

Snapshots - Jan2000-April 2002

The school has now been fully accepted. Until two years ago we were still only a 'free school for the handicapped' and so were not considered as 'acceptable' by the 'higher class'. This distinction has now appeared to have been relegated -and the worth of the system is more easily recognised. In their view our status has been 'elevated'. We are gaining a reputation of being a very child friendly and effective school in terms of learning. We are also moving from being known as a school for the mild brain injured children of the poorest sections to a school that caters to special needs - for the bright, average and those who need special help. That is not to say that we have taken on any 'hurt' children - there aren't any in the village that we know of who is not already with us. But we do have children who have hearing/speech problems, mal nutrition and poor mental capacities and child abuse cases. We are happy to say that no distinction is made, that all children are taught with the same vim and enthusiasm. Every child is growing the best he can and we take them as they come. We have no admission tests - every one is welcome. Since we believe in joyous education for all, we teach each child to his potential all the while stringently evaluating to see if we can do more and in what way. We have helped start two schools Primrose School, Pondicherry 1999, Aurochild School, Cuddalore 2000

In both cases our commitment has been in initial training of teachers and in continued visits for evaluation and teaching assistance. We are in the process of training and help start a school at Malavli, Maharashtra. Since Aruna's writing in the New Sunday Express, there is a lot more awareness of the method and its efficacy. Every issue brings 25 -30 e-mails, some very serious questions. The support here is in the spread of the ideas and creating an awareness that education can be what we want for our children. Our long term and in fact, the only goal: Joyous Education for All. We hope to meet it.

Our special achievements this year

Two of our children who had completed the 5th grade left us to join the local secondary school. They are doing extremely well and are topping their class. Which reassures us that whilst educating we have not lost the perspective that these children have to go back to 'the world'. We are now ready to send out our next six children come June 2003.

January : Nirupama was granted the permission by Swami Dayananda for attending the three month course in Vedanta and Sanskrit. It was an intense schedule starting with prayers at 5:30, meditation at 6:30, three classes of Vedanta (an hour each), one in Sanskrit and one Chanting (Some upanishads, Rudram), and Satsang at 8:30 ; a handful surely for a twelve year old. But she went through the course quite cheerfully and really learnt a lot - "giving her new insights when she re-reads Asimov, Richard Bach, Carl Sagan". Swamiji certainly went all out to give her very special attention as did the other teachers. It was indeed a unique blessing and we sincerely wish that more of our children can do this. It has now become a challenge to us !

February : With some of the nursery children (between ages two and four) raising Cain and wanting to go home, the older ones named the class 'Silly Symphony'. The class has equal number of girls and boys. And shooting our theories that girls are always smarter than boys, the boys are good too! The class has its usual mix of the very bright and those with learning difficulties. They are doing well and complain the seniors have more fun because they are allowed to sit on the computers without supervision! A one day visit to Velankanni with more than 30 children: It was fun to see the joy on their faces and the thrill of seeing the sea for the first time in their lives. The wide expanse was too much to accept for a few of them until the teachers forced them to. Then it was difficult to extricate them ! The kids who had never seen the sea before were most amazed: don't the waves get tired? Do the boats take people too or just fish? Who owns them? What tide is it? How do I know? Questions galore. The bus ride back was quiet with the half the children sleeping. We had two guests with us for the picnic. We presume they enjoyed the trip - they bore well the children who were all over them.

March : The month saw us reeling under the noise and crying in the nursery by the new batch of sixteen. Preparations were afoot for a half hour program by the children for the annual day function. Songs, Dance, Drama, Speech, Jokes....all were practiced with diligence; the teachers rose to the occasion writing the script, choreographing, and training. This was the first time in the history of the school that such an activity was taken up at this scale and it took more energies than we imagined ! Training thirty odd kids of various ages, abilities, notions was a challenge. The idea was to have every child up on 'stage'.

April : The older children were fine : they could sing / recite/ dance well. But what about six of our kids aged four-one can't speak, two cannot be understood, three who are so shy they smile and clap when a visitor leaves? Simple : three were dressed up as Buddhist monks - all they had to do was walk across the stage. The other three had beads and chains on their necks, feathers on the head and a small stick, and all they had to say was "oombh", "aaah", "oombh", "aaah". When they came on, Swamiji, the other visitors, and parents burst out laughing. That enthused them and they did some more jerky movements, that created even more laughter. Ultimately, the group was declared 'successful'. Swamiji blessed the children and the school.

May : We conducted a one week teacher's training at Pondi for the new staff of Primrose school. We were joined by Sushila - Aruna's sister - who also runs a pre-school in Mumbai. The school which had been started by Mother's Service society in June 1999, was really beginning to consolidate. The confidence with which the children performed at their annual day function was even mentioned in the newspapers! A new school at Cuddalore , Tamil Nadu, "Aurochild" was to be started in June. The teachers and the management [Correspondent] took the training along with the teachers at Pondi. The training also included a group from Cuddalore who were wanting to take the course just to see how they could get to using some of the techniques at their school. Our own teachers had been to Arshavidyashram Gurukulam - Coimbatore for a three day course on Vedic

Heritage Teaching Programme. They came back charged and now integrate the programme into the regular curriculum. The children also enjoy - they have a story session every day. At the time of going to press, Ramayana is being recounted in detail at the assembly.

June : "Aurochild" was formally inaugurated at Cuddalore and we had taken quite a few of the children from Primrose (Pondy) - for demonstration. The way they went through the motions was almost professional. Their teachers were thrilled that they did so well ! Just shows - give them an inch and they prove themselves a 'ruler'. The parents (including prospective) of the children of the new school were quite amazed and warmly receptive.

July : School reopened and this year's excitement was the entry of two girls from Mumbai - 8 and 12 years. They have so quickly integrated with the children. The eight year old Tanvi - a Maharashtrian - speaks fluent Tamil now. Ramya is affectionate to all. So with Nirupama and the three kids from Mumbai, the children have begun to speak in English though they are incredibly shy with us and strangers, with reference to speaking in English only, not otherwise. In July we were sanctioned an underground cable for the telephone connection.

August : Aruna was in Mumbai for a week conducting a work shop along with Sushila - for parents on the techniques used in the school. Sushila conducts such programmes every two months; the proceeds of which come to the Trust. An underground telephone line and our phones have worked every single day since then - quite an improvement in six years.

September : A time when the school was quite busy with covering the academics, specially since our first two students Nirupama and Rekha aged 12 were scheduled to appear for the ESLC. Being the first two students all our attention was on them performing excellently and special efforts including a battery of tests, quizzes, examination oriented slogging.

October : A time for prayer - Saraswati puja - solemnly conducted and the computer classes were inaugurated with 11 students from a nearby school. The course was scheduled as a three month course through till December - Anand taking charge, covering basics of computers, introduction to operating systems - windows 95, windows 98, windows NT, MS Word, MS Excel , introduction to the internet using explorer and outlook, use of CDs and other resources for preparing material for projects, games galore!! The children are given time on the computer every session - so they are really hands on !

November : The school closed for Diwali after three serious months of work. The children have already finished the year's academic target and are now on to doing projects and have more time at the computers. Nirupama and Rekha prepared for the ESLC examination with some apprehension as they had never appeared for any external examination before - but they are expecting to come out with flying colours. Aruna has turned a columnist writing fortnightly on 'Alternative Schooling ' for the Sunday Express a new publication of the Indian Express Madurai Unit. We believe it is well received.

December : And the children got ready for Christmas and prize distribution day which was on the 27th. This year too, as in every year, all children were given gifts - for the effort and the results they were able to show. Three children were specially honoured for taking care of the younger children and teaching them during their spare time. Aruna's language laboratory dream finally took off: an audio system where 6 children can be taught at a time; 3 fully multimedia computers where another six children can work / watch at a time. We have less than 12 children in a class normally. The children love every moment of it and there is hope that they will speak every language well. And that those who have hearing difficulties or speech problems will also be better taken care of. Today, every child spends an hour at the lab. The teachers are also happy to know that they can be even more effective - their dreams have been growing along with ours and all round there is an effervescence.

January 2001 : A large classroom of 420 sqft was completed for the primary class. It has been named 'Sagar' - the sea. Very airy, bright and windows without grills - next to the play park. Two other rooms have been built each of 216 sqft each. The Audio visual and computer lab has been named 'Contact', and the office / reception / staff work room all rolled into one as 'Act Now'! We now have a complete multimedia set including an AGP to connected to the TV.

February : A proper running track has been laid. A volley ball court has been sanded and softened for the younger children. For the greening of the school, water pipes have been laid from the irrigation tube well to the gardens. This should facilitate watering the banana plants and coconut trees besides the flower patches. This was until now being done with hose pipes.

March : As part of the village activity the Trust has helped with the furniture and the lighting of the local elementary school. We are hoping to follow this advantage with having the teachers use our materials on a library basis. We are hoping that this would be a simple method for extending our area of influence to the rest of the village. Time for reviews, exams and tests. Exams were conducted for children joining the regular school in std 6th at Sembangudi.

April : Annual day function held on 16th April and school closes.

May : Our classes are now fully furnished including mats (colourful paii) for reading corners. 10 day training program was conducted for teachers at Pondi / Cuddalore. Both schools are now doing very well, with Primrose having more than 90 children, and Aurochild 24.

June/July : School began with a tight schedule for all classes, with the emphasis being working with the children to complete the state text syllabus by October. The target was so set to facilitate use of other media and give more time to developing their personalities and emotional growth in the second half of the year. Both Nirupama and Rekha did very well at the ESLC exams scoring more than 70%. Rekha along with the young adults (Ragini and Rajesh) have joined 'regular' school at the 9th grade level - all three who would have been otherwise classified as drop-outs!

August : We had two interesting visitors - Aditya Advani and Padmini Seshadri. Aditya a typical city child (20 years old) wanted to have a first hand experience of rural school atmosphere and issues involved in it. The children enjoyed his stay while he talked to them about photography, astronomy, first aid, poems, stories of his school experience, stories of places he had visited. The result was the exposure the children had to a different personality who had happily consented to share himself selflessly, leaving behind the comforts of a lush Bombay home. Padmini, the mother of one of the resident children, taught the children papier-mache, pottery, painting, colouring, decorating old bottles, vases etc. The children were thus exposed to varied art forms.

September : The children participated in the inter district competitions, held by the State Fine Arts Center at Tiruvarur. Hectic practice and enthusiasm had 15 children take part at various levels and for different items - painting, elocution, vocal music. All children were awarded certificates for participation and Nirupama and Ramya won the first prizes for vocals in their age groups. It was a major program with hundreds of participants. It was the first exposure of its kind for the children and they rose to it.

October : Diwali celebrations saw almost all the children from the nearby houses and we had a group of more than 70 children other than our school kids. A rush to Tiruvarur for a fresh stock of 'noiseless' crackers had them enjoying themselves for a good three hours - and some sweets winding up on the celebrations. We began with the third project named

"Srushti - Center for Training Parents (SCTP). We had 15 parents come for a three full day training on our teaching methodologies, philosophy and pedagogy. We hope to have at least three such workshops every year. The growth of this project will depend on the number of requests that come in. As Raghavan was in Mumbai for quite a few months - he took the opportunity to assist in the conducting of three workshops (with Sushila) .

November : It was thought that we would have a small Vidya Ganapathy idol installed -a small temple with a large prayer hall is the proposal - funds permitting. Teachers were now fully using the facilities available-computers, television and video, CDs, audio equipment and the teachers' meeting revealed that the progress in the children was significantly boosted with this usage.

December : The month saw us visiting Anna Planetarium at Trichy. The children enjoyed the novel experience of viewing stars at 'touchable' distances, learning about the sun , the planets and their moons. It was in fact the first time our teachers were visiting a planetarium. Now they are more easily able to talk about our solar system ! A few sessions on the big bang theory had the children listening with rapt attention. It was a rediscovery of the self for them. A glorious exposure!

January 2002 : The children practiced rigorously for the Jan 26 celebrations. This time a special program was planned with the children doing all the work. Selecting songs to sing, setting them to tune, choosing the singers, selecting songs to dance to and choosing dancers, writing scripts for small skits and choreographing them....everything planned and executed by the children alone. The teachers were only on standby for assistance where asked! The program was such a success that a special announcement was made that all the children who participated in the various programs would be taken to Bombay if they practiced harder and were willing to put it up as a show there! The challenge was seriously taken up.

February : The planning for the Bombay trip became a frenzy and everybody was keen on making it possible. The result was it was decided that the children would put up a one hour program on 16th April and the same would be staged in Bombay later.

March : Again a time for reviews, exams and tests. Exams were conducted for children joining 'regular' school. The first three batches had earned a fair name and three students were prepared for leaving. Children decided that they would spend time on the functions - after and before school hours so that their studies would not be affected!

April : Annual day function held on 16th April with a visit by Swami Atmatriptananda and Shri Rajgopal, (Ragahvan's uncle) school closes. The program was well attended and we even had it video-graphed. The video was shown in the local cable television. For the first time we had invited teachers from Primrose and Aurochild and they were astonished at the performance of the children here! The annual day celebrations brought out talents - in the teachers the ability to write dialogues for a half hour play; among the students to learn not only their own parts but everybody else's too. The next day the children were given a lunch comprising entirely of sweets and savouries - a fitting end to a satisfying academic year.