

## PETTY CRIMINALS, PROUD CITIZENS

Arvind Gupta

There are a few educators in the world whose work is historically so influential. Anton Makarenko was among this very select group of Russian educators. In the early 1920's shortly after the October Revolution of 1917 and the ensuing civil war many Russians died. Thousands of children became homeless. Abandoned and dressed in ragged clothes, they crowded in slums or roamed the countryside, making a living from crime and begging. Left to their own devices these children robbed and murdered in herds. Their number reached millions by the early 1920's creating a serious social problem which lasted more than a decade.

Anton Makarenko (1888-1939) came from a working class family. His father was a painter in the railways. Makarenko himself started working at the age of 17 as a teacher in an elementary school for the children of railway workers. Later on he joined the Education Department. The Government under Lenin was serious about rehabilitating these delinquent children. Makarenko accepted the challenge and set up a colony for the rehabilitation of these orphans. The Gorky Colony (1920-28) set up in 1920 in Poltava (Ukraine) was named after the Russian humanist Maxim Gorky. It was shifted twice and by 1926 had 400 members. Later Makarenko was to be the director of the Dzerzinsky Commune (1927-35).

Makarenko was a product of his times. Russia was trying to rebuild itself through collective labour under a communist leadership. Makarenko believed that human beings were shaped by their circumstances. As conditions of depravity, insecurity and war had produced these delinquents; similarly conditions of security, friendship, love, trust would produce "a new human being".

Who were these children? Makarenko met Semyon Kalabalin – a young boy of seventeen in the Jail Superintendent's office. The boy was jailed for several criminal offences. On coming out from the jail, Makarenko immediately gave the boy a few hundred roubles and a list of provisions – eggs, loaves of bread etc and asked him to procure them from the provision store. He also told him that the store usually cheated him. How could Makarenko trust a criminal with cash and the horse cart? What if he escaped? The boy was aghast at such trust. He went and fetched the provisions. Makarenko counted and found three extra loaves (which this boy had stolen) and asked him to return them to the provision store. Such were the children who came to Makarenko and whose lives were transformed by collective work in the commune. Later on Semyon Kalabalin joined the Gorky Colony as a teacher.

Makarenko describes the "explosion method" which helped these children enormously. A group from the colony – a detachment would search the trains looking for these orphan children. Some would be hiding under the berths or in the lavatory. They would be taken to a room at the station. In the morning the Gorky Colony band would come to welcome and take them to the colony. Here after a clean scrub they would wear a clean uniform. Their old clothes were symbolically burnt in a pyre. Slowly, the new comers got inducted into the tough regimen of the colony.

Like Mahatma Gandhi Makarenko was another world class pedagogue who wanted to give a work base to education. The children studied for 5 hours a day and worked on collective farms or factories for 4 hours a day. Discipline was provided by a quasi-military type of regimentation. Each detachment had a commander whose task was to create a sense of pride, community and achievement. Labour education was a combination of formal secondary education with some form of productive work which at the Gorky Colony was mainly agricultural.

Makarenko's work of caring for war orphans was later supported by the leadership of Stalin and Feliks Dzerinsky the head of the Russian secret police Cheka. In early adult life Makarenko was a Bohemian man about town, immersed in romantic poetry, he frequented avant-garde, bourgeois, artistic settings which were anathema to the leaders of Russia's regimented revolution. But Makarenko soon transformed himself into a disciplined and effective revolutionary. A teacher by profession, Makarenko was heavily criticized by the revolutionary education community for his new approach to teaching and learning. But he enjoyed the support and endorsement of the great American educationist John Dewey. Soon Makarenko's approach became the official line that Stalin endorsed in education.

Under the tutelage of the great author and humanist Maxim Gorky, Makaranko wrote a series of extremely readable, profound and popular books on the aspirations and activities of correctional education – books that have been recognized as great literature by successive generations of devoted readers. The experience of the Gorky Colony - *Road to Life* (3-volumes) has been translated in over 60 languages of the world. Its popularity can be gauged from the fact that it is in the 85<sup>th</sup> edition in Russia with over 2.5 million copies sold. The English, Hindi, Marathi translations of this inspiring book were sold on the Indian roads for a very paltry sum and many of us were deeply enriched by them. Unfortunately, with the break up of Russia and Mir and Raduga Publishers, these books have simply disappeared. His other two famous works are *A Book for Parents and Teachers* and *Learning to Live*. The latter is his experience of running the Dzerinsky Commune. This commune though aided by the Russian state was largely self-financed. The children of 14-17 worked for 4 hours in factory workshops and produced the most sophisticated drilling machines and the famous Lieca cameras.

Makarenko like Gandhi considered work as an indispensable element of education. For Makarenko, discipline came from work - work that was carried out in the interest of the collective, also enriching the individual. He considered work as a creative fulfilment of individuals. Working with others, working with tools, working with materials and enjoying the rewards for the work brings about discipline.

Makaranko had a "feel" for children which went far beyond the understanding of educational theorists. His educational dictum could be summed in the following words: *Make as many demands as possible on a man and at the same time show him as much respect as possible*. His genius lay in transforming young, bedraggled, lice-infested, teenage beggars and criminals into proud, productive citizens of his country. The Gorky Colony became an exemplary centre for leadership training, preparing inmates for a productive role in society. Being ousted from the colony was the worst punishment for any inmate. One result of all this was that Makarenko became pivotal in determining the Bolshevik orientation towards education and the nuclear family.

These were remarkable accomplishments. Even before the Second World War, during Makarenko's lifetime his vitally positive and optimistic ideas had influenced the great Polish educator Jasnusz Korczak and the French educationist Freinet. There is much for us in India to learn from Makarenko's work. Men and women are not born criminals. Social circumstances force people to become criminals. And changed social circumstances can convert these same criminals into loving, humane and productive human beings.