

Rural Context of Primary Education Searching for the Roots

Shakuntala Bapat & Suman Karandikar

The present system of education in India, from the preschool stage to higher education, has been imported from the West in bits and pieces over the last 200 years. The overall cultural contexts of Indian society and the cultural specialities of its varied segments have been ignored by this system, with the result that it has never been fully accepted by the people. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the ecological inheritance, ethos and cultural commitment of Western societies have been quite different from those of oriental societies. The climate, natural environment, types of settlements, their historical evolution and the resultant goals and occupations, and the life-views of these societies have always been poles apart. This is the main cause of the continuing discord between education and society in India.

That educational systems are subsystems inherent in any given social system and cannot be imposed from outside without damage to the social fabric was realised by Mahatma Gandhi long ago. In his speech delivered on 20 October, 1931 at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, he lamented that the British administrators of education had failed to notice the special characteristics of Indian culture which had a tradition thousands of years old of education and instead of taking hold of things as they were, they had begun to root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the beautiful tree perished. The unrest which filled Gandhiji's heart at the sight of the mindless destruction of the vast network of literacy and knowledge-gathering enterprise embedded in Indian culture was directed not so much against individual officials but against the colonising mindset which always attempts to impose its own culture on a vanquished society. But this view of the colonial educational system was neither understood nor shared by many an educated Indian of those days. Gradually, however, this understanding did dawn on Indian educationists, but by then the damage had already been done.

The imported system had created two new classes in Indian society: the elite and the masses. The hybridised elite and the conquered masses became two cultural groups in a continuous state of conflict in the socio-economic and political fields. Efforts to cope with this conflict have seriously told upon the people's intellectual health, creative urges, self-respect and self-confidence. This damage to the Indian spirit has to be understood if a new educational era is to begin for the Indian people and give them the strength to meet material and spiritual challenges. The remedy was prescribed by Gandhiji: searching for cultural roots which have a refreshing diversity along with a common bond forged over thousands of years, and appreciating the beneficial aspects of other cultures with an open mind.

Indigenous Education

The indigenous system was studied by some British officials and scholars in the early nineteenth century. Even though their enquiry was restricted to British occupied territory, their reports serve to give quite a clear picture of the state of indigenous education even after the British had imposed their rule on most parts of the Indian subcontinent. There was an enquiry into indigenous education in Madras in 1822. An enquiry was conducted in Bombay Presidency in 1823 through the collectors of districts. In Bengal, Lord William Bentinck ordered an enquiry which was carried out by William Adam, a missionary who took a keen interest in Indian education. The Madras and Bombay enquiries were rather rough jobs. Adam, who studied only five districts out of nineteen in Bengal and Bihar, had an inadequate sample; but his work was thorough and his reports surprisingly unbiased.

The Madras enquiry found that there was one native school per 1000 population but there were hardly any female pupils enrolled. The pupils were generally between the ages of five and ten but many boys continued up to twelve or fourteen. There was a large practice of domestic instruction, and the number taught at home was five times greater than that taught in schools. Children were taught at home by relatives or private teachers. The report of this enquiry said, "the state of education here exhibited, low as

it is compared with that of our own country, is higher than it was in most European countries at no very distant period. It has no doubt been better in earlier times" (*Selections from the Records of the Government of Madras*, No.II, Appendix E). The remark that the system had been better in earlier times shows the soundness of Gandhiji's judgement that more literacy and popular education prevailed in India before the British conquest.

The report of the Bellary Collector, who participated in the Madras enquiry, is detailed and gives a graphic picture of the indigenous elementary schools of those days. He states that children, mainly boys, were inducted into schooling at age five. The parents of the prospective pupils invited home the master and the boys already studying in his school. They sat in a circle around the image of Ganesha, the god of learning. The child to be initiated was placed exactly opposite the Ganesha image. The master sat by his side. After offering *puja* to Ganesha, the master caused the child to repeat a prayer to the deity, asking for wisdom. He then guided the child to write with his finger, in rice, the mystic name of the deity (*shree ganeshaya namaha*). The parents then gave a present to the master. The child began to attend school the next day. The initiation ceremony and the gift from the parents prepared the child's mind for scholastic work. Whereas legal compulsion for schooling existed in the West, in India it was popular tradition that prepared the parents and the child to accept schooling in India.

Most children continued at school for five years, although the parents withdrew some earlier due to poverty or other circumstances. But some continued up to 14 or 15 years. School started at 6 o'clock in the morning. While the first pupil to arrive was honoured, late-comers were punished. Idleness was not allowed. The pupils were divided into classes. The youngest ones were placed in the care of a monitor while the master himself guided the older or slower pupils.

Instruction began with the child writing the letters of the alphabet in sand. When his fingers were well-trained, he began writing on a wooden slate smeared with rice-paste and pulverized charcoal. Another variety of slate was made from cloth stiffened with rice-water and covered with charcoal and several gums. A pencil made of white clay was used to write on these slates. The writing could be wiped off with a wet cloth. These were inexpensive materials made locally by the pupil's parents or neighbours or older playmates.

After learning the letters, the pupil proceeded to learn conjunct consonants, vowel signs, the names of birds, trees, etc., and then began arithmetic which, starting from the counting of numbers, went up to fractions, measures of capacity, area, weight, and so on. The test of reading and writing consisted of deciphering various kinds of handwriting in a public performance. Letters and documents which the master collected were read out before elders. Writing letters and drawing up documents, committing poetry to memory with attention to clear pronunciation, and readiness to correctly read any kind of composition, were required achievements. Appreciating this teaching-learning system, the collector's report says,

The economy with which the children are taught to write in the native schools, and the system by which the most advanced scholars are caused to teach the less advanced, and at the same time to confirm their own knowledge, is certainly admirable, and well deserves the imitation it has received in England.

In regard to the situation of indigenous education in the Bombay Presidency, the statement made by G.L. Prendergast, a member of the Bombay Governor's Council, in his minute to the Council, is extremely important for understanding the state of indigenous education in that vast region. Published in the Bombay government educational records, the minute points out,

I need hardly mention what every member of the Board knows as well as I do, that there is hardly a village, great or small, throughout our territories, in which there is not at least one school, and in larger villages more, many in every town and in larger cities in every division; where young natives are taught reading, writing and arithmetic, upon a system so economical, from a handful or two of grain, to perhaps a rupee per month to the schoolmaster; according to the ability of the parents, and at the same time so

simple and effectual that there is hardly a cultivator or petty dealer who is not competent to keep his own accounts with a degree of accuracy, in my opinion, beyond what we meet with amongst the lower orders in our own country; while the more splendid dealer, and bankers keep their books with a degree of ease, conciseness and clearness, I rather think fully equal to those of any British Merchant.

Also, the Fifth and Sixth Annual Reports of the Bombay Education Society (1819 and 1820, pp. 11 & 21, respectively) point out

There are probably as great a proportion of persons in India who can read, write and keep simple accounts as are to be found in European countries Schools are frequent among the natives and abound everywhere.

As to the situation in Bengal, Adam's first report stated:

Indigenous Elementary Schools: By this description are meant those schools in which instruction in the elements of knowledge is communicated, and which have been originated and are supported by the Natives themselves, in contradistinction from those that are supported by religious or philanthropic societies. The number of such schools in Bengal is supposed to be very great. A distinguished member of the General Committee of Public Instruction in a minute on the subject expressed the opinion, that if one rupee per mensem were expended on each existing village school in the Lower Provinces, the amount would probably fall little short of 12 lakhs of rupees per annum. This supposes that there are 100,000 such schools in Bengal and Bihar, and assuming the population of those two provinces to be 40,000,000, there would be a village school for every 400 persons.

That India had widespread arrangements for schooling — not in the Western sense, but in the form of family-based instruction or learning centres conducted by a local instructor supported by villagers — is proved by evidence available from British records. As pointed out by M.R. Paranjpe,

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there existed a fairly widespread organization for primary education in most parts of India. In Madras Presidency, Sir Thomas Munro found 'a primary school in every village' (Mill, *History of British India*, Vol. I, p.562, 4th edition). In Bengal, Ward discovered that 'almost all villages possessed schools for teaching, reading, writing and elementary arithmetic' (Ward, *View of the Hindoos*, Vol. I, p. 160). In Malva, which was for more than half a century suffering from continuous anarchy, Malcolm noticed that 'every village with about a hundred houses had an elementary school at the time of its coming under the British suzerainty' (Malcolm, *Memoirs of Central India and Malva*, Vol. II. p. 150).

Adam found that there were Bengali, Persian and Arabic schools in the Thana of Nattore. The overall pay of elementary school teachers was Rs. 5 to Rs. 8 per month. However, education of girls was neglected, and among 30,915 scholars Adam found only 214 girls in 6 special girls' schools in Murshidabad, Birbhum and Burdwan districts.

These indigenous learning centres thrived well because they met locally perceived educational needs. Their timings, style of functioning, achievement system, the accountability of the teachers to the community, vacations and celebrations, and general flexibility, all were rooted in community culture. These important indigenous factors were ignored by the imported system. The government dominated formal system at first diminished and later completely wiped out the role of the community in elementary education. Consequently, the progress of elementary education in India suffered a serious setback, the problem of illiteracy arose, and an educational rift between urban and rural areas was created. The action research projects of the Indian Institute of Education, which have sought to spread primary education to out-of-school rural children, therefore, take into account the importance of linkages between community culture and education as their main foundation.

Culture-conscious Primary Education

Glimpses of indigenous education as seen above, and many recent research studies carried out by Indian and foreign scholars, have clearly shown that universalisation of primary education in India's rural and tribal areas, which contain nearly 75 per cent of India's population, has been hampered by poverty but to a larger extent by the inappropriate organisation of the education system, which has persisted in ignoring the cultural contexts of the children's lives and depended mostly on bureaucratic measures. The present system which is too centralized, elite-dominated and urban-oriented, will have to undergo several modifications and relate itself to the needs and convenience of various communities and young learners if India is to have a strong educational base. Its curriculum and pedagogy will have to take into account the life-view and day-to-day living style of the communities to which the children belong and adapt the learning process and its organisation to the people's needs and aspirations. The neglect of this factor of 'belongingness' of the children to the community, and its impact on learning, makes the present-day system of schooling uninteresting and even unacceptable to many.

Based on these assumptions, the Indian Institute of Education evolved an action-research project titled 'Promoting Primary and Elementary Education' for which the acronym PROPEL has been adopted. This project, conducted in 137 villages, has been eminently successful because of its cultural consciousness and community orientation. The PROPEL style of non-formal primary education has been appreciated and selected by Unesco as a 'mobilizing' 'showcase' project which demonstrates a reapplicable alternative for bringing primary education within the reach of all children, with due regard to the community life-style and people's expectations.

The culture-specific facets of the PROPEL project are: (a) *curriculum*, which emphasises (i) free scope to recite folk tales, sing traditional songs, and hold conversations about daily experiences, (ii) language and mathematics, beginning with local language and ways of calculation, leading to progressive assimilation of expected levels of learning of 'standard' language and mathematics, (iii) understanding of nature through exploration, analytical discussion, and reasoned argument, (iv) developing aesthetic sensitivity through observation, appreciation and use of colour, shape, sound, rhythm, with a view to fashioning of plastic and graphic art works in an untutored manner related to the learner's natural surroundings, (v) health and hygiene in daily life, (vi) physical and mental relaxation through simple *yogasanas*, and (vii) explorations, *with the help of the family and community elders*, in local history and geography for discovering their relevance to local conditions and to the needs of local development; (b) *class-climate* for collaborative learning through verbal and non-verbal communication by means of (i) a circular, face-to-face seating arrangement in which the instructor too is included, (ii) shared learning materials which reflect the cultural ethos of non-acquisitiveness and un-selfishness, (iii) songs and skits based on the community's environmental and cultural contexts, (iv) learning to make speeches on local subjects, and (v) group work for participatory 'peer-group' learning along with regeneration of the individualised but non-competitive, stress-free pedagogy of pre-British indigenous character.

The teachers in PROPEL are selected by the community from among community members. They are non-professionals who are willing to be trained as instructors since they wish to educate children and thus to serve the community. They are accountable to the community, and to themselves, for their performance as instructors and for proving to be like elder brothers or sisters of the young learners who need affectionate guidance. The project has ensured that every Gram Panchayat (Village Council) sets up a Village Education Committee for looking after this culture-friendly learning system and ensuring its community orientation. As to the testing of the pupils' achievements in various skills, the communities are invited to participate in the process. Pupils from several learning centres (which the children call *Ap/la Varg* ; *Our Class*) gather together at a central village within a walking distance of 2 or 3 kms, once in 5½ months to participate in a *Bal-Jatra* : a Children's Fair. In this air they sing, play sports and games, present skits, tell stories, and also engage in the 'game' of taking language and mathematics tests in the presence of community members. There are no passes or failures because the tests indicate to each child the next step of learning. A meal provided by the host village is shared by the instructors and pupils. Graded tests of language, numbers, and general information are supplied to groups of five or four pupils at a time, and they test themselves in public view. Thus, the project demystifies examinations and

removes the confidentiality of performance. The fair provides a relaxed atmosphere and prevents examination stress.

Girls predominate in this project. They are generally drawn from the non-enrolled or dropout groups between the ages of 9 and 14. They show exceptionally good achievement in curricular studies, social skills, and understanding of the environment. They enjoy reasoning exercises, including simple experiments in science. The PROPEL project has broadly followed the principle of attending to the cultural parameters of rural primary education, especially in the case of the non-enrolled and dropout children. But the Institute is of the view that further investigations into the cultural contexts of education for rural and tribal children are essential in order to seek new paths for co-ordinating certain facets of community culture with the process of education, especially at the pre-school and primary levels, so as to bring the home and the school closer together. Also, such investigation would help delineate the ways of a meaningful fusion of essential cultural elements with innovative educational practices which could help generate the dynamism and consciousness of a wider world necessary for the people to meet the challenge of change. Thus perceived, education at the grassroots level would be an assimilative cultural movement instead of the discordant cultural scene which it currently presents.

Field-Studies

From this standpoint, the Institute made a short-term exploratory study of the cultural facets of three villages selected from three agro-climatic samples, viz., (a) drought-prone area, (b) rain-fed area, and (c) hilly tracts in the Western Ghats of Pune District in Maharashtra. In this study, interviews were held with women's groups, male and female members of households, village leaders, and other individuals active in organising or participating in local fairs, festivals and celebrations. Printed questionnaires were not used. Relaxed discussions were expected to yield both overt and covert facets of cultural ethos and practices. However, local contact persons were oriented towards the objectives of the study, manner of collecting information, recording it, and presenting it to the researchers in feedback sessions. The investigations revealed various aspects of the relationship of women with nature, their food-related rituals and celebrations, devotional practices directed towards primitive deities as well as some of the deities in the Hindu pantheon, and rites of passage from birth to maturity. The roles of men, women and children in rituals, celebrations, and festivals became clear and showed certain implications for learning activities at pre-school and primary levels.

In the three villages selected for the study, the explorations were restricted to a general view of events and practices in which children were present as witnesses and often inducted into their future roles in family and community events. Certain elements from these exploratory observations are important for providing learning activities and narrowing the gap between home and school. The pre-school and primary school organisation could be reviewed from this standpoint so as to evolve alternatives to existing practices in formal schooling in the rural areas.

Fairs and festivals in the rural areas are usually seasonal occurrences and have a clear ecological base, although some of them have acquired the garb of religious rituals. In the three villages, where climatic conditions are different and thus cause local variations in the styles of celebrations, the significance of ecological factors becomes evident. The real origins of several pseudo-ritual practices are to be found with people's age-old environmental concerns.





The case of Savardara, a drought-prone village. The soil here is rocky and vegetation is sparse. Only a few thorny trees can be seen in the otherwise barren surroundings. There is great scarcity of drinking water for about eight months in a year. Drinking water is fetched by women from a well situated at a distance of about 1½ km. Each woman makes at least three trips to the well daily and brings three vessels (*handas*) full of water in each trip. For the use of domestic animals and for growing small vegetable patches, menfolk bring non-potable water from a nearby source. Both boys and girls participate in fetching water. This is not viewed as child labour. It is normal participation of children in family activities. This village, which has 96 households, has acquired some modern vehicles for transport. This has increased mobility and, in the dry season, casual labourers hire them to go elsewhere to seek employment. Three jeeps, four trucks, 20 motorbikes, 22 rickshaws, some bullock-carts and several bicycles are available. Vehicles are driven by men and occasionally by boys also. But women and girls do not drive. However, some girls ride bicycles.

The village has two major deities and a few primitive guardian goddesses (*matrikas* : mother figures). The temples of Hanuman and Bhairav (Bhairoba), who are the major deities, are the most important places for socio-religious celebrations. The 96 families in the village mainly consist of scheduled castes, Guravs (temple-caretakers), traders, potters and a few others. There is also a solitary Muslim household settled in the village over a long time. It is just one part of the community, as the various caste-groupings are.

The village celebrates all the seasonal and religious festivals. Both men and women participate in them fully. Children inevitably join in the processions and the games played by women on these occasions. The women sing special songs during the festivals. Most children know these by heart. During the naming ceremony for a newborn, and at rites of passage such as pregnancy and childbirth, children are always present, wearing festive clothes and ornaments. Both boys and girls can easily recite practically all the songs sung by women on such occasions, since during early childhood they are more with the womenfolk who look after them than with men. Along with Hanuman and Bhairav, the villagers of Savardaray respect such primitive goddesses as Janai and Jokhai, who are situated on village borders as guardian goddesses. The solitary Muslim family celebrates its festivals and rituals like *Id*, *Mohurrum* and so on. All other families participate in them and also help in them. The favourite festival of the village is the Southern New Year (*gudhi padwa*), which arrives around April as the harbinger of spring. The whole village contributes to this collective celebration. At the end of the *padwa* day, village leaders gather in the Hanuman temple, make up the accounts, and from the funds that remain unused, give assistance to individuals or families in various ways. Often, slates, clothes, etc., are given to the poorer children to attend school. There is no caste consideration.

The Misalwadi village, situated in a hilly tract, receives heavy rainfall. Its surroundings are lush with vegetation. It has 95 households. There is a Hanuman temple in the village. The guardian of the village is the primitive goddess Malaai. Her ancient little temple is situated on the outskirts of the village, on a hill, from where she is supposed to keep an eye on the villagers and protect the boundaries of the village. A special custom in this village is that no individual goes out for work in the morning without paying obeisance to Hanuman. Interestingly, there is no priest in the village. Traditionally, a shepherd functions as the caretaker of the temple and lights the oil lamp daily. The oil for this purpose is not purchased but it is contributed by all the families in turn. Misalwadi village is a part of the village-cluster under the Kondkewadi Gram Panchayat (Village Council). From this village, no formal official of the Village Council functions because the village has always had an informally elected Council of five elders to take important decisions for the whole village. The community has continued this ancient tradition of a non-governmental Panchayat even though new Panchayat legislation has been passed by Parliament. The families in this

village are committed to the custom of consensus in local government.

Misalwadi is known in its surroundings for the many festivals it celebrates. The heavy rainfall it gets provides enough vegetation nearby to enable it to celebrate tree-based festivals such as *gudi padwa* (the New Year), which requires the use of new bamboos for use as flagstaff to fly the new year banner. Bunches of fresh *neem* leaves are used to decorate the banner. This connection of festivals with forests is noteworthy. The special ritual of this day is to prepare and distribute a mixture of tender *neem* leaves, ginger powder and sugar (or jaggery) to members of the family so as to reiterate the health-giving properties of the *neem*. In every celebration, token food offerings are made to fire, water, earth, air and sky. The family can partake of the feast only after offering it to household gods, the guardian deity of the village, and a cow. An observance called *rishi panchami* (the fifth moon day sacred to *rishis*) is celebrated by all women of the village, when vegetables and cereals grown without the use of bullock-drawn ploughshare are used. This is a reminder of the way the ancient hermits and sages lived. It obliges people to protect vegetation, especially tubers, roots and leafy vegetables naturally growing on the boundaries of the village.

Tree worship is again in evidence in the practice of married women worshipping the spirit of the banyan tree on a full-moon day. The tree which is known to live for hundreds of years by continually sending out new aerial roots into the earth, is a symbol of long life. Women pray to this *vata vriksha* to give long life to their husbands so that their families may grow and live in security even as the tree does. Groups of women dress in their finery and visit the tree, which is on the outskirts of the village. Children invariably accompany them. On *makar-sankranti* day (vernal equinox), newly harvested grain, fruits and vegetables are offered to the deities and to all others invited for the celebration at the end of winter. This is truly one of the most delightful and popular harvest festivals celebrated in the rural areas. Sweets made from sesame seeds and jaggery are exchanged with the exhortation, 'please speak sweetly the whole year long'.

On *ratha-saptami* day (seventh day of the moon for worship of the sun's chariot), the villagers worship the sun. There is much singing and dancing. On this day, a peculiar custom is observed in this village. The whole village provides a feast for all with sweets made from milk. But the responsibility for cooking is taken up by men and the women are given a full holiday from daily chores. Not only do the women have a holiday but they engage in games, sing songs, present their traditional dance, and so on. Nature related festivals like *naga-panchami* (fifth moon-day dedicated to the cobra), coconut day, when water sources are offered coconuts (on a full-moon day), and *bendur* are also celebrated. *Bendur* is meant for giving a holiday to the bullocks from farm work. Feeding bullocks with special sweets and worshipping them and also organizing bullock-cart races are special features. On *kojagiri purnima* (autumn full moon), each household contributes some milk for the community celebration. The milk is boiled by a group of volunteers in the evening, with sugar and dry fruits, for distribution to all. Children figure in all these festivals, bedecked in their best clothes, and are affectionately plied with sweets. The community leaders ensure that no child is denied this right.

The rain-fed village of Kondhanpur is quite well-to-do. Its peculiarity is that it has completely abolished untouchability and even constructed a *Buddha Mandir* just behind the temple of the community's ancient village-goddess Tukai. The Gram Panchayat of Kondhanpur gets established not by election but by consensus. Its biggest temple is that of Tukai, who is supposed to be an incarnation of the warrior goddess Durga. The village has other temples also, dedicated to Hanuman, Ganesh and Dattatreya. There are the inevitable guardian goddesses (*matrikas*), namely Kalubai and Khanjai. These primitive goddesses protect the borders of the village.

On *Dussehra* day, the whole village celebrates the festival although the families also have their own festival dinners and worship the goddess Durga at home. The village also makes a public sacrifice to the goddess. But instead of sacrificing animals, it cuts open a watermelon as a token sacrifice since its colour is red like blood. All exchange a few leaves of the *bahava* tree, which represents the exchange of gold coins practiced in ancient India. This tree is called *kanchan*, i.e., gold, in Marathi. Apart from *Dussehra*,

another favourite festival is that of *Janamashtami* (Birth of Lord Krishna). On this day men hang a cradle in the local temple and do all the rituals. Men and women take out a procession. Women play traditional games in a free atmosphere without feeling shy in the presence of men. The men also play their traditional games. All children participate in the games of men and women, mostly along with parents or older siblings. On this day, all the villagers together have an afternoon feast where sweets are served. At the end of the day the senior villagers take a review of the festival and get the temples cleaned and swept for the next day's worship. On *gudi padwa* also there is a community lunch which is jointly cooked by men and women and shared by the whole community, with the children receiving all possible attention.

In all these villages, there are several features common to festive events. The Ganapati festival, which usually lasts for ten days, is the most exciting time of the year. Ganapati or Ganesh is the god of learning, of wisdom. In all rituals, he is worshipped before commencing the ritual procedure because he is the leader of the people (*gana* — people, *pati* — leader). He presides over all auspicious occasions like weddings, naming ceremonies, *pujas* of other lesser gods, and keeps a benevolent eye on everyone. Preparations for the Ganapati festival begin two to four weeks before the installation of the clay image in the home or in a public place. Musical evenings, plays, lectures by visitors, are generally arranged during this period. Children participate in this festival with great enthusiasm as Ganesh is believed to be the god of learning. Along with Ganapati his mother Gauri also is worshipped during this festival. Images of Gauri are made by tying together tender branches of wild plants specially prescribed for this ritual and protected from destruction by cattle or human carelessness. A colourful piece of cloth is wound round this green bunch and it is topped by a paper mask of the goddess. In some families a brass mask, preserved over several generations, is used. This part of the Ganapati festival is in charge of women. But both boys and girls are involved in the festival from start to finish. They particularly help collect the hibiscus flowers and lotus lilies along with certain plants which are supposed to be special favourites of Ganapati.

There are several plant-related rituals which are like fairy tales and fantasies. The wedding of the *tulasi* plant (basil) with Krishna requires that the family tend a *tulasi* plant carefully throughout the year and replant it when the old one becomes weedy. This plant has many medicinal properties and the juice of its leaves is used with turmeric powder and honey or jaggery as a mild treatment for the cough of young children. It is also used in rituals as a symbol of purity and is part of the flowers and leaves offered to all deities and especially to Lord Krishna (or Vishnu). The tasty leaves are often chewed by children and adults as a mouth freshener. The various dishes prepared during different festivals have an inherent relationship with the environment and its seasonal aspects such as plenitude of certain food items along with their nutritional and health-care significance relating to the seasons of the year. The children absorb this traditional health information without effort.

All festivals require visits to relatives and neighbours for giving and receiving presents, usually the special sweets prescribed by tradition as also clothes, new cloth, pots and pans. It is usual for women to collectively prepare some of the special food items or visit one another's houses to help. Children tag along with them and are witness to this sharing of work and products. Older girls invariably help in these tasks and gather not only cookery skills but the procedures of deciding on exchanges of presents and their social significance.

Observations

The Nature of Indigenous Basic Education

The historical evidence left by British investigators reveals that the driving forces behind the indigenous system of primary education were mainly three: (a) an extension of the rites of induction of the child — especially boys — into the wider arena of skills leading to adulthood functions in the family and the community, (b) opening the doors to indigenous sources of wisdom encased in written materials and in the learning orally transmitted by the master through stories, poems and admonitions on personal and social behaviour, and (c) weaning the child away from dependence on the mother and other female caretakers at home. However, there was a cultural continuity in looking upon schooling as a phase in the

process of growing up, an affirmation of the Indian view of life that it is polyphasic. Early childhood, later childhood and youth (*brahmacharya*), life of a householder (*grihasthashrama*), and retired old age away from the hurry and bustle of life (*vanaprasthashrama*) are phases requiring a clear-cut set of duties and human relationships. Indigenous child education had a strong moral and social goal. It had only a marginal economic goal within its largely agrarian setting. It was also a part of the ritualistic behaviour of the family to which the child belonged and, therefore, an indivisible aspect of local culture.

The Anglo-Saxon School in India

The openly stated objectives of the school system established in India around 1765, and later confirmed by the imperial government, were to (a) wean away the Indian people from their culture and shape them into 'brown Englishmen', and (b) provide subordinate personnel for revenue collection, judicial posts, and train clerical cadres for the convenience of British administration in India. So as to ensure that sedition may not raise its head and for facility of supervision and management by educational administrators, the curriculum and text-books were prepared by government. Uniformity was insisted upon, reinforced by public examinations even at grade IV and VII levels. These examinations were used as 'sorting machines' for eliminating as many learners as possible so as to keep the numbers of certificate holders small enough to correspond with the available government jobs and also to keep the educational expenditure of government to the minimum essential for its administrative needs.

The driving force behind this imperially prescribed system was the subordination of natives and stabilisation of colonial rule. English was therefore made the medium of instruction from grade V onwards for training for relatively higher posts, while the vernacular medium was permitted for the posts of village level functionaries. For the English medium school course, the matriculation examination was held by universities. It applied further brakes on the numbers of 'qualified' persons by being extremely strict and generally failing nearly 75 per cent of the candidates. This system thus intentionally kept education from spreading, both through the destruction of the indigenous system and through the construction of a system which functioned as a sorting machine for keeping the number of successful candidates limited. The Anglo-Saxon system brought by the imperial government frankly stressed the 'education of the few' and the non-Indianization of those few who went through the system.

Looking at the educational situation on the eve of Independence, it became obvious that the imperial government had eminently succeeded in subjugating Indians not simply during its direct rule over them but for a much longer period. The gap between the culture of India's educated elite and that of the rural masses persists and has gone on widening. It persists, and the Indian mind is now confused. The question is whether this confusion can be overcome without reverting totally to the cultural past, which has now become irrelevant, or accepting the ways of the West which also are equally irrelevant to India's development needs and goals. One feature of the imperial style of government that has continued to prevail with detriment to the people's values, aspirations and freedom to decide their educational system, is bureaucratic paternalism and its attachment to the principle of centralised control. This is seen in every sphere of administration and especially so in education, where even the village school teacher, being a government servant, is steeped in the bureaucratic spirit. Teacher-training curricula, decided more by government officers than by thoughtful educationists, promote this bureaucratic linkage from the top to the bottom. If the people's culture is to assert itself in deciding the various phases of the education of Indian children, this situation would have to be critically researched for evolving remedies to release rural child education and primary education from its Anglo-Saxon bondage.

Village-studies : educational reflections

(a) *Cultural identity* : The explorations in three villages situated in climatically different tracts have brought out several aspects of culture and modalities of child socialization. Arising from human interaction with nature and a time-honoured value system which transcends the day-to-day subsistence concerns of the rural people, the cultural commitments of the family and community shape the child's personality almost from the moment of birth. However, the local primary school transplanted by the state in this cultural

milieu remains unaware of the education received by the child through participation in various rites, rituals, celebrations, life-style and allocated tasks. It is this education that shapes the child's personality and makes it feel secure within its cultural setting. It knows who it is, what it is expected to do, in what way, and how to relate itself to the kinship structure and the neighbourhood. It learns a tremendous amount about nature and develops emotional bonds with its different seasonal manifestations. All this knowledge, gathered at first hand, infuses self-confidence in the child and forms its cultural identity.

(b) *The school and the child* : In the process of growing up the child is helped by the various stake holders, parents, kin, neighbours and the community as a whole. The school teacher, being an outsider, is not a participant in this process of incidental but fairly well-organised cultural learning. For the rural child, therefore, the teacher in the formal school is a stranger and the school is a place where it has no protection from parents, older siblings, or relations and neighbours. School entry for the child is traumatic, an entry into insecurity, into a world of which the ways are quite different from what the child has experienced in its cultural milieu. This is often the reason for non-enrolment of rural children and of a large dropout rate. Not only the child but the parents also are distanced from the school, since it is only the teacher who is designated by the system to transmit education according to a state-prescribed curriculum. The textbook is the only tool of education, but the standardised, formal language it uses is far removed from the local vernacular. Its lessons deal with subjects with which the child has no cultural familiarity. The so-called co-curricular activities are also prescribed from a 'national' and 'international' standpoint about which the community, parents and children know next to nothing. Local festivals and celebrations receive a small place in the annual list of state-prescribed holidays, but the school does not figure in them as a cultural participant. The parents do not know what the curriculum intends to do nor what the textbook teaches. As a result, this education can receive hardly any support at home. The results of school learning fail to correspond with the parents' expectations of schooling and they withdraw their children from school. The children, by and large, do not regret this withdrawal and happily return to the security of the culture imbibed by them before school entry. This picture was seen in the three villages under investigation. It reinforced the overall research findings in this respect.

(c) *Men and women* : All the three villages gave evidence of gender-related cultural practices at home, at the workplace outside the home, and in community life. While the work of women relates to organising the rituals and celebrations within the home and family, men take up organisational tasks outside at the community level. These activities are interdependent and creativity is seen in the tasks performed by women and girls within the home and by men and boys outside the home. For festival processions and religious gatherings, all adults and children come together, transcending gender and caste barriers. Even religions are no bar to such celebrations as seen in the *Moharrum* festival at Savardaray and in the construction of the Buddha temple at Kondhanpur.

Women and girls delight in excelling in cookery and decorating the home and its yard at festival time. Men are enthusiastic about putting up a decorated *gudhi padwa* flag or decorating the bullocks for the *bendur* festival. However, on a certain day in the year, the men do the cooking and serve the women, thus reversing gender roles. On the occasion of the *kojagiri purnima*, the men undertake to boil and distribute sweetened milk, and they do the same on *ratha-saptami*, dedicated to the sun's return to the north.

(d) *Relationship with environment* : On festival days or during religious rites, token food offerings are first given to the earth, the sky, water, fire and air, since without a combination of these elements life cannot be sustained. Certain festivals stress the greater closeness of women to nature. Worship of the banyan tree, caring for the plant and gathering naturally growing vegetables denote this close relationship and have a symbolic significance for the well-being of the family. Also, the use of bamboo and *neem* leaves on *gudhi padwa*, distribution of *kanchan* leaves on *Dussehra*, offering of hibiscus flowers and lotus flowers to Ganapati, using mango leaves and marigold flowers for garlanding the door-frame of the house on *Dussehra* and *Diwali* days, demonstrate the delight people take in their natural surroundings where trees and other vegetation are still to be found. Preserving this natural wealth, appreciating the role even of the cobra in these rural surroundings, is part of the child's cultural education. In this culture, man and nature are not adversaries but friends. Man does not conquer nature but lives with it in a relationship of

give and take. These practices imply a very important philosophical stand on the relationship between man and nature common to eastern civilisations, where nature has generally been quite bountiful.

(e) *Economic transactions* : All the three communities under investigation had a tradition of economic transactions which cannot be monetised. The local economy is not controlled by bureaucratic procedures nor does it figure in the statistics of state bureaus of economics. For instance, the surplus festival funds distributed by village elders to needy persons are part of the community's welfare activities and do not figure in government expenditure on welfare. Some festivals appear to generate temporary contract jobs for erecting *pandals*, making leaf plates and bowls, collecting firewood, fetching large quantities of water, and so on. The milk contributed for the *ratha-saptami* festival is non-monetary. Most community meals have large contributions in kind which no one bothers to put into account books. Worshippers of the goddess Malaai maintain the temple and contribute oil for the sacred lamp all the year round. Barter of various commodities seems fairly common among neighbours. In weddings and other ceremonies, exchange of clothes and new pieces of cloth is a confirmed practice in which the 'giving well' aspect is stressed more than how much or what one might receive in exchange. Local vegetation is often used by everyone for some purpose or other but is not vandalised, so that it remains a community asset. Thrift is practised because the saints have exhorted the people to do so; but no visitor who may drop in at mealtime is allowed to go without partaking of some food. This is not calculated in terms of money.

Children in the rural areas get habituated to transactions of this kind. In the school text-books nothing of this nature is reflected. The community is often asked by educational bureaucrats to construct school-rooms or give equipment to the school. But the immediate users of primary education, i.e., the parents and the community, are never asked whether the curriculum, pedagogy, or economic aims of schooling correspond with their expectations and whether they could help make education culturally relevant. The gap between the economic concepts acquired by the children in the community and those adopted by the state in a bureaucratised school system being seriously at variance, the cultural confusion of the learning process gets exacerbated. The aim of Westernized basic education being employment, and that of the cultural education of the children being collaborative interdependence for the day-to-day business of living and growing, a clash between the two becomes inevitable.

Towards a Systemic Change in Education

This section cannot resist quoting Gandhiji at the outset as the background for its arguments:

Nothing can be further from my thought than that we should become exclusive or erect barriers. But I do respectfully contend that an appreciation of other cultures can fitly follow, never precede, an appreciation and assimilation of our own. It is my firm opinion that no culture has treasures so rich as ours has. We have not known it, we have been made even to deprecate its study and depreciate its value. We have almost ceased to live it. An academic grasp without practice behind it is like an embalmed corpse, perhaps lovely to look at but nothing to inspire or ennoble. My religion forbids me to belittle or disregard other cultures, as it insists under pain of civil suicide upon imbibing and living my own.

The validity of the Western model of schooling has been challenged not only by Gandhiji but in all the countries which were colonised, whether in the east or in the south. This model had ridiculed and devalued community-based systems of education with their culture-compatible organisation. Diversity was rejected. The community's ways of socialisation were condemned as primitive even in a country like India which has evolved knowledge in its many branches over thousands of years. Western science and technology and Western economics were propagated as elements of modernisation. The wheel of educational thinking has, however, been turning full circle and academics are pointing out that the foundational education of children cannot ignore its cultural contexts, that it can be successful only when the parents and the community participate in fashioning its aims, content, pedagogy and organisation. Non-formal education, alternatives to the present unsuccessful schooling system, and going beyond Western modernism to post-modern thinking which insists that the hegemony of the state over education must end, are some of the indicators of the commencement of an educational renaissance in Third World

societies. The enabling of the stake holders in education to assert their viewpoint on the fashioning of the future of society can be envisioned as the core of the educational scene in the post-modern era.

The configuration of education, particularly foundational education ('basic education' in the recent terminology of international donor organisations) needs to consist of elements which are local and culture-friendly. At the same time, widening of the learners' horizons should be possible through multimedia programmes, leaving their use not to state prescription but to the learners with their various goals and interests. Such widening of horizons is essential not only for ex-colonies like India but for the ex-colonisers as well. There could be programmes having diversified curricular offerings, taking the learner from the local level to the regional, national and even international levels of knowledge acquisition through a process of life-long learning. It is becoming clear that the very concept of school has to change, whether Western or Eastern. But whatever may be the learning opportunities opening out henceforth, they need to be shaped and used by people everywhere from their own cultural moorings, in the context of their integrated civilisational view. There would then be educational diversity which is essential for overcoming the control of the state and for handing back to the people the future of their cultures and their children's destinies.

But this is a rather vague vision at the present moment. For giving it sharpness, extensive studies in the cultural contexts of education need to be undertaken in diverse cultures.

References

[The authors acknowledge the guidance of Dr. Chitra Naik]

Carnoy, M and Samioff, J., *Education and Social Transition in the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 1990).

Cremin, Lawrence, *Toward an Ecology of Education* (Excerpt from *Public Education*, John Dewey Society, Pub:USIS, New Delhi, 1976).

Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree : Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century* (Biblia Impex, Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1983).

Di Bona, *One Teacher, One School : Adam's Reports* (Biblia Impex, Pvt. Ltd. 1983).

Gandhi, M.K., *India of my Dreams* (Navajivan Publishing House, 1995).

Iyer, R. N., *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (OUP, 1995).

Joshi, P.C., *Cultural Communication and Social Change* (Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1992).

Naik, J.P. and Nurullah, S., *A Students' History of Education in India* (McMillan & Co., Bombay, 1975).

Takala, Thomas (Ed.), *Quality of Education in the Context of Culture in Developing Countries* (Uni. of Tampere, Deptt. of Education, Tampere, Finland, 1994).