

The story of an experiment

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Who has not been struck by the story of Summerhill, or Sudbury Valley School, Toto Chan, the School of Barbiana, the Sands School, or by an earlier experiment by Giju Bhai? Or inspired by the conscientization work of Paulo Freire? The question then arises, are there no such experiments in India – apart from Giju Bhai's? As one is slowly discovering, there have been many different exciting educational experiments but there are few detailed records of these. There have been some attempts to capture the story of David Horsburgh's school at Neel Bagh, as well as of other alternative educators in a book entitled *Vernacular Educators* (also by The Other India Press), but they lack the detail necessary to make the school come alive to those who have not been to them. This is one reason that *Learning at Bodhshala: Re-Orienting the School to its Community* by Rajan Venkatesh is to be appreciated.

Learning at Bodhshala is the story of an educational experiment that dares to question the framework of present-day schooling and steps out to seek a new definition of education. Inspired by Gandhiji's idea of *Bunyadi Shiksha*, the Bodhshala experiment demonstrates the creative possibilities and the power/rationale of Gandhiji's idea – an idea that has otherwise been rejected in India without a serious trial. This model does not equate education with bookish learning or academics/scholastics. Instead of shutting children in classrooms, segregated from the family and community, they learn about life as active participants in the community. The classroom becomes the community in which the child lives. Learning from the community automatically instils respect and the children aspire to participate in the life of the community. Initiated into the life and practices of the community, it assimilates them into the community instead of alienating them. This method builds the capacities of the child and directs his/her energy to working in and for the community.

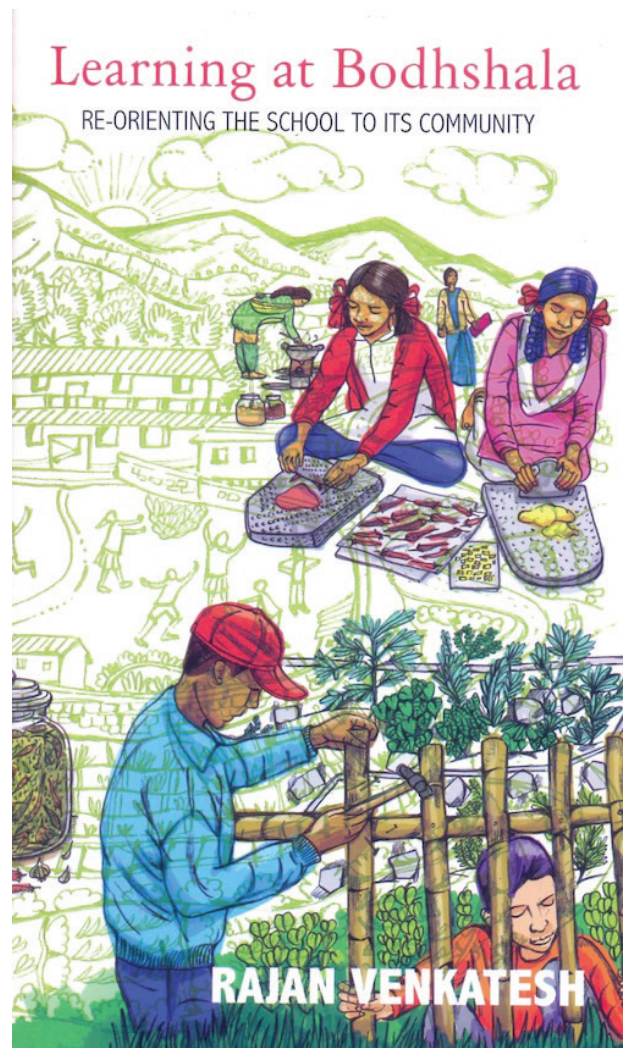
As one discovers from the Bodhshala experiment there is an immense potential for learning and earning to go together without any exploitation of the child – as some critics of *Bunyadi Shiksha* fear might happen. It also shows that with this kind of production-integrated, functional learning “most children grow up able to shoulder their responsibilities of everyday living”. This stands in sharp contrast to the modern schooling system which streams out more children than it retains and ends up churning out dysfunctional individuals whose aspirations far outpace their competence. Clearly, Gandhiji's *Bunyadi Shiksha* was designed to be inclusive and enabling, whereas as many of the critics of the formal schooling system have pointed out that modern schooling is a mechanism for excluding and streaming out. The production-based integrated education at Bodhshala demonstrates that in learning through observations and making-doing, the children develop confidence in their ability to learn and grow up to

Learning at Bodhshala

Re-Orienting the School to its Community

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be capable independent adults. This again is in strong contrast with the mainstream system which ends up making the student overly dependent upon teaching. As Ivan Illich points out, the students begin to confuse being taught and grade promotions with learning and end up losing their innate capacity to learn on their own.

The Bodhshala experiment focuses on three things: 1. To counter the perspective inculcated by “the eye of differentiation”, 2. To counter the negation of local knowledge systems, and 3. The alienation and disempowerment that modern schooling instils – particularly in the rural populations. Rajan Venkatesh and the team at Bodhshala, SIDH, rightly identify these flaws of the formal schooling system and attempt to stem that by “re-orienting the school to its community”. The weapon to counter the first is what is called “The Eye of Commonality”. The second and the third aspects are countered by a curriculum based upon food and health, local food, and medicines based on plants, which shifts the focus from literacy-numeracy to something that is central to what constitutes a healthy lifestyle. Relevance of these lessons – if they can be called lessons at all as it is a part of living – is obvious to all. The child begins to understand and appreciate the rationale of the local/community practices and the vibrancy of these practices. It shows how learning through observation and hands-on activities especially in the earliest stages can succeed in engaging the child much more than teaching or reading. The processes and the projects undertaken are chosen with this intention and aim.

Formal, mainstream schooling today serves more to break-in or enslave the person and make him/her afraid of what s/he might miss out on or lose if they don't submit uncritically to the schooling system and slaves can only keep the wheels of the system turning but not contribute to improving or critically addressing the flaws within the system. At

Bodhshala, by immersing the students in another world-view, the foundations are laid for the possibility of critically examining the world-view imposed by most of the formal schools.

If we ask what does anyone hopes for from an education? The answer will be that it should enhance one's personal well-being and enable one to contribute to the flourishing of family and community. As the Bodhshala experiment convincingly shows, there is a greater possibility of this being fulfilled by an education based on the ideas outlined in Bunyadi Shiksha than schooling within the modern school system that does not just take the children physically away from their community but alienates them from their families and communities. What other proof do we need of this than that every 'educated' person seeks an escape from the place to which s/he belongs. The village child wants to move to the town, the small town youth seek the city, and the metropolitan city youth crave to flee the country. Clearly, the present schooling system is unable to fulfil the expectations that people have.

The Bodhshala experiment outlines a model appropriate for engaging all children though this experiment was based in a rural setting. It will not be difficult for any teacher who can see the worth of this model to adapt it for the urban classroom. Despite the fact that the experiment was tried only for three years, it reveals the worth and potential of the idea. *Learning at Bodhshala* by Rajan Venkatesh is a valuable addition to the literature of hope. It demonstrates that a desirable change is possible given the commitment of the leader and the willingness of his team. And the teachers were able to inspire because they sincerely practiced what they taught.

The quality of the narrative is enhanced by the seemingly simple but elegant style of writing and the simple black-and-white line

illustrations that blend well with the narrative. The cover design is attractive but disappoints as it depicts the girls and boys in traditional roles: the girls involved in grinding – kitchen related activities – and the boys involved in outdoor chores of mending fences.

One only wishes there was more information on the impact of this experiment on the children, parents, and the community. Did it succeed in instilling a respect for physical work? Did people accept this form of schooling and an alternative concept of education? Did it stop some migrations? A counter mainstream initiative should not and cannot be measured by its impact upon the people, but one is curious to know to what extent it managed to convince people against it.

This story of Bodhshala, SIDH, would appeal to individuals interested in education and looking for alternatives to the mainstream formal system. Teachers looking for better ways to engage the students through hands-on, practical activities will find in it many useful ideas for use in their classrooms. Other alternative educators and parents home-schooling their children will find it a support and a guide. One hopes that this book will be read by education planners and administrators, as well as all those sceptical or dismissive of Gandhi's idea of education. It is sure to make them question their TINA attitude, as well as point them in the right direction.

The author has been working in the field of education for over 30 years. She has been involved with school teaching, teacher-education, and curriculum development (at institutional and national levels). She is based at an alternative education centre, Centre for Learning, Secunderabad, which she co-founded. She can be reached at <kaur.gurveen@gmail.com>.