

Learning Through Travel

Experiences from Deepika School

Sumathi Ramjee

At the Deepika School we have students who have difficulties with reading and writing, some with very short attention spans and some slow learners. The conventional modes of teaching did not yield positive results, so we started out with a small endeavour in 2007. We took our students for a school tour to Andhra Pradesh to facilitate the learning of the Social Sciences and found that it had a tremendous impact on them. It brought about a complete transformation of personality. Students learned life skills, which are essential for a balanced outlook, they expressed more interest in the world around them, they were inspired by the grandeur of the monuments and sculptures built by kings of yore and came back with renewed zeal to pursue learning through textbooks. Walking into a field of crops of that region gave them first-hand experience of the geography of the country.

Our first trip to Andhra Pradesh took us to hydel power projects over the Krishna River (Srisailem and Nagarjunasagar), where students watched the power of flowing water being converted to electricity. They experienced the wonder of nature while crawling through the stalactites and stalagmites of the Belum caves. While waiting for the train at Gooty station, the Station Master arranged for an informal talk on diesel engines where our students had all their doubts about the engines clarified. Studying about diesel engines in the railway station from an engineer who worked every day with engines was a novel way to learn.

Travelling to the rubber plantations in Kerala they watched the latex being tapped, set aside for curing, squeezed to remove water and then sent to the rubber factory for processing. They lived in an estate, ate local cuisine, watched bee-keeping and understood the making of laterite soil bricks. They learned details about grafting in nutmeg trees to produce better quality nutmeg, went to the Agricultural Sciences department and learned mushroom cultivation and vermi-composting. Lying on their stomachs on a rock precipice at the top of a waterfall in virgin forestland and watching it from above brought in the thrill of an adventure never known before.

Kappad Beach where Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer, landed, an Olive Ridley turtle hatchery and a treasure house of ancient furniture and armoury at Arakkal museum gave our students myriad hues of what our country has to offer. At the end of this trip, none of them wanted to go back home!

Subsequent trips were to the forts at Vellore and Senji (Gingee) where students saw how liberal minded and secular those rulers were by allowing all forms of worship within the fort premises. The difficult climb to the top of Senji fort made us all realise the comfort zones we live in!



Maruthuvamalai, Kanyakumari

For students with spatial orientation difficulties, map reading in geography is usually a complex task. So, in the trip to the southernmost tip of the country, Kanyakumari, students climbed Maruthuvamalai, a hill nearby to see the tip of the country and understood the topography. The

three mighty water bodies of the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea were there down below and as we pointed to each of the seas, our students learned social science for life. Vattakottai, near Nagercoil, took us back to Marthanda Verma's heroic victory against the Dutch. We marched to the echoes of *selaikaal*, *olaikaal* recreating a vision of what had happened centuries ago when the Dutch tied a piece of a sari (*selai*) to one foot of the soldiers and a palm leaf (*olai*) to the other and made them march calling out *selaikaal*, *olaikaal*.

The Karnataka school trip took our students to Chitradurga, Hampi, the Daroji Bear Sanctuary, Aihole, Pattadakal, Badami, Kudalasangama and Bijapur. The richness of the heritage that crowns India was visible in their expressions as they wondered how it was all built without the help of technology. Invariably, they came up with the comment that people of yore were far more innovative than us. The students re-enacted the adventure of Onakke Obbava at Chitradurga, marvelled at the sculptures of Badami, Pattadakal and Aihole and imbibed the secularity of the regions. Bijapur brought in the splendour of Adil Shah with the technical marvel called Gol Gumbaz.

Added to this feast of culture was the trip to a loom where we watched a typical Ilkal sari being woven, watched the sun set over the mighty Tungabhadra Dam at Hospet, sampled the local cuisine and came back with the thirst for knowledge still unquenched.



Pattachithra Raghurajpur, Odisha

A cultural meet that we were invited to, opened the doors to a trip to Orissa where our students stood on par with mainstream students from all over the country and participated in various art forms of dance, music and craft. Discovering what this land had to offer was unforgettable.

Our students were transported with happiness by the spired domes of the temples of Jagannath, Mukteshwar and Lingaraja, the meditative boat ride on the expansive Chilka Lake, the explosion of colour in the craft bazaars of Pipli, the majestic Konark Sun temple and the unrivalled talent of the *patachitra* artists of Raghurajpur.



Humayun's Tomb, Delhi

Armed with the experience of short trips that were about a week long, we ventured into organising one that was a fortnight long and involved travelling across the length and breadth of the country. We themed it as the *First War of Independence* and beginning with the Battle of Plassey, 1757 in West Bengal, we took them to Kolkata, Buxar, Kanpur, Lucknow, Delhi, Jhansi and Amritsar, spanning out through the trip what the Independence struggle was all about. Walking through the little hamlet of Brahampur, understanding the nuances of a different culture, visiting Thakur Bari, Rabindranath Tagore's house in Kolkata, eating the famous *luchi-aloo dum* and *rosogolla* brought in a uniqueness to the flavour of the school trip.

When history is taught through textbooks, it seems very abstract and unreal, but to visit the sites of famous battles like the Battle of Plassey, the First War of Independence that spanned across states from West Bengal to Delhi, they saw what destruction the war had caused in Lucknow; the innocent lives lost in Kanpur. After returning from the trips to Plassey, Kolkata, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi and Delhi, all of which were involved in the

First War of Independence, our students put up a stage show in which they created the monuments through human formations, enacted the bravery of the kings and queens who fought battles and dramatized scenes where leaders sacrificed their lives for the country's freedom. This gave them a better understanding of what the leaders went through and what they, as students, can do to make the world a better place.

Visiting a jute mill in West Bengal, they understood how fibre is converted into gunny bags and realised the difficult work environment that the workers have to battle. Travelling across the length of the country by train, they saw the different mountain ranges, the sea, the rivers and the crops that are grown in various soils and the diverse industries in each state.



Dholavira, Gujarat

Another learning experience was the visit to Gujarat where the highlight of the tour was a visit to Lothal and Dholavira which were cradles of the Indus Valley Civilisation. As we went through the ruins, we recreated what may have been there in a glorious past that vanished so mysteriously. The Fossil Park nearby was equally fascinating where every little stone had a tale to tell with little sea creatures fossilised in it. The barren beauty of the Great Rann of Kutch, the artists at Bhujodi, who created marvels with their hands, be it in carpentry, block printing, Kutch embroidery or weaving, reiterated the cultural diversity of this land. Returning from the trip, we traversed the Konkan coast soaking in the beauty of the flora and fauna that went by. Doodhsagar waterfalls made a memorable impression in our minds as we silently promised ourselves another trip to this natural wonder.

Taking us further back into the history of cave men, was Bhimbhetka, Madhya Pradesh where

the paintings gave us an insight into life aeons ago. The fascinating talent of the sculptors of Ellora, the ingenious Daulatabad Fort, Aurangzeb's attempt at recreating the Taj Mahal at Bibi ka Maqbara, Aurangabad, the Paithani weaving of that region – everywhere the learning was immense, the take-home monumental. Sitting in front of the Sanchi Stupa or in front of the sculptures at Ellora, our students put down as a visual art exercise all that they saw in front of them.

The situations that one encounters in a land that is culturally so diverse make way for learning to cope with stress and emotions. Being away from the protected comforts of home, students learn to be independent, become more responsible by learning to take care of their belongings, empathise with the other, especially those going through emotional trauma, take decisions independent of their parents, solve minor problems, learn soft skills, such as time management, leadership and teamwork, accept various cultures and adapt to situations as and when demanded.

Going to Daroji Bear Sanctuary and seeing the sloth bears there made the students come up with the idea of writing to the Government, asking them not to give permission for the construction of a steel plant coming up in the vicinity, thus, paving way for future citizenry which is environment-conscious and will proactively take up a worthy cause.

Learning in a different way brings out the relevance of what is being learnt, leading to social change. Through such school trips, students learn the history of the country and realise that by applying thought, mistakes made in the past need not be repeated. Going to a village in West Bengal and watching them use a stove that uses coal and cow dung as fuel, seeing alternative sources of energy like solar power, wind power and biogas instils in them the possibility of an alternative way of living. The bio-diversity of the Western Ghats taught them the holistic way in which nature provides, with every element of nature being essential in the 'circle of life'. Interacting with children who hardly get sufficient food to eat and clothes to wear and are deprived of schooling made them count their own blessings. Staying in a defence establishment made the students learn first-hand about disciplined and healthy living with physical fitness being prime in the agenda. Listening to different languages, getting information from various people in the train, eating food different from home food were lessons in the diversity of cultural India.

With the current curriculum and teaching of the Social Sciences, emphasis is given to learning facts, with the skills of interpretation, application or problem-solving seldom being explored. Our school trips enable the learner to establish the vital link between abstract theory and the real world. This was seen when my students noticed the term Jhansi Municipality and concluded that the local government must be a municipality and not a corporation. In every town or city they travelled to, they made observations related to the political science that they had studied theoretically, such as looking at election posters, government buildings, ministerial bungalows. Every night of the trip was spent in putting down in writing all the places visited and a brief significance for learning to be reinforced.

At the end of each trip, the students give valuable feedback. Spending a few days together breaks down communication barriers and even a non-communicative student expresses the impact that the trip made on him/her. They tell us what moved them the most, what upset them and where it could have been different.

A report based on the entire trip, including the expenses is submitted by the accompanying teacher to the school for further discussions on what changes need to be made for subsequent

budgeting and planning. The parents are called for a meeting and the students' strengths are discussed, highlighting instances of exemplary behaviour, making for more acceptance and appreciation from the parent. If an issue of concern has been noticed, it is highlighted so that both the school and the parent can work on it to bring about a positive change. Class teachers are asked for noticeable changes in the students' outlook and invariably it is found that there is an enhancement of confidence level, better critical skills of interpretation, analysis, understanding and reasoning, each of which is vital in developing a nuanced understanding of the society in which we live. Journeying through the length and breadth of the country to learn, imbibe and adapt by experiencing the diversity not only of Indian culture but the physical terrain too, has led to a school trip being organised every year with meticulous thought and planning leading to the holistic development of students with learning disabilities, who have benefitted from our different approach.

Looking at the strides made in learning for each student involved in the project, it is obvious that the same methodology of facilitating learning would help to mainstream students and make them better global citizens as there is so much to learn from history and geography.



Sumathi Ramjee is an Arts-based Therapy Practitioner and uses this methodology to overcome deficits in learning of children with mixed disabilities in Deepika school. She has been teaching them a variety of subjects like Social Science, Indian Culture and Heritage, Oral Language Development and Functional Maths. She is passionate about travelling to different places and understanding myriad cultures and believes that travelling is a very effective modality for enhancing learning. She may be reached at sumathiramjee@gmail.com