

## **Exploring realities within and without** Sriparna

Teaching in the Krishnamurti schools has often given me the opportunity to go beyond the immediate syllabus, to create a connection between the syllabus itself and the students' personal lives, physically as well as emotionally. A very conscious effort was also made to sensitize children to the social, economic and political forces shaping our lives, to analyse real life situations, to question one's own relationship with the people and the environment around us and to try to develop critical thinking so that the students, at the end of the day, could make sane, independent choices in life.

Some of the understanding of social issues has emerged even from spaces outside the history or the geography classroom as the apparent division between different disciplines often gets blurred when it comes to a more integrated and holistic learning about life itself.

The intent of this paper is just to share two or three of these experiences through which I had tried to consciously make this attempt.

### **First Experience**

One of the earliest memories of an effort of this kind was a decade ago, in Rajghat, where the school, as many of you know, is spread over a 300 acres campus on both sides of the Ganga-Varuna sangam. There seemed to me often that there was a world of difference between the students of the school, belonging to affluent business families of eastern U.P. , living a relatively sheltered and isolated life within the school campus and the vastly different reality of the life 'us paar' as the other side of the Varuna was locally called.

There was a rural school in this village called "Sarai Mohana", a rural hospital, an agricultural college that had closed down and a population of weavers of the traditional and renowned "Benarasi" sarees. At that point of time there seemed to be very little connection between the students of the school and the people on the other side of the fragile bamboo bridge, which invariably broke after every rainy season, leaving one at the mercy of small boats which ferried people to and fro.

The opportunity to interact with the people in the village came through a journalism class, which gave the children the time and space to explore any issue that seemed of interest or importance to them. That's how a group of children in the junior school got a glimpse of the lives of the people who not only lived next door but were also in an interesting way, connected to the families they belonged to, for the families of many of these children were traders of Benarasi sarees.

A few visits to the village and interaction with the villagers unfolded a story which was certainly a revelation to the impressionable 10 year olds. They noted the skill and hard work involved in the making of each saree, the poverty of the weavers, their helplessness on being at the mercy of middlemen and the obvious exploitation that the process involved.

The weavers for example, sold a saree for a meagre Rs. 500 to the middlemen, which was finally sold in the market for nothing less than Rs. 5000! The sarees couldn't be sold directly by the weavers as they could not afford the silk thread that was provided by the middlemen, who always

kept a handsome margin. An understanding of the forces operating in the market and the role of some of their own families happened to become quite evident, though not entirely intended in the beginning of the exercise.

One hoped that the perception of the reality next door could touch a cord in the hearts of the children who would grow up to be participants in this economic reality so closely associated with their lives.

### **Second Experience**

An example of another effort to understand our own lives in the light of socio-economic forces thus enabling the individual perhaps, to make intelligent choices with awareness and empathy, emerged from a particular strand of information in the history lesson itself. The lesson in question was Alauddin Khalji's price-control policy, through which the sultan controlled the quality and prices of commodities to improve the economic condition of the state. Numerous questions that it gave rise to were: the need for controlling of price, the role of the people/bodies involved with the implementation and the function of medieval guilds. Drawing a parallel to our own times, the students were encouraged to question the need of quality and price control today, the organizations that play the role of the guilds of the earlier times and the responsibility of the government and the citizens in the process.

This also led on to an investigation into a wide range of things associated with products available in the market : the various signs of certification on products, the role of the consumers' forum, an awareness of the prices of indigenous products as compared to those produced by the multinational companies, the question whether the quality of a product was necessarily related to its price, the obsession with particular brand names, whether the contents of most of these products were environment-friendly. The products covered a wide variety of things- ranging from biscuits to cereals, soaps and toiletries used in our daily lives. This also helped the students to understand some of the basic issues of globalization and the role of large corporations and encouraged them to make intelligent choices. At the end of the exercise the students gave their suggestions to the school and encouraged it to replace certain products available at the school store with relatively safer, economical and environmentally friendly ones.

### **Third Experience**

A relatively recent effort to help the children of class five to relate the contents of the text-book with their immediate surroundings was through a chapter in their English book, called "Narmada". Apart from the mythological background and the journey of the river, the chapter also referred to the Narmada dam and the controversy involved with the building of the dam. Some obvious questions that came up were the need for a dam, its functions and its contribution on one hand as well as the implications that it might have on the local population – all a little far from the immediate experience of these little children. This gave us an excellent opportunity to look at the "Chaskaman" dam in the vicinity, merely 6-7 kms. away from the school. Apart from getting to see the working of a dam and knowing the needs of the area that led to the construction, the children also got to hear two versions of the story, one from the officials involved and the other, a much more frustrated and sad one from some of the helpers in the school, who were actually some of the first people to be displaced after repeated protests for 10 years. Some of them had been deprived of the compensation, initially promised by the government. The exposure helped them to empathise with some of the issues involved with the Narmada dam.

At a very basic level, the students were introduced to the flip side of ‘development’ as we see it, the controversies involved in political decisions and the price that one has to pay at times, in order to raise one’s voice against what one considers to be an injustice. Above all, it would help them to realise perhaps, that there is usually more than one voice to be heard, more than one reality to be perceived and that it is important to maintain this objectivity while looking not only at things that happened in the past but also those that happen constantly around us today.

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