

Notes on Bhubaneswar Trip

**Learning dance from Ratikanta Mahapatra
at the Odissi workshop**



IDEC beginning with the sound of each conch



Mr Tushar Gandhi in his session



A view of the guest rooms at Silicon Institute



Panel discussion in session



Delegates lighting the lamp for Inauguration



Attended By:

Five children from various grades (3 = Shiva, Vinod, 4 = Sarojini, Shankari 5= Saba), Tanvi (13) and Nirupama (16) accompanied by Aruna and Raghavan

Objectives:

Understand differing perspectives on concepts of education with focus on what Democratic Education is all about

It seemed a wonderful opportunity – the children could be exposed to large groups of persons from more than 20 countries.

Present our thoughts based on the activities of our school

The Trip:

We left for Bhubaneswar on the morning of the 2nd of December, 2004. The children were so excited that their parents complained that they had woken up at 3 am to leave by 7 am! We looked sheepish; we had ourselves woken up at that time!!

We had a comfortable journey to Chennai even as the children enjoyed the luxury of ‘reserved seats’ all to themselves. Although we had taken them out before, they seem to have only a blurred memory of the previous visit – it was almost two years ago that we had taken some of this group to Mumbai and a year ago to Coimbatore; a simple pleasure that we would normally deem to be a basic amenity, not to be even thought about. At Chennai two surprises awaited us – Sivakumar with Pavitra and Vasu with sumptuous food which we would barely manage to consume in the next 2 days. The food Vasu had prepared was so good that after every meal we called him on our mobile and thanked him – use of technology – do-not-wait-till-you-get-there-before-you-can-call...stuff.

It was exciting waving as we pulled out of Chennai Station. The journey itself was uneventful – the children were busy watching the hills, the rivers and fields roll by every new sight greeted with a “Teeeeacher – see this, Teeeeacher see that” And learning to play Uno. At Vizag the train reverses direction appearing to move back to where we came from and a terrified group rushed to Aruna saying, ‘Teacher , the train is going back to Chennai !!’ until we explained the diversion it would soon take; the explanation was taken with a pinch of salt. They saw the Godavari and Krishna. Unfortunately, we passed Lake Chilika at night.

Bhubaneswar station greeted us 24 hours later (after a total journey of 39 hours), with a board welcoming us to the IDEC 2004 conference. A bushed group dropped off at the hostel. Up every morning by 600 hrs and out at 0745, the children were thrilled to see the large set up of the conference venue.

Yaacov from Isreal, Takeshi from Japan, Rob from Scotland, Sally from USA, Ho Sung from Korea, Marija from Croatia, Jerry Mintz from USA, Mike and Meta from Germany....The contingent was international !!

Jerry with his table-tennis classes was a great hit. The children frequently disappeared into the TT room to emerge hours later – faces flushed, “Teacher, we now know how to play TT, can we have a table in school?”

Marc from France watched the children in his drawing classes. ‘Vinod is good,’ he said. We had never managed to entice him to the art club at the school, and here he was tabbed good at it !! The children were enthralled with stalls from Shikshantar, from Japan , from Korea and Ranjan De’s puppet-making classes. They have carried several ideas with them and we will know better when we have these children as ‘teachers’. They were treated to an Odissi dance performance

Some jokes :

An Australian participant asked Saba if he had heard of Ricky Ponting. Saba asked him, “Have you heard of our Sachin”.

They enjoyed the nicknames they were awarded : mouse, butterfly, monkey, elephant and smarty

They enjoyed all the sweets that were served with the meals although they did not enjoy the food itself – too different

They enjoyed the different ways the participants pronounced their names.
Japanese : Sabapalli for Sabapathi. It was funny since in Tamil ‘palli’ means lizard.

English : Shankaari for Shankari.

German : Saho for Saro and Sheeva for Shiva

They all said that they enjoyed the trip – homesickness notwithstanding.

What we are proud about:

There were separate activities for adults – workshops / presentations etc. Children had their own agenda of activities including poi making from New Zealand, Odissi dance, T.Tennis, art work, puppet making, pottery (where the wheel was too large for them to bend over and work; but they enjoyed the sight of something emerging from a lump of clay.) They were left to their own devices. After an initial hesitation they got into the spirit of the place and grew so independent that we had to go in search of them. They behaved well even on their own and had other participants wondering how such small kids could handle themselves so well. Every evening we went for walks on the hills nearby and they regaled us with all their adventures. They have made ‘friends’ with whom they have exchanged email addresses (our email address that they have been very generous with) and school telephone number.

About democratic education :Views expressed by various groups - a report

Anugriha

Our presentation with the children chanting the Shanti mantra and Asatoma Sadgamaya....” was well received. We decided to conduct the session with exploring practical applications of the process of democracy at the school in the last 10 years. The audience was quite amazed by them and was really appreciative of the points we made.

We talked

- of the freedom the children are given in attending classes,

- of the children working on their own in the library, of choosing the book they'd like to read, the fact that there are more than 20,000 books to choose from,
- that while every child is expected to teach another child every day for at least 15 minutes, but they have a choice over what and whom to teach. that sometimes, we do match children – to quicken learning.
- *also, the weak children are given a student that everyone generally looks up to: this gives the child greater self- esteem and generally turns the corner.*
- we talked of the clubs that we have. In one case, the children being allowed to choose to do an activity; in the other, where a child repeatedly chose only one kind, our insistence that the child move to another activity, to give him/her a chance to learn something new and try out whether he/she begins to like it.
- an idea that the participants found intriguing was: children are given a choice, but having made one they are not allowed to rescind until the duration / activity is over.
- we said that although the children did come from a have-not background we had no incidents of 'lost' objects or deliberate destruction of school property.

Some questions asked of us:

Do the children have full freedom to choose what they will learn and whether they attend classes?

We said that we were pretty much structured for the morning two hours where children are taught to read and learn in two languages and do math. That the noon sessions are pretty much based on choice (including sleeping, art, games, yoga, craft, drama, music, dance, creative writing or reading by themselves). The noon sessions also have Integrated Knowledge Studies where a child can lead by asking questions or a teacher could do the same. Multimedia is used extensively.

Is the curriculum structured? What choice do children have?

We said that we needed to be structured in the morning session of the school as children are with us only until they are 10 years of age. And if they do not do well academically, they may not be sent to the secondary school. So, we work under pressure ourselves while the children are

ensured of enjoying their childhood. We are unable to cater to their needs beyond the primary level and hence we have to prepare them for their journey ahead...

Should not learning to read be a matter choice?

Children below the age of eight tend to do what they already know over and over again. They rarely try out something new – whether it is ice-cream flavour or a new book. Therefore, it is up to us to ensure that they have a varied learning fare. We prefer to make everything – including reading – compulsory. **After having got good at it they are free to not continue the activity.** That it is like a buffet – you taste everything and then eat more of what you like. They are not allowed to give an activity the school offers a go by. So while every one learns everything, they might choose the time / term / teacher to do it with. **That we believe that freedom to not do may be good; but better yet is freedom to try everything that comes their way: we can never know who will be touched and when.**

Is attendance to classes compulsory?

We talked of children who did not attend classes – those that sat outside the rooms and played on the sand outside. That it took them a year to accept us. We waited; the day they walked in we had them. They also turned out to be good learners. We also talked of a child who slept in school for a whole year and suddenly woke up in year two and took off to join the bright ones at the top of the class.

Have the children done something special that can be called their own?

We told them about the fundraising trip to Mumbai, where the smashing six put up a show that they had designed, scripted, choreographed, enacted. That our own contribution was to put them in touch with sponsors. That the show raised one lakh rupees other than funds for 10days sight seeing, to and fro travel expenses and food for 30 kids and 5 adults.

Something unique about the classes / children

We talked of the concept of free progressive system by the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Every child learns at his pace. **The child moves physically from one class to another to sit with kids who are at the same learning level.** This suits children who are either excellent or not doing too well. Both ways they get a lot of attention. A child therefore may be

learning math with the 3rd graders, Tamil with the 4th graders while for English and Integrated Knowledge Studies he might stay with his own class of 2nd graders. The result is that children learn to evaluate their own performance and makes them free to enhance their learning levels.

Why do we stop at the primary level?

As the only good school around here, we feel we need to touch as many children as we can. With the foundation that they receive they are able to take care of themselves very well in more formal systems. We have given them the confidence and strength.

Do you have free choice activity?

We talked of Tanvi who has taken on the teaching of Hindi to ten children of the 4th grade. She had the choice of students and those who took advantage of her age and misbehaved were asked to leave by her. She prepares for her own classes with no help from any of us as she is recognized as the best in the language. She has created her own teaching aids, her own texts and has adapted our language teaching technique to suit the nuances of Hindi. Tanvi has been doing this for a year now. She is now 13.

We reiterated that children can teach others; a group of enthusiastic kids volunteered to paint the tree fences; flower decorations for the classrooms and such other work.

In all, it was a wonderful experience. It was the first time Aruna and I met with people who think and work the way we do and it was nice to sit with people and exchange notes on the ‘how’.

Nirupama spoke on home schooling. She was bombarded with questions and she quite casually answered them.

Some of them :

- Did she not miss action of peer group? **Not really, there were six other children who grew up with her**
- Did she ever feel lonely? **While there are books in this world?**
- What did she do when she was free? **Read, listen to music, learn to sing, take classes in our school**

- Was it all very intellectual all the time? **Not really, there was more time to play mischief.**
- Did she do things like art / craft / music **Music – yes, art –sometimes, craft-no**
- Would she do the same for her kids when the time came? **Of course, one doesn't deny nice things to children**

Her session was scheduled 15mts for talk and 15 for Q&A; the session lasted an hour and a half.

Below are notes on some groups / individuals whose workshops we attended.

Some of the Indian contingent

Idiscoveri - Asish Rajpal

A Delhi NGO that bases its philosophy on Gandhiji's concepts of education. Led by Asish Rajpal, it is a very idealistic organisation. They now have a school in Haryana; children are taught in the local language; children take part in the school's maintenance, its cleanliness and begin writing only after reading – as prescribed by Gandhiji. Before his present life, Asish was in the US. He started looking at schools critically when his own children began school. That's when the idea of starting a school germinated.

He has a unique way of appointing teachers. He takes the candidates to the mountains for a week. They live camp style, doing all that is essential by themselves and also attending classes on education. By the end of the week only the truly committed are left and they join his group of teachers who, he says proudly, are ready to work late into the night.

Asish and his wife are home schooling their two lovely children.

Shikshantar, Jaipur

Led by Manish and Vidhi, Shikshantar has a programme called "Walking out and walking in". Children walk out of confining schools and situations and walk into freedom and space for learning. They are making an impact in Rajasthan and more and more youngsters are joining them. They run a

place where youngsters get together and teach and learn from each other and the adults around them. The format is free and learning is a joy.

Dance, music, pottery, putting out their books, cooking and eating – everything is done as a community. Manish and Vidhi are looking forward to homeschooling their pretty 16month baby.

[The Concerned for working children, Bangalore](#)

As the name suggests, the NGO works with child labourers and try to impart basic learning.

[KBJinan, Kerala](#)

Talked on detextualisation “tear the text books, burn books. Let children learn for themselves without the interference of adults”. He is very strong and is making it his life work to free children from adult prejudices.

[Tushar Gandhi, Gandhi foundation, Mumbai](#)

Tushar Gandhi spoke on being a Gandhi. It was full of anecdotes and stories and told with a brand of wry humor.

Groups from abroad:

[Yaacov Hecht, Israel](#)

One of the first to draft what democratic education is:

- Freedom: children make their own decision about their learning. There are no compulsory lessons, no binding timetable, exams are voluntary
- Equal rights between learners and teachers. No one is superior to anyone else or can prescribe what anyone else has to do
- Democratic voting : the school community itself decides how the school is organised; rules are made communally and every student and every teacher has one vote
- Links between the school and its environment : learning doesn't take place in the form of instruction; opportunities offered by local town or villages are also used.
- He conducted a number of workshops and they were most democratic!

Yaacov has had only three years of formal schooling – from 13 to 16. And having taught himself to read, he found that Tolstoy said all that he did! He spent some time at Summerhill and then started the Hadera school for Democratic Education in Tel Aviv, Israel. At the request of the Israeli govt. he left it to start other schools in Israel. His own four sons study at Hadera.

Tokyo Shure

This is an NGO started by Keiko Okuchi whose son was not doing too well in school. She ‘knew’ that her son was bright and yet here were school authorities saying that he was not good because he did not conform. So she began to take classes for him and other children like him. Today, it has become a university that caters to children who walk out of the normal stream and want to learn. The university offers a wide variety of subjects – including the ones the children have created. From filming to drama to art to history of man and designing cars that run on solar energy, the university encourages every child. There are today 30 children and 50 volunteer teachers. Age group 13 to 24. Some do not join the main stream but find work or become entrepreneurs. The university is now 10 years old while the school is 20 years old.

The university is addressing questions:

1. Students being accepted by society as graduates
2. Change from being considered an alternative to being main stre

Room 13, Scotland

Schools do not have classrooms numbered 13. So Rob Fairley decided that he would take art to children in schools and allow them to learn to paint of their own – with little or no interference. And he called such art rooms Room 13. What started as an experiment in making art a part of life soon grew to include such activities as cross country trekking, filming, photography where children decide what to do and how and when. Children were also encouraged to make Room 13 self sufficient and each school was allowed to formulate how they’d like to do so. So freedom encouraged them to find the means and in the process find themselves. They have grown – they now have ten such schools in Scotland and hope to have a few in England. They already have one in Kathmandu. We met

Claire – a guide of Room 13 and also two of their students aged 13 and 16. Highly independent and very composed, they impressed us.

Sally Carless

Sally from USA spoke on ways of learning and learners. That because the system treats everyone as same kind of learners, children have difficulties. She said that there were five kinds of personalities:

- Those who invent : who question, discover, inquisitive
- Those who plan, organize, schedule and have order
- Those who move, do, play and are spontaneous
- Those who talk, are cooperative, help and are caring
- Those who think, wonder, day dream contribute new ideas

If a teacher is able to find the category/ies a child belongs to it would be easy to plan lessons and the approach can be tailored to suit the child's nature. She had further categorised and detailed the characteristic of each group. The session was interesting as she asked the participants to evaluate themselves. Most found the group they belonged to and were pleasantly surprised to find themselves analysed! Also, the session became interesting because a quick reconciliation to childhood learning problems was made.

Marc Lazard, France

Talked on using the right side of the brain. He did it through drawing. I did only one class with him and the intensity that was expected whilst drawing was meditative and even soporific! He saw Vinod's drawing and was impressed by the details the child was able to observe. We all looked at Vinod afresh and I was quite awed by him.

John Loflin, USA

Talked on Homo Curaos – a term he has coined to tell how curious we are as a specie. His next question was : why when we all agree that man is by nature curious children are not allowed to ask questions in class. He has taught in government schools in New York and he was expelled because he asked too many questions of authorities. Especially concerning children who are termed 'special'. Special children are those who have a problem. His contention is that instead of trying to solve the problems, children are shunted from school to school and special learning rooms. He gave cases

especially of black students, students with dyslexia, attention deficient disorders and said how when these children were removed from 'normal' schools soon became 'good' students and even went on to doing graduate courses. He wanted such titles be removed and that the children be accepted. He has been working on these lines for more than two decades and is hated by authorities.

He has charted a [Student's bill of rights](#), which is very interesting. It gives a fair idea that education system in the US is about as enlightened as ours!

[Mike Weimann and Meta, Germany](#)

Began NGOs in East Berlin with a view to give children a fair chance at learning. They will be hosting the next IDEC in Berlin next year. They have been demanding equal rights for children and adults and want to bring about changes in the educational system; they support self management and self governance of schools.

They are both very intense people, very serious about their work; but with a ready laugh. Both are East Berliners and speak of the wall with an interesting perspective.

[Sands School, England](#)

One of the first democratic schools to be established (reminded one very much of Summer Hill) it had Sybilla leading her group of 10 – most of whom were students 13 to 19 years of age. Very bright and informal students, they led a group discussion on students as teachers.

[Jerry Mintz, Alternate Education Resource Organisation](#)

Jerry Mintz began talking of democratic education decades ago and was then a lone voice in the US. He still is one – talking of decision making by students, trying to talk to education department of giving freedom to children.

In his book, [No homework and recess all day](#), Jerry talks of the [difference between freedom and license](#) – a very important and fine difference. Mostly, it is because one is confused with the other that school authorities refuse freedom.

Jerry's table tennis classes at the IDEC meet and his sessions with students on democratic education had full attendance. He can also speak words backwards!

Gail Thomas

Gail spoke on 'Opportunities and choices for children with special needs in main stream education'. Like Loflin, she was very intense about children getting 'boxed' in by terms and never being given a chance to come out of it. She is trying to find solutions by creating and stimulating an awareness.

A single observation

All the years we home schooled Niru, people looked on us as some kind of freaks. It was nice knowing that there a few thousand out there just like us.

A special note

Niru and Tanvi helped in bringing out a IDEC daily; they worked as reporters, writers, sub editors, key in-ners. They probably met even the participants that we didn't. They liaised with other students of their age from Sands, Tutorial School, USA. Copies of the IDEC Daily Reporter can be read on the web site IDEC2004.