

**03**

## Towards Responsible Citizenship:

Civics Education in Anand Niketan, Sewagram

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“Tai\*, We have an urgent request”, children of Class V gathered around me and wanted to talk to me as soon as I entered the class. The restlessness was quite obvious from all the faces. “Yes, tell me, what’s the matter?” I asked. “We are quite unhappy with Sangharsh’s behavior with the P.T. teacher in the morning today. He has been rude and unfair with tai and we feel that he should immediately say sorry to her?”, all of them expressed their anguish. I tried to understand what all had happened in the morning and realized that Sangharsh, a student of Class VII, along with two other friends of his class, was non-attentive and non-cooperative during the weekly physical drill on Saturday morning. I was told that Dimple, the physical education teacher, asked him to be with the group or else to get out of the group if he did not want to participate. Children continued to be in the group and also were having fun together (may be they had something interesting to share more than the drill) when the teacher did not see them. Disturbed by this ongoing behavior for quite some time, the teacher gave Sangharsh a slap. Obviously this, not being a common feature in the school, feeling insulted, Sangharsh answered back saying that she could not slap him like this. The anguish stemming from the humiliation was very obvious, probably much more stark than the irritated teacher’s slap because of Sangharsh’s deprived background; his father’s addiction had led the family into violence. Having been exposed to the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar, Gandhi and also to children’s rights, he was a fearless, intelligent and sensitive child with strong emotional outbursts occasionally. According to the children’s desire, a meeting of classes V, VI and VII with all the teachers was called and the matter was taken up for discussion. It wasn’t that the other children

sided either him or the teacher, but they certainly had sympathy for the teacher, as they felt that managing a large number of students would be a tough job if students did not realize the importance of the activity and did not co-operate. According to them Sangharsh’s act was disproportionate to that of Tai. The discussion continued for more than three hours in which multiple questions were discussed like -

1. Was the teacher’s act right? Did she not realize that slapping the child is not a good way of making the child understand the importance of work? What made her slap the student? What else could have been the action? What was her take on the issue?
2. Was Sangharsh’s behavior correct? What made him behave like this? What made him so much disinterested in the activity? What would have been the better way of behavior on Sangharsh’s part? What was his take on the issue?
3. Should we have physical drill at all? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this activity? Should we keep this school activity or for that matter any other activity a compulsory one? Which activities should be compulsory and which could be optional and why?
4. What if one doesn’t feel like participating even if one believes that the activity is important? When such situations occur? When such a condition arises, what does a teacher and student do?
5. What are the acceptable ways of communicating our situation to others fearlessly?
6. What is freedom? How do we differentiate it from whim? Do we have the freedom to act in a way that hinders the well-being of others?

\*‘Tai’ is the term used for the teacher, meaning sister in Marathi

7. Why do we react negatively sometimes? Does it help? What can be the better ways of actions then? How does a small thoughtful pause help us to act with reasoning?
8. Is discipline important for an individual? If so what could be the right way of disciplining-externally driven or internally driven? Is this process different for children and teachers or adults?
9. What is the role of others who are present at the time when any such inappropriate incident occurs?
10. What could we do as a school hereafter?

The whole discussion led to an understanding at everybody's level to work further with mutual understanding of a certain kind. Sangharsh was sorry for his impulsive and distractive behavior. He shared that many times if things go against him or his ideas, he gets furious and reacts and is unable to control his anger. Tai felt sorry for her lack of patience and thought that she could have handled the situation differently. Other children were satisfied with the discussion and the teacher's group came out of their restlessness over Sangharsh's behavior. It was also decided that if a child is unwilling to participate (beside the normal reasons for which children are already being allowed / suggested to rest) in any particular activity after giving a full thought to it, he or she should be allowed to do so till felt necessary. However, he or she must choose any other activity of interest and should not disturb or distract others. Over a period of time, the child may give a second thought to the decision taken earlier. All the same everybody was consistent on not giving an excuse to anybody (except on health grounds or any other jointly acceptable reason) for the cleaning work as it was considered vital for individual development.

This whole incidence narrated here is the part of all the efforts that we have been putting to make the school work democratically. School is a small society where everybody has to follow certain rules.

Mostly rules are made by the school and children are made to follow them. If there is violation of a rule, children are punished, mostly without listening to a cause which can be worth. No dialogue is held over the reasons for specific rules. Civics is an important subject through which we intend to equip children over a period of time to be a responsible citizen of a democratic society. Thus, it becomes important for all those in education to think of the ways of creating opportunities for our children to get ready for such roles. Our children need to understand the meaning of the concepts like "social republic". They should be able to both understand and analyze in their social context and feel the need of the constitutional values like –

1. Justice-social, economic and political
2. Freedom-of thought, expression, trust and religion
3. Equality of status and opportunity

Children also need to understand the meaning of the words like 'Unity' and 'Integrity'. It is important for them to realize the difference between the Nation and the country; and thus to understand the sociopolitical processes those nurture togetherness among people and those just emphasize boundaries at the cost of hatred. Our children need to critically understand the traditions of rich cultural diversity at the same time cultural discrimination therein so as to nurture in themselves the right attitudes to take decisions in their daily lives. The important challenge is also to give them an opportunity to understand the new socio-cultural and economic discriminatory processes that are affecting our social surrounding, our beliefs and practices.

Children have a lot more ability to analyze things than the adults / teachers think. Underestimation of their capacities is largely due to the non-readiness of adults and teachers. It is important to realize that children construct their own concepts and thus we need to change from banking approach of teaching to

an approach that gives them an opportunity to do and explore, observe, think and analyze the world around them critically. The natural and social environment and happening therein provide immense learning opportunities for the child. The requirement is that we, the teachers, come out of excessive dependency on information based standardized textbooks (which mostly have been taking care of the interests of a specific class and culture). Children in the open air of the school, themselves take cognizance of multiple things which can be used as the entry points for further investigation and mentoring thereby making learning process more participatory. News items – from local to national and global, gathering of relevant data, listening/referring to multiple views on different matters, discussions, etc all these help children to develop their own ideas and opinions. To make this happen, the teacher needs to be an eager learner himself/herself. The culture of dialogue and enquiry needs to be nurtured. This is possible only when the teacher has a deep respect and love for the child. With this readiness, it is possible to be comfortable with children in a democratic mode.

To quote an incidence of the kind, I remember, students of class IV coming to me with the desire to organise a school rally against corruption a year back. This was in response to Anna Hazare’s nationwide agitation. This initiative from children’s side was used as an opportunity for understanding the criticalities of corruption. The proposal was put up in the school meeting to which children from class IV to VII responded very positively. We did come up with a small rally but only after a rigorous exercise. At the end of the discussion, the initial list of readymade slogans like, “Anna aap aage badho, ham aapke sath hai” were replaced by self-made, self-driven slogans like- “MeheNat se khayenge, bhrashtachar se ladenge”. Understanding the structure and working of the republic was also understood as a part of this process. Selection of songs to be sung on the streets, preparing banners, taking permission from the police



Rally against corruption

station, all such activities were of immense interest to them. The incident made them realize that citizens should be vigilant about the working of the government at the same time has to be self-disciplined. It needs to be ensured that mere collection of information and understanding is not sufficient. Children should be encouraged to take up action as per their ability or else the whole effort just becomes a wishful thinking waiting for someone else to begin.

Manual labour has been looked down upon in India. Excessive importance to intellect with an aspiration for white collared jobs has been the Indian feature for centuries. This has led to a social imbalance leading to a stark difference in the haves and have not’s. This has also led us to underestimating the creative energies and contributions of a large section of the society which have been the producers, craftsman and service providers. This lack of acknowledgement of traditional wisdom has also been of great disadvantage to us as this has led to bookish, inactive, non-creative and sterile education greatly deskilling the Indian population. This has also led to the unconcerned and arrogant attitude on the part of the people in white collared jobs. To combat this, Anand Niketan has a balance of 3 Hs- Hand, Head and Heart as was suggested by Gandhiji for the holistic development of an individual. Gardening, Cooking, Vastrakala (Art of fabric making- spinning, embroidery, stitching, block printing etc.), art and music, clay work, cleaning, repair and maintenance of simple machines etc. , all such experiential learning opportunities (along with

the normal subjects taught in mainstream schools) have not only been helping children develop practical skills and intelligence, but have also been helping in providing opportunities to understand the world

and its complexities better. These pedagogic features have certainly helped the teachers and the students in realizing the meaning of SWARAJ to some extent.



Studying soil erosion



Engrossed in taking care of their vegetable beds



Learning by doing



SUSHAMA is the Principal of Anand Niketan, Sewagram, Maharashtra. The school is inspired by the Gandhian Philosophy. Anand Niketan is a school for children from 3 to 13 years, started in 2005 in the premises of Gandhi Ashram as a neighbourhood school and today has a strength 170 children. With an academic background of M.Sc. Anthropology and M.A. Elementary Education, Sushama has been working in the field of education for last 25 years. She can be contacted at [sushama.anwda@gmail.com](mailto:sushama.anwda@gmail.com)