

Udayachal School

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No school in the whole of Mumbai can match the Udayachal School in terms of sheer space and vision. The Udayachal School - located in Vikhroli, is run by the Godrej group of companies as a measure of social welfare for its employee's children. Since its start in 1955 the school was guided by the late Mrs. Cooverbai Vakil. This petite lady was affectionately called "Aunty" by one and all. Mrs. Vakil had worked in Shantiniketan where she imbibed a fine sense of aesthetics and a love for simple living and high thinking. She brought this artistic sensitivity to the school. During the formative years she had to persuade the parents to send their children to school. And when the children did come they had to be washed and cleaned and fed. Under her loving guidance the teachers did all this willingly.

There is something absolutely admirable about the school – its inclusiveness. The children of managers, shop workers and gardeners - irrespective of their social stature all study together. As part of their corporate social responsibility the Godrej Company provides free education to two children of every employee. Why only two? This is in keeping with their philosophy of providing good education and simultaneously exercising some control over our burgeoning population. Unlike many fancy schools there are no admission tests. As education is deemed a fundamental right of every child the school admits children without conducting any tests whatsoever. There is only one criterion - the child should have completed three years. For the last few years the school also admits a few students whose parents are not Godrej employees.

Twenty years back I had the privilege of spending a day in the school and those wonderful memories still linger. The school was then headed by an eminent educationist Shirin Choksey. She took me to a class where the children were practicing music. I was used to situations where one or two children sing and the others mutely listen. So it was a surprise to see every child playing music with ingenuously improvised instruments. The instruments consisted of – empty powder tins filled with pebbles to make sound; cymbals using two polish tin lids; a cylindrical tin with a wooden baton nailed to it and a wire strung taut to make an "Ektara". Children made music with these contraptions and enjoyed it too. The whole class participated in the orchestra. More than the good music they imbibed the spirit of working together as a team.

The nursery as the pre-school is called was a sheer delight. Here 4 year olds were sitting on their haunches and hammering "soaked" newspapers with wooden mallets. It is usual for children to bring in old newspapers from home. These are soaked overnight in a water tank. The next morning the little ones - hammered them into shreds and bits dissipating all their pent up energy. So absorbed were they in this "destructive" act that they did not bother to even "glance" at a stranger like me! Later the newspaper pulp was mixed with clay and glue to make pliable dough. Using this home-made dough the children crafted toys, figurines, pots, pans and other artifacts with their dexterous fingers. Later they painted their papier-mâché creations.

This reminds of an incident which John Holt described about an experimental school in Denmark. The children of this free school loved hammering nails into wood. What they loved most was to imprint their names on wooden planks by hammering in nails!

In the beginning most of the children who came to Udayachal were first generation learners. They spoke Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, Telegu, Kannada and Malayalam at home. Only 10 percent spoke English. In a sense the school truly represents a mini-India. The school celebrates this richness and diversity of languages, religions and cultures. This leads to the broadening of the mind and soul. Children learn to respect differences and tolerance. The morning prayers too have a secular character – they are usually in praise of nature thanking mother earth for all its bounties and beauties.



There is a tremendous emphasis on “activities” in the elementary school. Children play with lots of everyday natural things and use them to create beautiful pieces of art. There is a separate place where leaves, twigs, different shapes and varieties of seeds, twine (sutli), coconut shells and other natural materials are stored. A few old brown packing corrugated

cartons also lie around. The children stick seeds, twigs and leaves to make landscapes and pictures of stunning beauty. The top layer of the carton is peeled to expose the fluted “corrugation” within. This wonderfully textured material is used in abundance to make leaves, houses etc.

Learning by doing is a motto the school lives by. Whatever the children do with their hands they later document. Children love writing their own experiences. This makes the language come “alive”.

In another primary class the children sat in groups of 5-6 each making collages. Between them they had a few plates, each with a sponge soaked in a different poster colour. Also, there were many rubber stamps. These rubber stamps were outlines of trees, houses, cars, buses, cycles, birds, animals all cut-outs from an old cycle tube and then stuck with glue on flat pieces of wood. The children had old newspapers spread on the floor. They would first press the stamps on the sponge and then on to the newspaper creating beautiful collages. Each child’s creation was unique and different from the others. The children were so deeply absorbed in what they were doing that they did not even look up. It was so different from other schools where children are bored to death with absurd and meaningless inanities which masquerade in the name of education.

The Godrej family is perhaps the single biggest landowner in the whole of Mumbai. Large tracts of mangroves are part of its real estate. The whole campus is full of old trees. The school has a vibrant nature club where first hand experience and field trips are emphasized. No other school can provide its children such a rich natural biosphere for exploration.

Last month my colleague Dr. Vidula Mhaiskar conducted a two-day workshop with the children and teachers of the Udayachal School. She returned back elated. For not only did she show the school possibilities of “doing” science with low-cost odds and bits, but also learnt a great deal about good education. For people with a deep and abiding interest in education it might be worth their while to visit the school.