

Work and Wisdom of Vernacular Educators from India

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About Sita School

Sita School is a daytime, alternative school, about 28 kms to the north of Bangalore, started in 1975 by Jane Sahi.

Forty children, mainly first generation school learners, aged between four and 15 years, come to the school from the surrounding villages. The medium of instruction is Kannada and the children learn English and Hindi as additional languages. The majority of the children take the Karnataka State Board's seventh standard examination in the Kannada medium as private candidates as and when they are prepared for it. So far all the children have successfully qualified. At present one student is even preparing for the tenth standard examination of the National Open School, New Delhi, in the English medium. Although the school does not have formal recognition from the educational authorities, a number of its ex-students have become teachers, gone in for art training, nursing, joined the seminary, undertaken vocational training and have worked their way towards acquiring college degrees.

Sita School began in 1975 with four children in the 4–6 years age group, in the home of one of the teachers. A year later, a room was constructed to keep books and materials. In 1985, one third of an acre was donated to the school and a low cost school building was constructed. The initial years were rather difficult as there was no electricity and water was in short supply. In 1987, an adjoining acre of land was gifted to the school. This has been developed as a garden with fruit and flowering trees. An existing building closeby, also donated to the school, is used as a work space for teachers and for housing the library, learning materials, etc.

The school functions five days a week, Monday to Friday. Older children are in school from 8.30 a.m. until 6 p.m. and younger children from 8.30 a.m. until 3 p.m. The school provides a breakfast drink of *ragi ganji* (millet porridge) and a simple lunch is served consisting of the customary *ragi mudde* (small millet balls) with *tarkari saaru* (vegetable stew).

The children come from the neighbouring four villages of Silvepura, Fatimapura, Thimalapura and Hurulichikanahalli. They are largely from the socially and economically underprivileged sections of the *Dalit* community who converted to Christianity. Children belonging to Hindu and Muslim communities, children of migrant workers, children of uprooted and unstable families all study at Sita School. It is a place where children who, for socio economic or other reasons, have dropped out of regular school or have not found a place in the educational mainstream but still wish to get themselves an education.

The daily schedule is as follows:

8.15 a.m.	day begins with cleaning duties
9.00 a.m.	silence/meditation/play for the juniors.
9.15 a.m.	assembly and prayer
9.45 – 11.15 a.m.	first session
11.15 – 11.30 a.m.	porridge break
11.30 – 1.00 p.m.	second session
1.00 – 2.00 p.m.	lunch break
2.15 – 4.30 p.m.	last session
5.00 – 6.00 p.m.	silent study

Sita School is structured in a way that children can enter at any level and are encouraged to learn at their own pace without pressure of exams or fear of failure and disapproval. Literacy is only one aspect of education. Learning that fosters solely the growth of the intellect is often fundamentally disconnected with life and therefore, oppressive to children who are full of feeling, sensitivity, eager to learn and wanting a direct experience with life in all its entirety.

Says Jane: 'At Sita School we try to create an environment which stimulates the child not just intellectually, but also emotionally, creatively and socially. We try to draw on the feeling and imagination of the child in a broad non-sectarian and spiritual sense. We try to cultivate a sense of wonder, an appreciation of the beautiful and the healthy. At the same time, we actively cultivate cooperation, sharing and respect for the other and towards nature and material things, to foster a just and balanced way of life.'

The school affords opportunities for many types of learning. In addition to language study, practical math, social studies and science, children learn clay work, tailoring, needlework, printing, first aid, food, health and home remedies, kitchen gardening. Theatre, art and craft lessons bring creativity into their learning experience.



The week-long 'Water Project' findings written and illustrated

Children spend as much time writing as they do in conversations, listening and telling stories, singing, craftwork, cleaning, cooking, gardening and prayer. Work and play are balanced in the course of the day. Traditionally, learning, working and living were bound together and the child was very much a part of an adult person's life. Today after the child is detached from adult struggles and concerns, it does not even contribute to productive and necessary work



What do we see around us? Learning nature words with Jane Sahi

within the family. Instead children are overloaded with 'intellectual work' where the connection with life has been severed and thus education becomes mere drudgery. Children are thus deprived of the enjoyment and pride of doing at least one thing well. This brings about a sense of failure, inferiority, boredom, passivity and dependency. Thus, cleaning and caring for the school premises, arranging books and material, serving lunch, gardening etc. are tasks woven into the fabric of daily routine and done by adults and children alike with a sense of duty and enthusiasm.

The school children are grouped into five groups on the basis of abilities. There are four full-time teachers, a part-time needlework teacher, a cook and a gardener. Jane Sahi, the founder teacher, is the heart and soul of the school. She teaches English, fills in for other subject-teachers whenever required and coordinates all the activities of the school.

The teachers and the children have over the years put together a wide variety of teaching aids and activity material for use in the classroom. Games, newspaper and magazine cuttings, a wide selection of textbooks, children's pictures, greeting cards, a small but well stocked library, simple science equipment are all used effectively in the class. Apart from this there are flashcards, reading cards, work cards, charts and pictures all painstakingly made and illustrated by hand. This enables the teachers to be flexible in handling the mixed-age, multifaceted class effectively so that each child is given activity material appropriate to his/her level.

Teaching at Sita School is largely clustered around themes (also known as the project method). Children are encouraged to plan, explore, experiment and evaluate topics in a variety of ways that cut across traditional subject boundaries. Classes are highly in-

The Teachers

The school is fortunate that it has a core group of very unassuming, hard working and energetic teachers, who have thoroughly imbibed the spirit of the school and give shape to the ideals of the school.

There are no formal staff meetings. As and when a need or problem arises, a meeting is arranged. Spontaneous sharing of class experiences, what to teach and how to plan work happens during the *ragi* break or at lunch. Jane and the teachers share a very close personal relationship that overflows the boundaries of their school work.

Divya Jyoti joined Sita School in 1980 as a full time teacher. Earlier, she pursued a crèche nurse-training course in Bangalore. She feels she has learnt the most, more than all the children. 'Jane is my backbone, my *adhara sthambha* who showed me that I had the ability to do and teach things I felt I was not able to do before. Initially when I came, I knew and taught only Kannada.

Now I confidently teach Hindi, Social Studies, even Math. She awakened in me the capacity to write stories and songs too! I wish we had been exposed to such educational opportunities in our school days – we would have excelled and gone a long way in our lives.' Divya's daughter Supriya studied in Sita School, did the National Open School exam and is now undergoing training in Odissi dance at Nityagram, a performing arts gurukula founded by the late Protima Bedi, the renowned danseuse and also studying a degree course.

Sarojini came to the school in 1989, taught at Sita School for nine years, then went back

to her hometown, Sirsi, to get married and raise a family. Within four years she returned to Sita School with her three and a half year old daughter and husband in tow, and now the family lives on campus. Her husband commutes daily to Bangalore for work while Sarojini teaches Social Studies. Medini, her little daughter is part of the youngest group, Karuna, in the school. 'We learnt about freedom, to be free from tradition and rigid ways, to teach without textbooks, to grow simply by oneself...this is what I value about Sita School.'

Kamalamma, who presently teaches math and science, joined in 1995. She lives on the campus with her husband and daughter.

'We take individual care of each child, and there is absolutely no violence. Jane too does not impose any views or methods on us, we freely express and share thoughts and doubts and help each other out.'



Sarojini, Divya and Jane

Rebecca is Sita School's gift to itself. When she was six years old Rebecca joined the fourth batch of children at Sita School. After spending five years, she left to complete her studies and returned to teach at the school. Rebecca now steers the youngest group through all school subjects and activities with utmost patience and confidence. She remembers the difficulties of the initial years in school, bringing water from far away...no power, no TVs and VCRs in the village. But she feels there was 'more strength and substance in the children and their lives in her childhood. Now, nobody cares for each other, people are obsessed with money and hanker after the falsehoods shown on TV.'

teractive and activity based. Topics include: Our Homes, Our Clothes, Our Village, Buildings Around Us, the Agricultural Cycle, the Town, Sight, Air, Earth, Ancient India, Man and Animals and so on. A theme is usually explored for between one to three months.

Some of the topics explored during a particular year are reflected in the colourfully illustrated screen-printed calendars made by the children each year. In 1979, when the unit was first set up, around 400 calendars were printed and sold. In 2003 the school



Pattern writing activity with Karuna Children

supplied 1300 calendars to two firms in Bangalore. However on an average, the school makes around 500 calendars every year. The sale of the calendars is a source of income for the school.

Some calendar themes have been: Games in the Village, Festivals, My Mother, Trees, Birds, Excursions, The Story of Buddha, People of India, Energy Sources, Water, Jataka Stories, Chipko Movement, Seasons and Flowers.

While the school is not sectarian, different religions and festivals do play a major role to give rhythm and joy to the school year. Morning assembly begins with lighting a lamp that has been cleaned

and placed on a *rangoli* (decorative art work on the floor) made of fresh leaves and flowers. Songs are sung from all traditions – Sanskrit chants, Christian prayers, Hindu bhajans. Festivals are very basic to Sita School life: Children's Day, end of term, Ganesh Chaturthi, Christmas, etc., are all celebrated with equal enthusiasm.

In the initial years of the school it was felt that the values of the family and community should be strengthened. The spirit of sharing and accepting responsibility within the family was highlighted as a value to be preserved. Despite ongoing rifts and divisions between different families, there was a feeling of overall unity in the village. This was consciously stressed and valued in the classroom.

The syllabus which has evolved over the years has been built on the child's own experience and knowledge of the immediate environment and the community. This gives a sense of relevance to their learning. In school, children are given the space to bring what they already know into the classroom so as to bridge the world outside the school with the world inside, thereby joining experience and reflection.

Cooperation, sharing and respect for the other is consciously fostered. There are many opportunities where responsibilities can be shared in small groups like making wall charts, murals, even their own books. Children in the course of the year make books on a variety of subjects and illustrate them for the use of younger children. Each child takes the trouble to write neatly and illustrate the book profusely because they know it will be shared and used. They also make books, reading cards and dolls for each other.

Older children help the younger ones with class work and children of different abilities and ages work together in groups. There are five multi-level groups at present: Karuna (4-8 year olds), Sadhana (8-12 year olds), Vasantha (12-14 year olds), Sangeetha (13-14 year olds) and Gulabi (children appearing for the Karnataka State Seventh Standard Board exams).

A mixed age group has the advantage of an informal atmosphere where the teaching and learning is among children themselves. In the absence of rigid standards, rewards and punishment, each child has a chance to establish his/her own pace of growth,

About Jane Sahi

Jane was born in 1949 into a Quaker family in England. She went to a Quaker residential school. Her father taught the philosophy of education and through him she was exposed to alternative ways of education, particularly the ideas of Rudolph Steiner and A.S. Neil.

She came to India in 1968 in search of a deeper understanding of Gandhiji's life and values. She met a number of individuals who helped shape her perspective and ideals. She mentions Marjorie Sykes and the Quaker Centre at Rasulia, Radhakrishna Menon, Banwarilal Choudhary, Laurie Baker – amongst innumerable others – whom she continues to draw inspiration from.

In 1970 she married Jyoti Sahi. Soon after, they moved to Bangalore and settled down near Silvepura where she now lives with her husband and her large family of five children (and two grandchildren).

Gandhiji continues to be to a strong source of inspiration, in particular, his vision and theory of basic education 'which is rooted in the soil both literally and figuratively.' Gandhiji insisted on the dignity of labour and on work being an integral part and means of intellectual growth.

Tagore also had a profound influence on Jane. Tagore rejected the artificiality and barrenness of English oriented bookish education that seeks only to train the mind and that too, only by suppressing one's creativity. At Shantiniketan, Tagore established a school that stimulated a vision of beauty in material things and an

integration with all that is natural and elemental.

In addition, Jane has been influenced by the Free School Movement in the West which has stressed the necessity of the individual's development in an environment free from the pressure of adult artificial expectations.

She has been considerably influenced by Rudolph Steiner, and of late has discovered Martin Bueber, the Jewish existentialist

thinker who she feels has finally provided her with a philosophical framework for her thinking.

The informal network of alternative schools that has been meeting in different places in India once a year for the last twelve years has given her a space to reflect. Sharing her experiences and doubts with this

wide variety of people in search of a similar quest she says has sustained her through all her trials. She hopes that as individuals and groups we can together address the question of oppression of children both within the school and outside.

She is constantly energized by ideas people bring when they come as chance visitors or volunteers. Even the places she visits leave her with new thoughts and connections to mull over. Jane particularly mentions how deep the impression a visit to the permaculture farm at Pastapur made on her. She saw close parallels between agriculture and education and subsequently wrote about it in an article on sustainable education. All her writing, Jane claims, is the result of reflection and outpourings after vigorous discussions at meetings.



Jane Sahi

in an atmosphere free of competitiveness and, at the same time, be aware of each other's needs.

Jane suggests that it is difficult to prescribe a definitive method or a set of methods for alternative education. If education is to be vital and meaningful it has to be organic, and open to change. The basis is not so much a prescribed method but a relationship, where individuals can constantly respond to themselves, to others and to their environment. Each child is so specific and unique that we have to evolve ways to deal with each one of them.

'There is much talk today of child-centric education in opposition to teacher-centric education. What is needed is the space between these two approaches. The child must be taken beyond what he knows in order to learn things that his immediate senses and observation cannot tell him because he lacks the necessary tools and experience. The teacher through making learning more concrete and practical, and by showing the connections to the known and familiar is able to integrate the old with the new, the known with the unknown.'

Jane stresses the centrality of the living relationship between the child and the teacher. Children are encouraged to think and work on their own but this does not reduce the teacher to the role of an observer leaving the child to deal with the impersonal written word and self study.

There is a delicate balance between freedom and authority in the classroom. 'It is difficult as a teacher to respond to each child as a person with a unique potential, an inner freedom, a special history and an unknown future. A gardener has to recognize the qualities of a plant ... he cannot mould the delicate white jasmine to the flaming extravagant orange of the *gulmohur*. A teacher is faced with the danger of feeling in control, imagining that growth can be

"standardized" and thus effectively paralysing creativity and spontaneity.'

Yet, 'it is the teacher's responsibility to prepare children for freedom, to equip the child with tools that enable him or her to accept responsibility and maturity in its fullness.'

Art is not an additional activity limited to the weekly drawing class, but is the basis, the underlying means of expression of all learning especially at the primary level. Nearly all the children at Sita School draws profusely and spontaneously and without inhibition. The school walls are decorated with children's work in a riot of colours and their yearly calendars are much sought after for their colour, harmony and forthright expression.

Jane believes that a child can sometimes visually express something that would otherwise on a verbal level, remain suppressed. Through painting and drawing pictures the child can give form to inner feelings and sometimes can help depict a very significant, but negative experience. Art itself can then become part of a healing process by helping to express, make conscious, and come to terms with the negative or difficult experience. An observant and perceptive teacher often can, by looking at a child's drawing and pictures, become aware of his/her growth, problems and needs.

Seeing that a child has a natural expression and pattern of discovery, Jane says that 'we must realize how harmful adult interference can be. It is not possible to accelerate the process of a child's expression by showing how the human person is to be drawn, or insisting on the right colour or the correct proportion. Interference creates dependency and destroys the child's confidence in his own particular flow of expression.'

Jane quotes the Stuttgart Steiner School principle: 'Art and religion are so basic, they are part of every activity in the school.' The adult, however, has a role in creating an atmosphere that is supportive and not dominating, but one that stimulates the child to draw on personal experiences that are meaningful. Art is often considered an exclusively individual activity. Jane reminds us that traditionally it was very much a community affair. For example, a simple activity such as bringing out the school newspaper with poems, pictures, description of events in the vil-



Chanting and Prayers

lage, school news, suggestions for improvement, provides an opportunity to share and explore feelings and thoughts on subjects that touch children's lives.

Every Monday the younger children spend the morning writing a weekly diary that covers significant events experienced during the previous week. Writing is combined with drawing colourful pictures. Some events that the Sadhana Group wrote about in their weekly diary were: two drunkards beating one another, a special *puja* (worship) in the temple, taking *akka* (a respectful address for female elders) to hospital, catching rats to make *saaru* (curry), playing marbles on Sunday, winnowing *ragi* with the family.

Jane believes that poetry, drama, stories, puppetry, painting, making models involve children in understanding a subject in a way that abstract learning cannot. 'If children participate actively in drawing, painting, drama or craft as a part of their learning, whether it is number work, a lesson about the plough or examining our cultural roots, the children are more likely to integrate and retain the knowledge if it is imparted in an imaginative way.'

The school works on a very modest budget. The parents of the pupils contribute a small amount of Rs.10 per month towards the costs of running the school. There is a conscious effort to minimize needs and to use less expensive materials in keeping with an attitude of using the earth's finite resources with care. Salaries and running expenses are met by personal donations and individual grants from friends and well-wishers. Whenever required, funds have been raised for building and repair work. For the past three years the school has been partly funded by a Buddhist organization based in Pune. The school also receives a steady stream of volunteers from India and abroad who stay for periods ranging from one month to a year and unstintingly give of their time and labour.

In 1981, Sita School joined hands with two other schools serving underprivileged children to form a new group: The Society for Educational Exploration (SEE). Though ideals are common, SEE is a purely functional body and the individual schools function as autonomous entities each making its own policy and taking other decisions within the school itself.

Sita School is not without its share of problems.

The city of Bangalore has reached the doorsteps of the school. The villages have undergone profound socioeconomic changes in the last 25 years. Villages, far from being largely agricultural rural communities, have become a base from which unskilled labourers commute to nearby industrial estates. Mobility is high, as people have sold their lands to city speculators and lost their single sense of security. Urbanization has brought amenities and conveniences, TV and mass media into homes. This arouses expectations without providing people the means to fulfill those dreams and expectations.

So, there is constant economic pressure on the children to contribute to the family income. Older children tend to leave school to care for animals, siblings, or take up work as domestic servants. The dropout rate is very high and in the last few years, probably due to higher job mobility, entire families are leaving the village to take up work in unknown, far away places.

Divya, one of the teachers says: 'Initially, my expectations from the children were very high – the first batches of children were remarkable all-rounders, excelling in everything they did. I expected this trend to continue. But now I am more realistic. These days, children are disinterested; perhaps it is because they are getting mixed signals. Their parents are not motivated, they don't take interest in their children or what the school does, and perhaps they are distracted due to the lure of the city, TV and increasing social mobility.'

To the question: How far is Sita School integrated into the life of the community? Jane candidly replies that the impact of the school on the life of the community has not been as great as it ought to have been and while the school has definitely affected individual lives and some families it has not directly been an effective agent of change and progress in the village as a whole. But this is also because the preoccupation with daily tasks and the practicalities of teaching leave little time for either her or the teachers to engage in these wider concerns at this moment.

In response to the question: What are we preparing children for? Jane says: 'In this rapidly changing society I still see that our primary objective is to im-

part values and ideas that enable a person to live fully and meaningfully.' Quoting from E.F. Schumacher's book, *Small is Beautiful*, she says, 'Our task – and the task of education – is to understand the present world and the world in which we live and make our choices.'

Jane believes that her effort is neither pioneering nor a path breaking one. 'There is nothing new about the vision of the school, nor is there any effort in any way to impose a "vision" either on the children or the adults in the school,' she asserts. 'Whatever the school has achieved upto now is the result of teamwork, a mutual sharing of hard work, ideas, abilities and talents.' She is grateful that she has a sensitive and reliable team of colleagues and is deeply indebted to them.

In her reflections on sustainable education, Jane writes: 'We simply foster values such as sharing, co-operation, diversity, self-reliance, being conscious of our interdependence with the whole of existence... all traditional values, and our common heritage of human wisdom. However, while it is no longer feasible to imitate traditional patterns, for the context has changed, it is our present challenge to "arrange what was always there in a different way."'

For Jane, school is a preparation for life. Joy, wonder, reverence, sensitivity, creativity, caring for the weak are qualities not usually found within the hard covers of the textbook. They are conveyed not so much by what we teach, as how we teach, the atmosphere of a school and the 'lived' values of the teachers.

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