

“Mari Shala”

S.Gayathri

The importance of being Bindooben.

“Mari Shala” in Gujarati or ‘My School’ in English. The real essence or philosophy behind the school is also the same. How commitment or passion of a single person can show light to so many is epitomized by Bindooben, a teacher at a school in Gujarat. Unassuming yet having a quiet aura about herself. She is brimming with enthusiasm and pragmatically states that it is not about completing seventh standard but seven years of education that clearly sets the difference.



What differentiates this school from any other government school was the passion and sense of belongingness that every individual associated with the school exhibited. The school was characterised by

freedom, a basic trust that each one of them is capable to be part of a system and will be able to work for its betterment. There was no protocol or bounded discipline which characterises a majority of the schools. Here the attention was not merely on acquisition of cognitive abilities but to make them a better human being.

A peek into the school

A regular day in the school starts at 11am and goes on till 5 pm, but interestingly it is often seen that the school starts early and ends late. Most of the students from the village are present in the school even before the teachers are there. They come early and start off with their daily chores. There are some children who are sweeping the school, some watering the plants, others filling water in the tank and so on and so forth. In order to facilitate the smooth functioning of the school, the management has assigned each child a ministry. Some of the different ministries assigned to children are “paani mantri” - minister for water, “utsav mantri” - minister for different celebrations, “Khel mantri” - minister for sports etc. There are different chores which are enlisted like cleaning of rooms, filling up water, maintaining the gardens, toilets, playground etc. Every child is involved in different processes, on a rotation basis. The formation of different ministries and the election of different ministers are done in the most democratic fashion with the consensus of all the children of the school.

Take for instance the time when the need was felt for a water tank to be dug, within the school premises. Bindooben elaborates that the school children were made part of the entire process by involving them in all the processes- from digging of the water tank, money matters, deciding the location of the tank, the man power and man hours that would be required to complete the project to how it was to be done. The teacher explained that the entire project was devised, executed and monitored by the children.

Using work as a basic tool to impart education, is an important principle which the school practices. It seemingly similar to the Gandhian principle of basic education where craft centered education was given importance. Clearly, the pedagogical principles were not designed to complete the course but the emphasis was on competency acquisition by the child.

Here the child is kept at the centre of the teaching learning process. The dignity of the child was respected and the innate belief that learning of a child can only take place in an environment where there is no fear for the consequence, was given paramount importance. The emphasis was on creating a learning environment for the child which was an extension of the natural environment of the child.

Contextualising education formed the core of the entire exercise. What does this mean? The TLMs were created from the locally available materials. In the teaching learning process, there has been an effort made to establish linkages between what the child knows from his immediate environment to the new learning which the child was about to acquire.



Bindooben- the teacher

This brings me back to the comment I had made earlier. What makes a person feel the need to make difference in others lives? There are various stages of transition when you see people who make difference merely by their presence.....rather than questioning the obvious they try to create the path for themselves and take people along with them. Bindooben was a teacher of a rare kind. Rather than

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compromising with the system she has tried to pave a new way by taking charge of the situation.

What made her different from the 'others' was that she knew what she wanted from life -the purpose of her living and was ready to strive for it. She had the courage to dream and to strive for the dream. The house she stays and the life she leads may sound utopian to many. She has been brought up in an environment which is unadulterated by the hypocrisy of life and believes in the basic innateness of life. Her life is a story of human goodness, the basic trust that life is most fulfilling when you share it with somebody. She and her husband share a dream of making a difference in the lives of the children, to give them a purpose to live, to enable them and to empower them. This in turn they believe will bring in a ripple effect and can bring change in the community.



By practicing the lines of modelling theory of Bandura, she was setting an ideal example for the children. Rather than her extolling the virtues of life, she was trying to set an example for the children by leading a life which was worth emulating. Her simplicity, accessibility to children, playfulness, and most importantly, a basic trust in the innocence of the child could not be missed. She respected the individuality in each child and at no stage was trying to create clones among them or preach the do's and dont's. It is

through the process of educating them that she was preparing them for life.

The vision of treating every one as equal has created a strong foundation for *Maari Prathamaic Shala*-the foundation of equity, equality and democracy. There is a greater identification for the need of education as a preparation of life rather than a tool towards literacy.

She felt in the process of education there is a greater need to establish an identity among the learner about who they are and the need to establish the linkage of where they are learning to its utility in their life. It is this establishment of linkages in education that will create a personal identity and a greater sense of belonging with the task in the hand.



A lot of what Bindooben spoke with me shall remain with me for long. She once quipped that educating the children was not to churn out engineers, doctors, professionals or scientists, if they become one in the process, there could be nothing better than that, but what was far more important was that they become *empowered individuals* who can lead a life of dignity.

S. Gayathri is Member, Research and Documentation team, Azim Premji Foundation .

