

# Memories of experiments in education

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WAY back in the early 1970s, we searched for a world better than the one we saw around us, a world bigger than ourselves and our lives, a world worth living to make. The journey took us in various directions: some to devise development projects to alter rural reality, some to politics; others to theatre, poetry, writing, the arts or design in search of a language that was authentic and true to the times and yet others to rediscovering the ends and means of education. There was a restlessness, an impatience, a desire to get on with it and not just talk about it. Many friendships were made and unmade because of the path one chose.

I found myself running an alternative school of sorts with fifteen friends in the early mornings before the university schedule at what was then Patparganj village, handing it over to young friends from the locality when we headed back to university. Partho Chatterjee, Shyam Kamath, Abhiram Seth, Madhu (Purie) and Naresh Trehan who often fetched us at six or seven in the morning in his car to run a medical camp at the premises while doing his internship at Safdarjang hospital, were all compatriots in this endeavour. Then again after four, once we had finished our day's work, this exploration continued in a slum opposite Rajghat.

**T**his was our way of assessing what the content and form of education should be for children who did not necessarily have the motivation for it. It was our way of using whatever ingenuity we could devise to make the learning process more 'real', more of a 'personal experience', more 'worth learning', more 'useful', and certainly more 'relevant'. It was also a time when we discovered our own talents and frailties, our ability to not only communicate with 'words' but by 'doing', showing 'how', by all means at our disposal. It was a great deal of fun not only for the children but also us: singing, dancing, making rhymes, enacting our dilemmas, making with our own hands to translate concepts into concrete 'realities' whenever necessary and possible. It was a learning process for 'us and them'.

The Patparganj and Rajghat experience was made possible by the blessings and protection of the remarkable Meera Mahadevan, who already had initiated the Mobile Creches for working mothers at construction sites. She had felt the need to do something 'real and Gandhian' for these children while Gandhi Darshan was being built. She supported our efforts by allowing the use of an underutilized two acre space and building at Patparganj belonging to the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi because she felt there was some hope of reactivating the spirit of Gandhi which was losing impetus and immediacy. She faced the full fury of criticism from the Nidhi for allowing a 'bunch of youth' to take over a serious social service institution, even though over the next year we trained our local colleagues to assume responsibility of running the 'programme'.

In the slum at Rajghat, we soon realized that there just was not enough space to work with the children and thus began a daily walk with about 100 children to the compounds of the Bal Bhawan and National Children's Museum at Kotla road. This, on the suggestion of another wonderful lady, Shantaben Gandhi, who was on the board of the institution, while she taught classical Sanskrit theatre at the NSD (National School of Drama).

**I**t was here that we encountered a most casual, taken for granted atmosphere both among the children and the workshop guides – ‘heads of sections’ dealing with music, dance, theatre in the performing arts; painting, potting, clay modelling, sculpture in the plastic arts; a crafts workshop and a science lab and workshop. Children came and went, with only a few staying to explore either the medium or the material for any length of time. Here was an ideal ground for exploring ideas and materials and how the two could come together to give meaning to learning, and yet, no one seemed to be bothered about this rare opportunity going waste. This was the beginning of another and more conscious phase of trying to assess the importance of ideas and the means of exploring them in the learning process.

Over the next two or three years, I found myself taking a degree in education and being interviewed to head the ‘craft section’; soon I was joined by other friends including Amba Sanyal, Jolly Rohatgi and Suresh. The fun and games continued as we began every session by discussions with the children on what it was necessary to know and why. No one thought it was possible to conduct a discussion between children of ages 5 to 16 for any gainful purpose and for any length of time. But these discussions became the core of our relationship with children and between children – the younger ones providing the naïve and innocent insights and the older ones more worldly and value conscious.

**T**hey began to enjoy the difference in their ‘way’ of looking at the world and responding to it. Realizing that this was a free-wheeling session without ‘evaluation and assessment’, marks and grades, they went wild with imagination in exploring the possibilities. It was these discussion sessions that determined the number of groups that would be formed thereafter and the nature of media or activity they would then work in, so that the ideas that had been developed in the discussion could take form in terms of expression. They actually saw their ideas take shape over the next couple of hours or so every day.

For instance, I recall exploring the relationship between ‘human needs’ and ‘needs growing endlessly’ in a series of discussions that began with the basic needs of air, water, food, clothing, shelter and human expression as work. Air was seen as ephemeral as a feeling, as movement and as sound. As light as ‘two leaves tossing about speaking to each other,’ said one of the six year olds in the group. The creation of sound and its nature was explored and once they had produced all manner of sounds, we turned to the question of music and its nature. This led to a discussion on musical instruments and how exactly and accurately they enunciated sound in the form of wind, percussion and string instruments, apart from their ability to emulate the human voice. Over months of exacting but exciting effort, the children actually made the instruments for a twenty piece

orchestra with their own hands. Close to a hundred children had contributed in one form or another to make these instruments and learn to play them. I remember how difficult it was for them to get the first 'sa' right in the simplest clay flute and how moved they were by the simplicity of a vagrant street flute player who simply looked at the length of the fresh clay pipe, measured it with his fingers and pierced the correct hole for a perfect note.

**I**n the discussion on shelter, they talked about the lives of nomads, those who settled in villages and tilled the land, and the rationale of towns and cities. In mud, brick, stone and mortar they actually built enormous landscaped examples of these environments in the open spaces of the institution, firing bricks and learning all about engineering and architecture, drainage and layout plans of living environments. It was an endless process of enquiry and making, seamless and enjoyable as the effort did not show or was carried through by the search for answers.

Similarly, in exploring clothing with the children, for the first time I attempted to extract fibre from cactus growing in the compound – soaking it for a week in water, spinning it into yarn on a drop spindle, dyeing it with colours and then learning to weave tapestries on a simple frame loom, inspired by a book called *Woven by Hand* by an amazing Egyptian weaver. There was no better way that I could think of than to introduce them to the precision, the joy and concentration required for turning fibre into cloth.

At the end of six years, we were able to formulate a series of nine projects that could help a child from junior school to high school to learn without the 'formal' effort that they were expected to put in. These modules were presented to the NCERT as possible content for the 'work experience' hours that had been recently introduced in the curricula. We were in a position to demonstrate the efficacy of the methodology, even though conscious that possibly only two out of a hundred children knew or were drawn to a medium of expression they could make their own. Usually children are simply lost about what they want to do or what they enjoy doing most. For them it was an ideal process, not only of exploring ideas and materials but also discovering themselves and their capabilities.

**T**he NCERT turned around to tell us that since we weren't exactly a 'research institution' it was they who would decide what the content of education should be. Unfortunately, soon thereafter Indira Gandhi who happened to be the Chairperson of the institution, lost the elections and further work on the projects was stymied by the trade union minded in the institution. They were hostile to a 25 year old upstart not only 'heading' a section with all the media activities at her disposal, but also trying to show what 'more' could be done. I was prepared to demonstrate and defend the pedagogical rationale of my work but not exactly sit around for the next 20 years defending my 'position' and 'status'. Resign and depart is what I did, without regret as I never look back and prefer to move on.

I am glad, however, that Shantaben Gandhi never gave up and for many years worked in Mumbai with a group of young friends under the banner of AVEHI. Though she is no

longer physically with us today, her niece Ratna Pathak Shah and other friends and colleagues continue to work with these projects and have developed them further in at least 500 schools in Mumbai.

**I**t was in those years that I began searching for spinners working with finer yarns and ‘discovered’ Baba Lal Singh on the first floor of a small home cum office in Nai Sarak, Old Delhi. He had met Gandhiji as a young boy sometime in the 1920s in Amritsar and was so moved by his thought and action that he opted to live by his philosophy. Though he produced and sold printed maps for a living, he taught spinning to anyone willing to learn so that they could earn by exchanging the spun yarn for lengths of fabric, or grain or a small amount in cash. He had two adopted daughters, Sita Bimbra and Veena Handa, who were college lecturers but also taught spinning to children of the underprivileged near their homes. Every Friday afternoon, they led a small group of adept spinners in one corner of Rajghat, facing Gandhiji’s eternal flame for about an hour, following it up with multi-religious prayers set to music.

Years later in 2002, when I worked on ‘Khadi – the fabric of freedom’, an exhibition at the IGNCA, it was some of their current students who came to teach spinning on the lawns facing the exhibit, a memory come alive after so many years. But they were still there and kind enough to share our past in the present. Though part of a disappearing legacy, they are so much more relevant now when we have moved even further away from the tactile, the basic capability of functioning hands in tune with the rest of us. In fact, spinning provides the ideal coming together of the hand, heart and head in tuneful harmony and it took the genius of a Gandhi to recognize its value as a liberating communion.

At a time when ‘development’ is associated with relieving the hand from ‘drudgery’, as though the mind can fly free without associating with the hand, and ‘high tech’ is considered the only worthwhile pursuit, it is time to review this entire question of where we are going and in search of what. What about the low tech high skill that is not only more accessible and feasible but could also provide a sound base for the flight beyond?

**T**he long standing socio-pictorial map of modern India consists of islands of wellbeing surrounded by a vast sea of a degradation, denial, and poverty. Though the islands have grown, especially in the last fifty years, so has the sea. Either because the pace and scale of development has not been far-reaching enough or has been outstripped by growing numbers whose traditional sources of livelihood have collapsed and can no longer provide livelihood enough to live in the present. The sea has grown faster than the islands.

In this multifaceted democracy of ours, many centuries coexist simultaneously and no matter how rapidly the islands of wellbeing grow, in our attempts to industrialize, catch up with the world and, more recently, liberalize and globalize, the sea of poverty or at least segments of it remain out of reach.

The application of the hand is our greatest asset even if it has placed the most skilled hand producers at the bottom of the social hierarchy. It is they who have given India recognition in the nameless, numerous artifacts created by our artisans over hundreds of years. It is their experiential insight that has given form to complex ideas in philosophy, aesthetics, symbolism and made these communicable to the knowledgeable and the unlettered. And what is more, they have not only confined themselves to making articles of ritual or religious purpose but also the most ordinary fabrics, pots, pans, lamps and articles of daily household needs.

**F**or a child growing up in India today, it is not only necessary to be ‘hooked on’ to world culture but also to know with his/her heart, head and hand what it is to be born here, before he becomes the NRI the system is pushing him towards. We all will soon be expatriates living in this country. Learning with the hands stays with us, no matter what we become, just like driving a bicycle. More so, in a society that is trying to overcome its social divisions, its brahmanical past and to create a level playing field for the growing numbers joining in.

This is the challenge today when communities are being pushed to the brink as being ‘under-productive’, referred to as ‘a legacy of the past’, when they are in fact the finest example of harmonious development. Their sustenance in economic, social and cultural terms is a challenge both philosophical and literal for all societies in transition. Ultimately, we are all in a process of transition, both in the ‘developing’ and the ‘developed’ world. We need to find ways to recognize the worth of the human ‘hand’ even as the human ‘mind’ seeks to relieve it from the drudgery of constant application. In not doing so, we lose not only the great resources of ‘hand’ skills but also their intrinsic contribution to human development.