

Khilendra Kumar

These were the early days of the Azim Premji School. One day, during one of my music classes, an incident took place that touched me profoundly. This was in class I. I learned much from this class - how well-acquainted children are with the incidents that take place in their environment and how they are involved with their surroundings as well. Children observe their surroundings, they see and hear what is happening around them, reason with it and build their understanding. One such anecdote, that I believe is worth sharing, I am presenting here. The discussion with the children happened in their regional language. However, for the sake of simplicity, I am writing this in Hindi. (*The article has been translated into English*).

In the second period, when I went to my music class, I began the class with the poem '*bade swere uth murge ne*'. Children were singing the poem one at a time. The singing was proceeding nicely when a child mimicked the crow of a rooster. Everybody started laughing at the mimicry.

This is when a child exclaimed, 'Teacher, look. He has lost a tooth!'

A second child said, 'He doesn't brush his teeth.'

A third child said, 'His tooth has rotted.'

Another child claimed, 'He eats *pouch*.'

Upon hearing the word 'pouch', the child who was being called out got very angry, saying, 'Teacher, they are accusing me just like that. I don't eat such things!'

I asked them, 'What is this 'pouch'?''

Children responded, 'Oho! You don't even know what a pouch is?'

'No,' I said.

Children explained, 'It's something you eat.'

'So, if it's something to eat, what is the problem if he eats it?'

Children replied, 'Teacher, you don't know. He is hooked on it.'

'So what if he is hooked on it?'

To this statement, children gave several examples of things people do when they are intoxicated, such as, 'they wobble here and there', 'they bump into

light poles', 'they start fights at home', 'they fall down on roads', and 'they use bad words'.

I asked them, 'Oh! So, is that a good thing?'

Children replied in unison, 'No.'

I agreed, saying, 'Yes. Even I don't think this is a good thing. Where do you get this 'pouch'?''

They replied, 'At the shop.'

'If this is a bad thing, why do they sell it?'

The children answered, 'Teacher, to earn money, what else?'

'So, is selling this 'pouch' the only way to earn money?'

Again, they replied in unison, 'No.'

'Then?'

Children replied, 'We can earn by selling potatoes, by selling onions, by selling chocolates, by selling biscuits, by selling our crops, by selling comics, by selling chips.'

'Then, this selling of 'pouch' should be stopped.'

Children replied, 'Yes. That's true.'

I asked them, 'So, how will that happen?'

They replied, 'We will go to the shop tomorrow and tell them not to sell 'pouch'.'

The discussion was underway. But it was time for the next class, so I left.

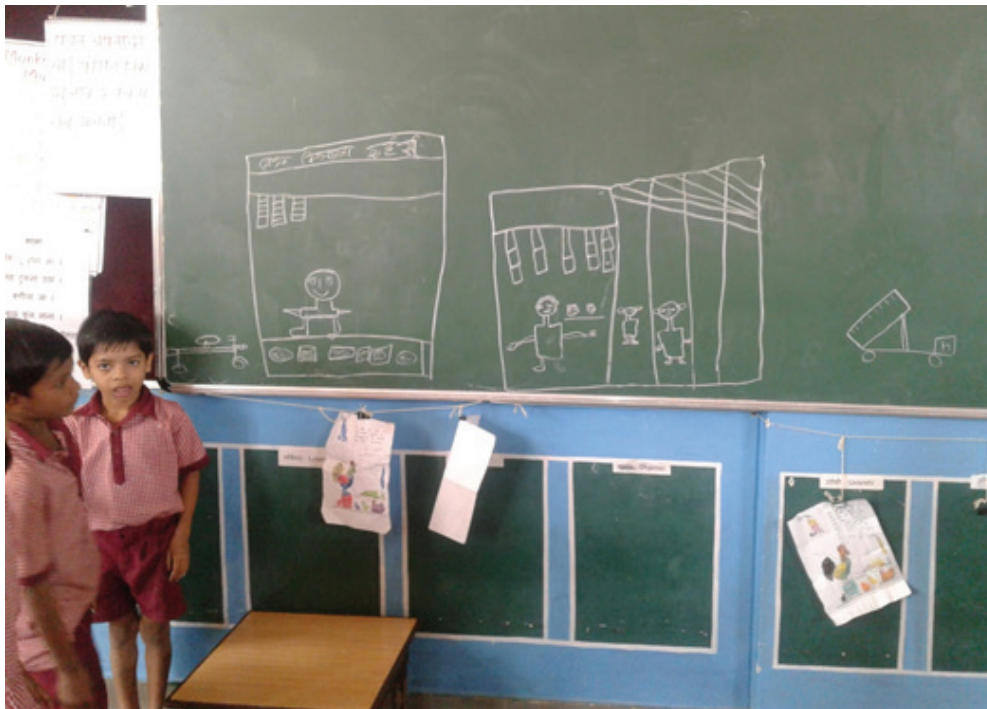
At the beginning of the discussion, I was acting as though I was unaware of *gutka*. Consequently, after a while, the children came up to me to show a drawing they had made on the board, saying, 'Teacher, look. this is how they always hang up that 'pouch' in the shop.'

The next time I went to their class, they shared their experiences with me. Their experiences were varied. Children shared, 'We went to the shops in our colony/street. The shopkeeper and people sitting there chased us away. They also laughed at us.' Other children shared, 'The cart-seller told us that he won't stop selling.' A girl said, 'My papa said he will stop. But he is still selling it.'

I have worked in several organisations before. However, such an interesting experience was a first for me. The realisation that young children have

such awareness was new to me. In schools, there is often a stipulated time period set for different teachers and during that period, they are expected to teach a certain subject and the class revolves around that. However, I thought that in order to understand children and the incidents that take place in their surroundings, a dialogue would be a useful way. And there is a space required for the same. For this reason, I put aside the activity I had planned for my music class in favour of taking the discussion forward with the children.

From the dialogue, I realised how in their immediate surroundings, indeed in society at large, children's expressions are either quelled or ignored by adults. Their thoughts are not given due attention or are discarded as juvenile. Although these children did not have the physical or mental ability to convince adults or to debate with them, the fact that they were able to differentiate between right and wrong, and present their opposition amongst adults is a monumental achievement. If their conviction persists, they will surely play an invaluable role in building a better society.



Children's drawing of 'pouch' sold in shops



Khilendra Kumar Sahu has MA and *Visharad* degree in classical vocal music. For the last seven years, he has been associated with music in the field of education. Presentation of local folk songs in cultural programs on national channels like Akashvani and Doordarshan has been his special achievement. He is involved in the process of teaching linguistic skills through music to young children, by way of singing songs, playing instruments and interacting. Since 2017, he has been working as a Music Teacher in the Azim Premji School, Shankardah, Dhamtari (Chhattisgarh). He may be contacted at khilendra.sahu@azimpremjifoundation.org