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Children and their parents come running into Schools

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In many villages, poor families have 5-15 country chicken. Children know that when ‘kutumba’ (family) come visiting, you have to prepare a chicken dish. And when you suddenly need some money, a few chicken can be sold off. But twice or thrice a year there are these epidemics and many chicken die. Yes, they know that there are some veterinarians, both government and private. But who will come to treat 15 chickens? And then they charge too much too. So Class VI, VII and VIII kids were asked – Why don’t you immunize the chicken yourself? They were incredulous – “We are only small children!”, they exclaimed. “How can we do this?” And then one child said – “Why not?” That was the beginning! In 8 villages, about 200 adolescents learnt how to immunize chickens. They went around informing households — “Please do not release your chickens in the morning; we are coming to inject them”. And the surprised villagers saw a group of 5-6 children land up at their doorstep early morning, catch the chicken and confidently inject them. In the first year this was done free of cost; from second year they started charging for the cost of medicine. Chicken death went down; from the third year the villagers willingly paid the cost of medicine plus a fee for the



service. This gave some of the economically poor school-goers some income!

Some of the following questions that arose from this exercise were: What are the breeds of these chicken? How are they different from the broilers? What are the diseases they contract? How do they spread? How does immunization work? Who discovered this? What about goat and cow diseases which affect us very badly? Can we diagnose and treat them? Are these things in our school books? Alas --- School books talk about Australian cows! Can the government veterinarian take classes? The children approached the Block Veterinary Officer. He was amused as well as excited, and came and taught them on how to diagnose goat and cow diseases. And then the children wanted to organize a goat – cow vaccination camp. The Vet was excited as he had his quota to fill. And then the children sat together and designed a household survey format: How many cows and goats ? Age ? Breed ? Do you have land ? Source and difficulty in getting fodder ? Diseases ? etc. Then they went around collecting the data and had a lot of fun in the process too. Later, they sat with the data, made tables, bar diagrams, pie charts, and Mathematics became fun and useful! They knew how many houses had one cow, how many 2-5 , how many 5-10 and how many had cows but no land, milk production, price at which cattle were sold, etc. A group of children had so many questions to ask! Next, they publicized and organized the cow-goat veterinary camp. The school, villagers, panchayat members and block officers all mingled together in preparing and organizing this camp. It was a huge learning and fun mela!

So what is school education? We all know that even after wonderful policy documents and beautifully written down aims of education, as well as numerous kinds of efforts, for most adults, parents, teachers and children, school education is about sitting in one place in a room for 4-5 hours, day after day, trying to read and understand the text book, hopefully assisted by a teacher, going home and memorising it, and ‘vomiting’ it in some exam.

Sandip Bandopadhyay writes in ‘Sriniketan’: “Sikshasatra was founded on July 1, 1924 near Shantiniketan . Each boy was given a small plot of land and encouraged to treat it as a playground and experimental farm. He was also at liberty to choose a craft according to his interest and aptitude. Only one hour daily was devoted to the learning of the three Rs. Each craft was treated as a project and a source of non-formal learning. The 1928 report categorically stated that craft should be of ‘definite economic value’ and the products should be of ‘real use at home and should command ready sale outside’. Sikshasatra thus anticipated Gandhi’s ‘Basic Education scheme’ in more than one respect.”

Ananda Niketan, started in 1937 at Sevagram by Mirabeen and others, and then guided for many years by the Aryanayakams (who had worked in Sikshasatra for some time before moving from Shantiniketan to Wardha), and beautifully described by Marjorie Sykes in her book, ‘The Story of Nai Talim’, had closed down in 1960s like most of the other Basic or Buniyadi or Nai Talim schools all over India. But a plucky Sushama Sharma backed by Talimi Sangh, restarted it in 2005. And as Ankit, student of M.A.Education Program 2011-13, Azim Premji University, currently working with the school there, describes: “Each child has an agriculture plot and as they plant and nurture and water their crops, they are learning counting, measurements, mensuration, shapes, angles, data gathering, organizing data, fractions, decimals, ratio-proportion and all the other concepts in NCERT Mathematics books for classes

V, VI and VII. And they are having so much fun that those who had to go away after Class VII wish that they could have continued in this school”. Unfortunately , Ananda Niketan does not have government approval as Maharashtra is not “recognizing” any new Marathi medium schools and it is only till Class VII! So, while Gandhi and Tagore’s dream has a precarious existence, in the meantime, some children are having fun combining “work and education”.

But wait – are only children going to have fun? What about their parents? Swanirvar, an NGO working in North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal and running 4 experimental schools, decided to do some exercises with parents in May-June 2002. Parents (mostly mothers) from the same village were seated together and encouraged to draw a map of their village. In some cases Swanirvar teachers set the ball rolling by asking everybody to first draw the road from their house to the school. In all cases the parents soon got quite involved and started putting in all the roads, big trees, the more widely used tube-wells, key shops, schools, places of worship, and even individual houses, particularly their own! The second exercise was to make timelines. To illustrate what this was, Swanirvar teachers first helped one individual participant to describe his/her life through a timeline, and then parents were divided into groups to prepare a lot of timelines. The day after the exercises, the teachers were accosted by many mothers



who had not or could not come to this workshop and demanded to know why they had been left out of the fun! Over the years, Swanimvar has got proficient at being able to involve both literate and illiterate parents (fathers also joining) in these workshops. Therefore, parents now appreciate what Swanimvar does with the children, even if these things are not part of the text books! So, there are the parents who make and multiply teaching aids for us (and make a few extra to take home too!); then there are the veterans who guide the “new” mothers. Parents look forward to the workshop days which it is now organized separately for parents of children in classes I-II and parents of children in classes III-IV.

Many interesting things have been tried and are being attempted by “alternative” schools everywhere. Things like toilet survey, water surveys, tree surveys and their analysis and then certain follow up actions are enjoyable, usefully productive, lead to all-round development of the child, increased

sensitivity, democratic habits, etc. Will millions of village children get an opportunity to learn this way and thereby transform rural India? NCF-2005 is sympathetic to the idea. Some state governments might be willing to give it a shot. Many will have to collaborate to take this forward. Different text books like “Apne Aas Paas” of Digantar and “Our Land Our Life” of Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi will have to be written. And each region will have to come with area-specific and appropriate things to do and ways of doing this. As an illustration, let me quote Sonam Wangchuk of SECMOL, Ladakh: “Sometimes the only way the school can contribute to education is by remaining shut. For instance the schools stay open in the summer season, when there is so much that the children can learn from the farms. The way to ensure that children learn about agriculture is not by starting agriculture classes for them, but just to remain closed for a month in the summer, when the children can automatically learn from the fields.”



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