour because he/she is learning through his/her own observations. He/she understands the connections and is creating knowledge!

Similarly, while talking about what they had for breakfast or dinner and what they had brought for lunch, we can share our understanding of food and nutrition with the children and it becomes a

science class where no one is bored or unable to participate. We can easily discuss the carbohydrates, proteins and vitamins while analysing the class menu. We can also impart an understanding of balanced diet and deficiency-connected diseases.

If we are doing organic farming in school and then cooking whatever is grown without any recipe, everyone eats it because it is grown by them and everyone learns about the vitamins and minerals they get by eating those vegetables. This discussion can happen as often as needed and then the children will know it all without rote learning.

While learning to do organic farming in a very informal way, the children learn about how soil is formed, why it is important to conserve soil and water to grow food, the harmful effects of fertilisers and pesticides, the good and harmful insects, the weeds and herbal shrubs, the uses of mulch and even compost preparation. This kind of learning needs no examination. The children imbibe this knowledge through the act of farming and growing vegetables. They learn a lot more than prescribed in their textbook. While marking their plot, measuring the height of the plant, counting the leaves or flowers they learn math; while observing the leaf pattern, flower petals, pollen, or insects, etc., they are learning science; while writing their diary they are learning Tamil or English; while working together and helping each other they are learning civic sense, while planning the work and taking leadership for the activities they are learning social science; while gathering knowledge about the vegetable's origin they learn history; and while talking to their parents about how life was in their childhood days they are learning history again!

Competition and comparison: Would even

the most foolish of persons we know be stupid enough to compare the beauty of a rose with that of a lily? Both are flowers but each is special in its own way. Well, so are children- each special in their own way. Each child has a special skill or ability and interest. No child should be compared with another because that causes jealousy, inferiority and insecurity. But this is what the present education system thrives on! If we don't stop comparing our children with others, we will not be able to see the speciality in our child!

If parents stopped worrying about the future of their child, the child would carve a good place for itself in the society with honesty and integrity. But we teach the child hatred and cunning through our insistence on comparing with other children. Do we take responsibility then for violence and hatred in society today?

Fear and shame: The present education system is an institution perpetuating fear and using shame to rule the minds of the parents and children alike. The fear of failure and the shame of being not as good as the other has often led the children to either suicide or become insensitive and obnoxious. Most adults fear what others would think about their child but very rarely fear what their child would think of them. Most adults want the children to conform to the society because they do not understand the speciality of their child. They do not want their child to be leading the path to a new way of life. But we all enjoy the poem and take immense pleasure in understanding its meaning.....

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN by Robert Frost.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

**Examination and evaluation:** Both examination and evaluation are tools to propagate fear and shame. The way the examination is held is also erroneous. It is only a test of the memory of uninteresting words and concepts which never take the place of knowledge. At best, it is an information memory test, not an intelligence test. Intelligence is when one uses one's creativity to create something out of waste. Most intelligent children make lovely toys with leaves and stones. But we want to throw them away and buy them the shiny plastic rubbish which is dead matter in the mind of the child. The child loves challenges but we give them book after book of information to memorise!

If only we trusted the child and realised that each child does its very best to learn what he/she feels motivated to learn. And this motivation is the child's calling. His/her true purpose of being born on this earth! If we trust the children, they will trust themselves and others. The whole world would become the child's laboratory and he/she would not shy away from hard work.

Happiness is the fundamental condition for real learning: Essentially it turns out that the learning of the three R's is easy compared to learning of attitudes that will generate harmony in the self and in the environment. If the child is free to do what he/she wants and is moving at will and sharing his/her thoughts and fears, likes and apprehensions with the adults in the environment, the child is happy and feels safe. Then the child learns automatically.

If we can make the attitudinal changes needed for learning and self-reliance in the environment of freedom and responsibility, our task as teachers is done.

Concepts, theories, numbers, languages all are secondary skills when compared to the skill of learning about oneself -what each one likes, enjoys and wants from others. The primary task is to develop a self-concept in the child that is positive. The children should believe that they are good, resourceful, ingenious, enthusiastic, co-operative, free to express themselves, sympathetic and wonderful in every sense of the word.

The challenge then is to create a learning environment where the adults and the children interact as equals and learn from each other while living a simple life growing their food, making their clothes, creating their dwellings and cooking their food! Simply living!

### **The Curriculum and Methodology**

Keeping all these requirements in mind, we classify our learning into five basic modules: The Sun, the Earth, Water, Air and Space. The five elements are essential for survival. The children learn about their physical properties and experience these elements through their five senses. The mentor or the teacher just draws the children's attention to certain aspects of the elements that they are relating to the concepts learnt. Our curriculum has evolved from these fundamentals. The classes include storytelling and singing as a fun mode of conveying and sharing ideas, values and vocabulary.

The teachers write stories and songs based on the concepts that the children need to learn. The essential concepts deemed necessary by the educational boards and institutions are incorporated in stories and songs recited in the class. The children draw images to express what they have understood from the stories and the songs. The children discuss the lessons among

themselves and with the teacher. The children are free to move in and out of the classroom if they do not disturb the others. They have the freedom and the responsibility to participate on their own terms. The school is run by the children's parliament. They elect their leaders and ministers and the teachers are there to help and guide. There are no locks on doors and cupboards. The waste is completely recycled. There are dry composting toilets whose compost is used in the garden and all wash water is channelled to fruit trees. We make our own bathing and washing soap organically and use ash for washing utensils. We make our tooth powder too!

Emphasis is laid on the re-use of paper, proper use of learning material and respect for other living things in the environment, be they ants, lizards or people. Mathematical activities like counting, sorting, classifying, measuring, and measured drawings, scaled drawings and geometrical drawings like the traditional rangolis, are used to learn mathematics.

Drawing and painting is an important expression of the children's inner worlds. The children are happy to draw and paint, and we are happy to learn about their innermost dreams and challenges through the pictures they share with us. Emphasis and time are given for drawings of plants and trees, flowers and insects, sceneries and buildings. The children learn about the intrinsic details of an object by observation and drawing. Many questions and discussions are generated among the children as they learn from what others have observed and they themselves had missed.

The children are divided into groups. On an empty plot of land, they decide and mark the portion they want to grow plants in. They measure it, draw it to scale, design the rows and decide what they

want to plant, determine the quantity of seeds they will need; then mulch, water and watch their plants grow. They measure the rate of growth, count the number of flowers and compare with the number of fruits. They observe and sketch the plant parts, and the insects and birds that visit. Finally, they compute the time they spent gardening and the quantity of vegetables they could harvest and make a cost analysis of their activity. They also learn to make natural pest control extracts and vermicomposting. They learn to identify plants and use them for medicine, food, composting or mulching.

Other activities include carpentry, where the children make toys, puzzles, useful articles like key hangers and pen stands. They are involved in the maintenance of the library and they read a lot. They also do construction activity. They cook their own snacks, bake bread and make pickles. They design and stitch their uniforms and make their own medicines too!

They are connected with the surroundings through these experiences and their knowledge of physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, language and social science is evolved from these experiences. Drawing helps internalise the knowledge. Their knowledge is thus continually improvised.

Since the emphasis is on generating wonderful experiences which will help the children build a happy, loving, trustworthy and honest world inside their minds, we make sure that the children have enough opportunities to meet visitors and interact with them. They travel to other parts of the country. Travel opens up their horizons and they bloom with their experience, and that fragrance fills our lives. This approach has a two-fold objective: Firstly, it makes the experiences at school relevant to the student's life. Secondly, it empowers the child to

believe and adopt this method of practical learning throughout their lives.

Children gain experience even outside the classroom when they help out at home while socialising and during play. In our school, these experiences are discussed, validated, and used to build positive responses. The children can bring up their concerns and they are considered with seriousness, as we respect the learning that it provides.

### **The Purpose of Education**

The purpose of education in the present scenario should be to support the child to understand his/her role in the society, undertake positive action to improve the resources, allow the development of a humane society where the differences between people are ironed out, empower children to analyse the problems of the present world and find ways to combat them, understand his/her place in the web of life and learn to live in harmony with all the other species and last of all we need to provide for oneself and one's community. The world is fast changing and the information that is in the textbooks is growing obsolete even before the books tear! In this kind of a situation, the only real empowerment for a child would be to learn on his/her own and apply that knowledge in their day-to-day life challenges.

We want our children to be able to discern the right from the wrong, the valuable from the superfluous and evolve a way of life for themselves doing whatever they choose to do without bias for any profession. We need no examinations to validate this method of learning. The children give their best. If we can allow the children to learn without the stress of competition and allow them to make things with their hands at least to the eighth

grade, we can hope to save their childhood. This way of learning is the right of every child!

### **There is a lot to learn from a bad design!**

At present, the purpose of education is limited to individual prosperity. It fosters competition, academic achievement, jealousy, greed, dishonesty and injustice.

- We need a system which fosters cooperation, social equality, honesty, justice and contentment. - Nai Talim

- The present system is designed to feed the big factories, multinational companies, educational, social and State institutions. It is meant to propagate the consumer mentality and globalisation.

- We need a system to nurture small entrepreneurship, self-employment trades for small-scale manufacturers, farming communities, and environmentally safe arts and crafts. We need to put the emphasis on local economic activity and understand the banes of consumerism both for the earth and for the individual. - Nai Talim

- The present system is designed to make the individual feel insecure, inept and dependent

- We need a system to make the individual feel secure, accomplished and independent of any outside control, to be able to lead a meaningful life simply and with dignity. - Nai Talim

- The present system does not address the psychological and philosophical needs of the child, except when they feel the child does not 'fit in the box', and remedial counselling is essential.

- We need a system where the psychological needs of the child are understood and philosophical

questions are discussed and explained to help the child to understand his/her self and make decisions about his/her inclinations. - Nai Talim

- The present system provides space for the academic understanding of environmental, social, political and justice problems but there is no sensitivity developed.

- We need a system where the child becomes sensitive to the processes around him/her and can initiate corrective action in his/her personal and social interactions. - Nai Talim

- The evaluation system in the prevailing system of education instils fear in the children while giving them a skewed sense of success.

- We need a system where evaluation is not necessary. At all times, the child or the adult is on a self-evaluation mode. Evaluation, be it ranking or grading, is unhealthy. Learning should be a natural process as it is in the first years of the child's life. Without evaluation, the child learns to speak, talk and walk. So surely, he or she can learn all else without the need for evaluation. Evaluation is not for the benefit of the child. It seems to be for the benefit of the parents and other institutions. Real success is the sense of achievement when we do something which we ourselves feel is a challenge for us. - Nai Talim

We all need to come together for a common goal – to help the child to live and the Earth to heal.

## NOTES

1. Beautiful Tree, Dharampal, Introduction, pg. 19