

## EDUCATION

Modern communications technology has brought with it hints of the global village. But so far the only inhabitants of that village have been the transnational elites, those who live in the industrialized North and those in the South who have access to the global communications network. The current pattern of communication and transportation, to say nothing of the commercial culture imparted chiefly by the mass media, has helped create a new stratification of the world's people into two classes that share little information, experience, or common concern. The wealthy transnational class is assimilated into a universe of communication and information that is out of bounds for the majority of mankind. The psychological-distance between these two strata is in imminent danger of reaching a point where the only form of discourse between the top and the bottom is violence, punctuated by occasional spasms of charity.

The profound irony of the situation cannot escape us. The very communications and information technologies that have the potential to knit humankind together in ways never before possible are now contributing to its fragmentation. Similarly, while these technologies have the capacity to contribute to democratization, to the decentralization of power, they are often used thoughtlessly in ways that centralize power. We flatter ourselves at Swanirvar - maybe we deceive ourselves too - in thinking that the geographical boundaries of our project area do not shut out our wider concerns, and that we do not lose sight of the massive wheel in which we arms a tiny part. Thus we are challenged to consider the ways in which the poor and the marginalised people of the world can be brought to a position of easy and independent access to modern knowledge. They, too, are decision makers in the development process. The aggregate of millions of decisions and choices by individuals and households can make or break population policies, maintain or exhaust the carrying capacity of specific environments, ensure or undermine the stability of a political or social system.

This long, but we hope not long-winded, introduction to an account of our year's work in the field of education is necessary for a proper understanding of what we are trying to achieve. The key to everything everything is in education, even simple schooling, and we wish people paused and pondered how much valuable energy is being expended on pointless debates on the correct age to start teaching English, to the exclusion of any meaningful effort to improve quality in everything to do with mass education. Mindless literacy in English is as empty as mindless literacy without it.

We now run a pre-primary school in 14 villages. The total enrolment is 721, of whom 371 are

girls. Quite a few of these have no proper building, no access road, and no toilet facilities. In some, a really rainy day is a compulsory holiday. Our usual cover-up for our inability to provide better facilities for the children is to state that their enthusiasm transcends such inadequacies. Happily and luckily this enthusiasm is shared by the parents/guardians, as is evidenced by the ever-increasing demand for admission to the schools and the growing interest that they take in their wards' progress and the working of the school. Our teachers and supervisor constantly make home visits (altogether 4462 this year) and regular parents' meetings are held (69 this year with 1503 parents, often mothers, attending).

Opinions are exchanged, questions are answered. The net result has been that we have succeeded to a great extent in convincing parents, including those who are themselves illiterate or barely literate, that their responsibility to their children does not cease with sending them to school and in convincing our teachers that they must not feel that they know best. In certain villages we have gone further and have set in motion a process to form education committees for the whole village, with representation from teachers in other schools and parents of children who go to these besides our own teachers and our students' parents. The community as a whole will not benefit if the community as a whole is not involved.

We have not in any way relaxed our emphasis on regular supervision (232 visits to the 14 schools) and the supervisor's evaluation was supplemented by that of other visitors from outside (112 in all), including from CRY and Vikramshila, the two organizations that are our resource centres. The teachers met at monthly meetings, at workshops, at internal trainings and during group visits to one school by teachers of some others. Each gets to know how the others are doing, and uses interaction with peers to improve or modify his own performance, neither of which can boast of an optimum point. They also go for external trainings, but this year unfortunately there was no exposure visit to any other NGO.

In villages where we run a primary school the children from our pre-primary schools join these but where they have to join Government primary schools in Class I it has by now become common to find our alumni doing much better than others. This is only as it should be and what is more fulfilling is an experience like the following. One of our pre-primary schools one day had a group of unscheduled visitors; a holiday had been declared at the local primary school and some of our old students had then come to see what their successors were doing. They were asked to mix with the present group of children. This they did with the innocuous superiority of "seniors" and when the teacher asked them if they were not being exasperated by the "ignorance" of their juniors, they said with one voice, "Not at all. It must be our fault that we

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cannot explain things to them in a manner that they can understand. After all, they are too small.”

Until last year there was some resistance to and misgiving about the method of “bookless” learning that we followed in our schools and some parents could not understand how a school could supplant “serious education” with “fun and games”. Happily this is now a thing of the past. In one village one father wanted to take his daughter out of our school but relented when he discovered that the child of 5 had developed better reading abilities than her sister of 8 who was in Class II of the local primary Government school.

Our three primary schools, which we run on behalf of Vikramshila Education Resource Society, Calcutta with money from the Central Government under the NFE 2000 scheme, completed their second year this year. At the end of the year we had 272 students in all, 140 of them girls. At the Andharmanik school 21 children had left us for the local Government schools, because of some misunderstanding which was exploited somewhat unfairly. These local schools were worried by the preference among guardians for our school, and there was a word of mouth campaign that no high school would accept the children from our school when they go for admission to Class V there. We could not counter this as our contacts with the parents here were at that time not very well developed. We hope next year there will be no repetition of this. Home visits (1433 in the three villages) and parent-teacher meetings (12, with an average attendance of 48 parents) continue, but a very welcome change has been that more and more parents are coming to meet the teachers or the supervisor to talk about many things. Earlier we had to visit homes to collect the fees, but now parents come of their own to pay. It is also good to find that personal hygiene and cleanliness are now accepted as their responsibility by the parents. Many of them have now understood our methods and, at least some have realised that at home if the child needs any help, they can and should give it, and not go for a private tutor, who has become an essential adornment, regardless of his efficacy.

It is not merely parents who have become more involved and demanding. Teachers of neighbouring Government schools and some school inspectors also have expressed interest in our methods. By next year we should be having an education committee in all villages where we run a school, and this will bring together parents, panchayat members, Government school teachers and our workers. Our teachers and the supervisor held regular monthly meetings, workshops and group visits to exchange ideas on teaching; lesson planning, preparation of work cards and work sheets etc. One such workshop was addressed by a teacher from

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Santiniketan. The supervisor made 106 visits to the three schools to acquaint himself with the teachers problems first hand. We are still unsure about what to do with slow learners or children who persist in being indifferent for reasons about which we can do nothing.

At Andharmanik there is a group of children who miss school for a number of weeks at a stretch because they have to go with their parents who work as agricultural labourers in other districts: What do we do with them when they come back and cannot catch up with the lost days? Four teachers this year attended a 2-phase training course run by Vikramshila, and three teachers and the supervisor went for an Education Leadership Training. On various occasions we had visitors who spoke to us at informal meetings and usually these were very profitable.

We did not visit any other NGO this year but two groups visited us. A 13 member team from Santi Sadhana Ashram in Guwahati spent three days visiting our schools and other projects and there were 8 people from NKJK in South 24 Parganas.

Last year's exhibition of details of our educational experiment could not be repeated this year but we did set up a stall displaying our various educational materials at the venues of our four sports meets. Headmasters and teachers of quite a few primary and secondary schools have visited our pre-primary and primary schools and expressed keen interest in our work, and we look forward to meaningful cooperation with them in the coming years, beyond the joint cultural activities that took place quite a few times this year.

One new thing we started this year is literacy classes for adult women. Over the years we have often been asked by such women to arrange these classes and we specially remember two such instances. Once a few mothers lamented that their children, who were going to our schools, made fun of them because they had now learnt to read and write, so we must do something about it, and in the other case, a woman explained her predicament thus. She was maltreated by her in-laws, but if she wanted succour from her parents she had to ask one of these in-laws to write to them and any advice the parents gave could not be kept secret as she would need somebody to read their letter to her. We did not have the resources for one thing, and for another, we wondered if it would be wise to do something that the Government was doing with so much fanfare, for we did not wish the impression to be created that the literacy mission was incapable of achieving its target without help. However, by now it is quite clear that public assertions notwithstanding, there is a very big gap between claims and reality and so we decided to begin the work in a small way. Our pre-primary teachers in some places began to

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run some centres and then in December there was a three-day training for all teachers where a representative from the All India Council for Mass Education and Development gave them theoretical and practical input on adult literacy. Nine centres were opened this year and response has been very good. They run at various times according to the convenience of the women. At some places, these women go home and teach their husbands the alphabet and other things they have learnt. In one village some boys in their late teens come to the classes. At Matiya where we run a school which began for children of sex workers, two sex workers come to the class. Enthusiasm has been followed by performance.

In our own schools we do manage to conduct several experiments with methods of teaching, relating curricula with daily life, innovative ways of uncovering hidden creative skills etc., but we are in no position to address the larger issues that have made a mockery of education in general in our country, particularly in the rural areas, in that we are merely producing competence in storing information. For this k #1k we need larger forums and inputs from various sources, particularly from people and organisations that specialize in education. We have thus joined several networks to work in cooperation with others.

The first of these comprises about 15 NGOs all of which have their school programme funded by CRY. These partners and CRY meet every 3 months and this year we had three meetings. The agenda generally has been exchange of experience and ideas and mutual evaluation, a review of general conditions in education, propagation of our views to a wider audience through interaction with other NGOs and by forming alliances with government and other private schools and panchayats in our own project areas. In the coming meetings we hope to move on to wider national issues, and the practical fall-out of Government policies and our efforts. Action Aid organised a meeting in Calcutta in August where NGOs active in education met to discuss the possibility of free and compulsory primary education and what we can do to create pressure on the authorities.

In October we were among the four organisers of a three-day workshop at Badu near Calcutta where several West Bengal NGOs, representatives of the State Government, several specialist individuals, representatives of path-breaking NGOs from other States, like Eklavya and Digantar, had a very meaningful interaction. Various aspects of education in general in India were discussed, and special emphasis was placed on the special needs of rural learners. Universalization of elementary education was also discussed. Some follow-up measures were taken, but we need give more time to it. All the CRY partners and three others NGOs met in

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December at a seminar on curriculum development organised by Vikramshila. Our two supervisors and some teachers attended this meeting. Another such seminar was held in February to discuss exclusively what sort of evaluation/examination techniques we should adopt in our schools.