

## **Nurturing Green Thumbs: a pan India overview**

Education in India took a turn in the mid nineteenth century with the famous Maculay Despatch that pronounced and proposed for British India a system of education which was meant to create down the line clerical staff for the colonizer administration.

Independent India did not stop to think if it was the best form of education for the children of this nation. It continued with the system that was already in place, with hardly any great reform worth its name. The result is there for all to see. We are a now a young nation with a demographic advantage but stuck with unskilled unemployable youth who have to be trained whilst on the job.

If we change the frame, train the focus lights on some educational endeavours that go about their business without paying heed to populist educational trends, one feels reassured, sees hope and believes that there may still be a chance that we will pull ourselves up as winners from the ecological and economic crisis that is showing all signs of taking a massive toll on humans and all of nature on a planetary scale.

What are these endeavours, who are these educators and where is this happening?

The answer is simple. These are educational endeavours, schools, institutions that are run by visionary educators, mostly with a strong philosophical or ideological mooring in remote corners of this country far from the madding crowd.

In far away remote Kumaon country in Uttarakhand is Kausani, a little town overlooking the Himalayan ranges of Almora District. On the directions of Mahatma Gandhi, Laxmi Ashram, a residential school for girls and young women was started here in the early 1940s by a British lady volunteer known by the name of Sarala Bhen. Since then, the alumni of this institution have been part of the freedom struggle, local social movements and the well known Chipko Andolan.

Tending the 11 acre campus of forest and farm land, growing their own food, harvesting and threshing grain, taking care of the cowshed, grazing the cattle, fuel and fodder collection,

farming, fixing fences, cooking, cleaning, playing host to innumerable guests, interns and visitors, spinning, maintaining weather records, prayer, yoga, meditation, academics are all part of the day's activity. The ashram hosts about 50 to 70 girls in the age group of 7 to 20 and women staff. The students study till class ten, however many stay back to continue their college education through local institutions; growing up to take up socially responsible career options and leadership roles in their community.

The achievements of the alumni of this institution can be credited to the grooming they receive through working with the land and community living; a strong sense of ethics, a deep understanding of the local ecology and building of socially useful skill and knowledge base. Laxmi Ashram over the decades has organically developed its own rhythm such that the day to day functioning is carried out by the young residents. It has very closely adhered to Gandhi's understanding of gram swaraj and swavalambhan. The central factor is their engagement in land related activities: farming, composting, bio-gas generation, running the community kitchen, use of appropriate technology – mostly solar, weather study, care of animals complemented by exposure to ethical values emulated by the resident mentors and a disciplined routine. The students are also tech savvy thanks to the many computers at their disposal and the constant flow of international 'teacher' volunteers and interns who come by on a regular basis.

Travelling down south one will reach CLOAAT (Centre for Learning Organic Agriculture and Appropriate Technology) that is a part of Sholai School at Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu. Spread across a vast area is the campus that comprises of coffee plantations, organic farms, perennial streams and hills. This too is a residential facility with children from the local community, nearby towns and cities as also children of non- indian origin. The school is completely self sufficient in energy - not at all dependent on the Tamil Nadu electricity Board. As a result, children are very knowledgeable about the running and maintenance of micro-hydro, solar-electricity, wind energy and bio-gas equipments. The energy consciousness extends to the kitchen and the bathing requirements as these too are run on fuel-wood efficient cook-stoves and water heating equipments. Farming is one of the main activities that the children here are adept at. Carpentry, tile making, automobile maintenance, building technology, cooking, weather and bio-diversity study, photography, computer literacy, animal care is all part of a school day.

Theatre and drama, debates and academics go hand in hand. The school also offers a self directed and self designed study programme for older children known as the Mature Student's Programme. The founder and head of the institution, Brian Jenkins was strongly influenced by J Krishnamurti's teachings during his association with the teacher-philosopher.

Gandhiji's *jalma bhoomi* still carries a strong tradition of walking along the path proposed by him. The Gujarat Vidyapeeth, whose very first chancellor was MKG himself, runs hundreds of institutions that are pledged to the Nai Talim philosophy of basic education as proposed by him in 1937. Of them Lok Bharati is worth a mention. Located at Sansora in Bhavnagar district of Gujarat, Lok Bharati is an autonomous residential *Institute of Rural Higher Education*. It boasts of an expansive campus with school, college, *go-shala* and dairy, farm, composting experimental plots, a wheat research station, alternative energy use – both wind and solar, orchards and horticultural nurseries, community science centre and community life in student-mentor resident *chatralayas*. Agriculture related practices form the central theme around which the dairy, composting units, alternative technology and alternative energy mechanisms, community life are interwoven. The LOK-1 variety of wheat that was developed at the centre was released by the Gujarat Govt. in 1979. It was further taken to the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Karnataka, West Bengal, Maharashtra by 2001. Since then it has spread to neighbouring countries in Asia and is now also cultivated in the U.S.A. Mexico, Russia, Indonesia, Guyana and Argentina. An important fact to note is that all the research activity and the task of maintaining live genome strains is undertaken by the under graduate and post graduate students of Lok Bharati. The institute has an amazing collection of dissertation papers submitted by students on varied topics related to agriculture, animal husbandry, composting techniques, community health, alternative energy etc.

Dr. Arum Dave, the visionary founder president of Lokbharati Community Science Centre has been the inspiration for taking forward the work of the institution.

If one were to look eastwards, the DRCSE (Development Research Communication and Services Centre) in Kolkata, has been engaged since 1982 in collecting and disseminating educational material on Ecology and Natural Resource Education. With a strong leaning towards permaculture techniques, the teacher education materials developed by them based of actual field

work with children is a rich resource. Headed by Dr. Ardhendu Chatterjee, a master trainer in sustainable farming techniques, the resource materials are worth obtaining. The book *The Green Sprout Journey* by Satoko Chatterjee is a great guide for any parent wanting to introduce children to the pleasures of gardening, ecology and nature study.

At the very centre of our country in little known Sewagram in Wardha, Maharashtra. Adjoining the Gandhi Ashram *parisar* here is an eight year old school Anand Niketan. At this little school one can witness the unfolding of a gardening centered curriculum on a day to day basis. Based on the Nai Talim philosophy, this school which is upto class eight, has mastered the fine art of an integrated pedagogy. Children become familiar with *baagwani* from their kindergarten days. Walks around the campus, watching older children garden, they get attuned to working with the land from an early age. The school places much emphasis on self reliance and cooperative work. Teachers and pupils work alongside in daily cleaning, composting, gardening, spinning, weaving, sewing, craft work, cooking, pottery, repair and maintenance etc. There is a strong emphasis on ethical practices, social justice, and sensitization to local cultural and traditional practices. The school run by the Nai Talim Samiti is lead by the visionary head teacher Sushama Sharma with a team of dedicated teachers. Here Gandhiji's dream of an ideal learning experience for children is being lived in the contemporary context.

From the text above, one may begin to conclude that mostly gandhian thought has influence educational endeavours that are attuned to living and working with the land, learning from it. This is not the case. These are only indicative living examples that have stood the test of time.

In the past couple of decades our knowledge of ecological damage done to the land by way of indiscriminate over exploitation of our natural endowments have given an impetus for many to take up environmental education. It has now brought the entire movement to the ground level, literally, by inspiring many educators to take up gardening activity with children. The range of engagement is diverse. Some have gone all the way to make it the central learning experience as in Pacha Shaala at Zaheerabad in Medak District of the newly formed Telangana. Here learning experiences are centered around ecological farming in the rain-fed subsistence farming landscape of central Deccan. At Adarshila Learning Centre in Sakad viilage of Badwani district in Madhya

Pradesh, organic farming is not only a major activity but also a theme of engagement with the surrounding villages. The children not only grow their own vegetables for the school kitchen but also engage in spreading their knowledge of various organic techniques and formulations to farmers in the nearby villages. The children of Puvudham and Tulir in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu have been farming for many years now, so has the school located at the Timbaktu Collective in Ananthpur district in Andhra Pradesh. Many of the schools of the Krishnamurti Foundation are engaging children in growing of edible gardens. Among the recent entrants in the south are many followers of spiritual heads and institutions such as ISKON, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Isha Foundation, Amritanandamayi who have either begun working with children on kitchen garden or are planning to do so. The Azim Premji Foundation too has programmes under its education wing that is engaging with government schools in promoting gardening related activity. Murudam Farm school in Tiruvanmalai Vidya Vanam in Annikatti, Tamil Nadu and the Jeevana Vikasa Vidya Vanam near Vijaywada in Andhra Pradesh are some other new entrants into this arena.

Of educators who engage with children in gardening activity, the community is growing fast and wide across the nation. Auroville near Puducherry and Beej Vidya Peeth in Dehra Dun have long been a destination for young adults interested in learning to work with the land. Apart from this there are innumerable institutions and farms across the country where young people enlist as interns and volunteers. They are mostly young professionals who face a burnout in their demanding career as professionals who wish to return to a saner life style of living with the land or young adults who have become wise early in life and say farming is the way of life for them.

All in all, whatever other dreams a large majority of this young nation may be chasing, there is a fast growing community of young individuals who see sense in learning skills that are respectful of mother nature. The examples above illustrate the fact that good sense will sooner or later always prevail even if only in a few.

## **The Larger Picture**

Somewhere in our grand wisdom we deemed it right to separate life from learning for our children. We institutionalized learning, created elaborate physical and administrative structures and certification procedures and called them schools. The idea of such spaces as the only portals of learning has, for some time now, peaked. They are fast turning vestigial. However what has survived the test of time are endeavours that recognised the inseparableness of life and learning. That is because they designed the learning experience such that children become active participants of their learning journey; learning from everyday life situations, working with their hands - close to the land. Many serious recent entrants into the educational scene have recognised this wisdom; are endeavouring to emulate these precedents with great success. By the same logic, conventional schools, if they have to play their designate role, will have to reinvent themselves; accept that developing mental faculties through dry theoretical academic rhetoric will be inadequate for dealing with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Young India deserves better and needs much more than just academic competence if it has to transit through the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Learning to stay attuned to the land and its nurturing will put it at a great advantage.

Many schools and institutions, especially those based on strong ideological moorings have recognised the limitations of restricting learning to academic subjects. They have, through deep reflective analysis acknowledged the limitedness of such pursuits, taken measures to bring balanced and varied experience to children. This has been mostly the forte of visionary educators; very rarely, if at all, is it seen in state run institutions.

The matter is a very simple albeit, a serious one. It is about children learning to tend a garden, grow plants and trees, love and respect nature, hone skills that will hold them in good stead in an ecologically or economically challenging globalised world. The future is in going local, as the grand old man of India M K Gandhi predicted and advised us a century ago in the little treatise 'Hind Swaraj'.

Reference: Personal communication, visits, firsthand exchanges and relevant institutional web portals.

Nyla Coelho