

Snap shots of 2002 - 2003

Aruna's column in the Sunday Express -"Alternative Schooling" - remained popular and they decided to publish a compendium of the articles of the last two years in book form "Your child can be a genius" Aruna was awarded a medal for the Woman of the Year (Education) for pioneering work on Alternative Schooling; the list of awardees included Dr.Padma Subramaniam, Ms.Shiny Wilson and others.

Three teachers' training courses were conducted during the year and we are really happy to say that our dream in 1999 of ten schools in ten years was becoming a reality! (we have helped begin schools five, six and seven this year). Manthan Vidyashram at Chennai and Zenith School at Trichy and the best - The Delta Study school, Kochi (a CBSE school with more than 750 children).They have decided to revamp their systems to follow our methods in their school. We understand that this is a very prestigious school at Kochi and if we can work it there, several schools at Kochi would be happy to follow! (Fingers crossed!!)

The New Indian Express (Madurai) group launched- Women's World Expo and we were invited for a series of talks at Kochi, Bangalore and Chennai. We have really been touring and meeting thousands of parents. It was only then that we realized Aruna's large reader following!

Our trip to Mumbai with 30 children and the musical evening put up by them thrilled us. Traveling (by reserved coaches), shopping in large departmental stores and the streets of Mumbai, ogling at cars and buildings and fly-overs, visits to National Park, the Kanheri caves, Fantasy land, I-max theatre (a 3D movie theater) a boat ride at the Gateway of India, Prince of Wales museum, Malabar hills, Marine Drive, going up lifts in sky-scrappers....It was certainly an incredible experience for the village children, the teachers and us.

Some interesting remarks by visitors:

Robert MacFarlane : Wonderful! The children look so bright and happy and we can see the teachers are happy teaching.

Dr Poulose : Your children write so beautifully - even on un-ruled sheets - all of them do. That is very remarkable. You must write in the paper about it.

Ravi Aluganti : When I met you at Bangalore I did not believe you so I came to check. The children are so bright and have so much to say and are always smiling. I am going to use this method with my group at Madanapallee.

Anita Balasubramaniam : Normally, when we visit schools, it is very difficult to hold a conversation with the children. Here I found that the children have tons of things to say and they even teased me!

Harsha Samani : The children don't fight among themselves; there is so much freedom yet they are very disciplined.

Mrs Vasantha : Nirupama and Ramya singing so well is no surprise. But that other children sing in perfect key - that is remarkable.

Jayashree Janardhan : They are so cute! Ashok, Manasa and I will come and spend some time next year. What should I plan so I can teach the children whilst Manasa is in class

April : The annual day of the school was held with much fun-fare. The children has practiced for more than a month and the teachers had spent a considerable amount of time making it a fairly professional job. Skits were designed, plays written, songs chosen and rigorously perfected, folk dances were selected and the tunes were set by the music teacher. The children had chosen 10 songs - in English, Hindi, Tamil and Sanskrit - and were assisted by 'Pati' (grandmother - Aruna's mother) and Swami Atmatriptananda (one of our trustees) in fine tuning them. Stories of Veerapandia- Kattabomman and the Maruthu Pandian brothers were chosen and scripted as plays and the teachers had done a wonderful job of writing for it. The whole school knew all the dialogues by the time the show was finally put up! What simpler way of doing a text? The children saw a movie 'Kattabomman' to see how the king and the others walked, talked, dressed and lived! Their imitation was fairly realistic! The resulting two hour show, performed before a packed audience, appeared

professional! The audience included Swami Atmatriptananda, Dr. Rajagopal (Raghavan's uncle from London who timed his visit to the show), teachers from our group of schools from Pondicherry and Cuddalore and the parents of the school children. We decided to this time record the entire show on video. To our pleasant surprise, one of the parents who also runs the local cable in the village, decided to air the program - something that had never happened before!

May : Vacation time and time for the series of constructions that would go on till Jan of the next year (they take the slow and steady theory far!). We spent considerable time on making detailed notes for the teachers for the academic year. Some children who were to appear for the Std. X examination in March 2003 were called and time was spent on English, Social Sciences and Math.

June : The school reopened with a quite air of expectation. Aruna had promised that 30 kids would be taken to Mumbai (Bombay) for a trip. The six resident children had planned a program - a musical evening - completely designed, scripted, choreographed and executed by them and 23 others. It all began with a casual conversation where the children asked us how they could raise funds for the school - and the idea of staging a show was born. We decided that we would not in any way interfere in its creation except to act as mediators.

July : saw us in Mumbai. Most of you would have received a copy of the Mumbai report and we would be boring you but just a few words here. It was the first time that these children were traveling by train - by a reserved compartment at that. The show was excellently put up and the audience was very understanding, responsive and appreciative of the élan with which it was done! After the show, of course, was a flurry of sight-seeing - shopping in large departmental stores and the streets, going up and down the highways studying cars and buildings and fly-overs, the safari at Borivali National Park, the Kanheri caves, the amusement park - fantasy land, watching Mount Everest at I-max theatre (a 3D movie hall), a boat ride at the Gateway of India, Prince of Wales museum, Malabar hills, Marine Drive, going up lifts in sky-scrappers.... We were moved by the effort put in by everyone there in so organizing everything that nothing

was in want! It was indeed a wonderful experience for the teachers and the children for whom it would be a ever-lasting fond memory.

August : saw the construction of one new class room measuring 450 sqft, being completed. Called "Sagar" it is a room where about 20 children can easily complete all their day-to-day academics and physicals. (A large airy class-room that has convenient windows for the children to jump out - which is rarely discouraged- appears to be the most attractive feature of the room).

September : saw us back at Mumbai for a session with parents who had earlier attended our sessions and now had children in the primary and middle school level. We rushed back to the village for a Teachers' Training session. Three groups, one from Chennai, one from Trichy and one from Malavli (near Lonavala) had sent a total of 8 teachers to be trained to start a school along the lines we do at the village. This has resulted in two new schools being started - Manthan Vidyashram at Chennai and Zenith School at Trichy. The third group Balgram - had already started a school in January 2002 and these were newer teachers who had joined in. The schools - visited during April now - were doing very well for themselves!

October : Saraswati pooja was conducted with solemnity. Two new class-rooms Ganga and Ponni each measuring 320 sqft., were opened and the large windows provide a panoramic aerial view of the lush green fields. We guess that this would require the teachers to become much more interesting to keep the attention of the kids in the class! We put up a small hand-written paper on the tree at the local bus stop and another at the temple for new admissions for the year. We thought we should take about 12 children; we got 77 applications! After a lot of pressure working and discussions at the highest and lowest levels we settled for about 34 new entrants. We now have 104 children and they are a mouthful!

November : Mr.Shivakumar joined us with his wife Sugandhi and daughter Pavitra. A break-through. He was in the Naval Service and could take a VRS if he so decided! Three months over phone and personal meetings and then he took the bold step of exiting the 'norm' world and deciding to live with us in the village. Having taken complete charge of the administration he relieves us from a lot of routine. Sugandhi has taken the

youngest class and has settled down and Pavitra goes around as if she has been here all her life! Indian Express (Madurai) group began the first Women's World Expo at Kochi and our half hour slot turned out a four hour interactive session with the parents there. Nirupama (our daughter who now accompanies us wherever we go) had her first chance at public speaking - answering questions on stage from parents attending the meet!

December : Always the month of Christmas and gifts. Even the little ones who joined us in October knew there'd be gifts. So all calendars had 25th marked off and each day was struck off with great joy. By 24th the children were in a state of high excitement. This year - as usual - there were gifts of books for the older ones, games and toys for the younger ones. Rumour has it that the elders in the family were being taught to play ludo, snakes and ladders and chess. It is also said that some mothers tried using crayons instead of the usual rangoli powder!

January : The month began with a variety of activities. A conference was held at Bangalore by Asha for Education where we participated. Asha brought together other NGOs that are doing experimental work and are successful at it. It was an interesting experience meeting others working like we are and may be in even more difficult circumstances and situations. We gave a half hour presentation on our methods. It was well received, we conducted a day's workshop for some of the participants - mostly parents and we hear that their children are reading - some as young as two and a half. We've had two visitors who have gone back and tried the reading programme with their groups successfully. Woman's World Expo at Bangalore had a turn out that was more than expected. It was almost a two hour with a question and answer session on learning and bringing up children. We went back to Kochi for initiating the method at Delta Study - a CBSE school. The teachers were so enthusiastic - they said it was good to know that they can be fully effective in class. That nobody likes to do less than possible. The first day there were 18 teachers of the preprimary and first standard. The second day Raghvan's fame as a demo math teacher had spread and we had an attendance of almost 30 teachers. The Principal- Dr Poulouse- was more than happy. They later visited our school to see the method in action. They had brought with them a lot material that they had prepared and we were amazed to see teachers who are to retire in a couple of years or so put in so much effort and look so happy doing it all. We are

quite certain that Dr.Poulose and his team will do extraordinarily well. Aruna's book "Your child can be a genius" with a foreword by Karmayogi was published and released at Kochi by the New Indian Express. The book is a compilation of articles published in the Sunday Express over the last two and a half years.

February : The third Woman's World Expo at Chennai. Aruna was felicitated by the New Indian Express among a group of women who have done exceptional work in their field. Lord VidyaGanapathy was installed in the school temple and He now lives with us. It has been solemnised that the children and staff may do the daily Poona. So the children are being taught to perform the "truly traditional' Poona. In the first week of His being with us He performed a miracle. A child we despaired of, since he made no attempt to learn apart from the fact that he has learning disabilities, prayed that he should be able to read. He did it of his own. In a month he had run through the UKG and first standard books and is now reading the second standard books. That is where he should be by age. Seeing this, some others in his class have begun to work too.

March : saw Arena on a whirlwind trip to Mumbai to take an advanced course for parents with children in the primary on how to teach various subjects. Rocha, our first and one of our very bright students(she aspires to become a Doctor), and three others were the first to take the Std X Tamil nadir board examination, proving comprehensively that it is possible to go to a school not yet recognized and still appear for the Std X! March brought visitors: Robert MacFarlane, Mrs. Maharaja and Mrs. Vedanta of Mother's Service Society. We were most delighted to have them. Robert, as usual, had a bag full of ideas that will take us a few months in some cases and years others, to implement!

April : The last fortnight is always the most exciting for the children. Preparations for annual day celebrations begin and no set routine except practice. This year we had a few short dances and songs by the little ones. The three year olds enjoyed themselves. For them the thrill was in getting on to the stage. They didn't do much but giggle and smile at their parents clean forgetting that they had to dance. It ended with the teacher giving cue dancing more than the children. There was a 'grandma's gossip circle' put up by the first standard. The gossip was on nutrition and health. They

delivered the dialogues with great aplomb. The dialogues were funny and the children actually paused to wait for the audience to stop laughing before saying the next lines! The children of the second, third and fourth standard - 23 in all - along with Ramie and Miriam put up a 45 minute musical on VOChidambaram Pillai's life. Since the songs were Bharatiyaar's, the teachers had to write dialogues to match the strength of the songs. The play came off very well and it moved us to see them. A few parents had tears in their eyes watching the performance! The children never fail to amaze us: on stage they had the poise of professionals and it was obvious that they were enjoying themselves immensely. The school closed for the children on the 12th with a 'sweets only' lunch. The teachers continue until the 30th. Preparations are on for the next year - planning and creating new texts for the 'senior' classes of second, third and fourth standard. A new set of texts to teach English for the third and fourth standard is on. And through the language we expect to teach science and geography - to give the children the 'big picture'. We are in the process of writing 'inspiring lives' as texts for history. The texts are written lightly, high lighting an aspect that might catch a child's fancy. Simultaneously, add-on reading material is also being created giving the chronological development of the personality. It is quite a task and we are happy to say that we are now creating writers in teachers.