

LEARNING THE LOHIA WAY

I was just 3 years old, playing ball on the veranda of the Inspection Bungalow in Red Hills near Madras (Chennai), the venue of the February 1956 first Socialist Study Camp. My ball rolled out into the darkening dusk and I was afraid to retrieve it. Dr. Lohia, who was discussing the day's events with my parents the organisers of the convention, noticed my plight. He came up to me and encouraged me to get the ball. When I was hesitant and explained that I was scared, he said; "Only bad people are afraid of the dark, and you are not a bad person".

This, one of my earliest interactions with Dr. Lohia marked the beginning of my Socialist education that spanned more than a decade, and it remains as one of the most important lessons.

It taught me that education or 'learning' should enable one to explore the unknown fearlessly. To be able to delve into the mysterious realms of science and math, language and literature, spirituality and the inexplicable and find answers that push the frontiers of ones understanding and empower one to break the barriers of language, cast, religion and gender in order to determine the course of ones life.

Unfortunately education in its present form does not do this. Instead it leads to social stratification and has no relevance to the lives of the majority of children. It does not ensure the earning of a livelihood or even employment, it alienates children from their roots, it makes them feel deficient and stupid; but most of all it disempowers children. Children emerge from the system semi literate at best (even after seven years of government schooling - that is if they have survived the system that long); and it discourages questioning and kills their inherent spark for exploration.

Mari Montessori wrote in her book 'The Discovery of the Child': "*We keep children in school restricted by objects that are degrading to both body and soul, the desk and material rewards and punishments. And why? To keep them silent and immobile. But where does this lead them? Unfortunately, nowhere! Their education consists in mechanically filling their minds with the contents of a syllabus that is frequently drawn up by departments of education and imposed by law. Confronted by such a forgetfulness of the continuity of our own lives with that of our children and their descendants, we should hang our heads in shame and cover our faces with our hands! Truly there is an urgent need today of reforming the methods of instruction and*

education, and he who aims at such a renewal is struggling for the regeneration of mankind.¹"

So many years after those words were written the education system in India still fits this description. A system evolved and designed by the British to produce clerks for the Colonial bureaucracy and now, software engineers - the new IT contract labourers for the First World.

Education plays a fundamental role in sculpting the fabric of a nation. Today, the fact that we are being overtaken by the negative impacts of a Model of Globalisation dictated by the economics of business and industry is due in large part to the kind of students we churn out of our schools. This education system that is producing the new hybrid Indian is modelled on a development model that promotes competition, corporatisation, consumerism and privatisation and has put democracy and our constitution at risk. Our young citizens are conditioned to be ruthlessly competitive, believing in the survival of the fittest they scramble to join call centres. Ignorant of our rich tradition and culture, uprooted and distanced from their communities and often their very families, these individuals are more comfortable in Burger King than at home.

An essential element of the Corporate Globalisation Model is social modification. Globalists are committed to social modification or the mass conditioning of people into believing that globalisation leads to pots of gold. You are not 'somebody' until you have a mobile phone, a car, a TV, and wear a suit with a personalised clock-in swipe card hanging around your neck. Give up your identity, your language, accent, roots and don the mask of globalisation - then you have 'arrived'.

In a society supplied with an abundance of material goods, in which information is carefully controlled by the mass media, and in which independent thought is discouraged from an early age by an education system which rewards conformity, it is possible to 'opiate' the masses into believing in a consumer culture. Once there, they can be induced to believe almost anything provided it comes from an accepted authority figure or source, such as political leaders, professors, newspapers with coloured pictures, teachers in the classroom, the lyrics of pop music, and most of all - the TV². A large degree of this kind of social modification is achieved through schooling and our education system.

¹ Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, Ballantine Books, March 1972, page 17.

² See Graham L. Strachan, *Globalism, Neo-Tribalism and False Reality*, (c) Copyright 1999/7-7-99

Therefore our education system cannot abdicate its role in the process that has led to the discrediting of traditional and indigenous knowledge, the erosion of constitutional principles and values such as egalitarianism, non-discrimination, peace and non-violence, equality, participation and rights. [Today, the definition of political participation by 'citizens' begins and ends with casting of the ballot if at all and the definition of civil society participation is understood as the 'participation of the elite' through self appointed associations or NGOs.]

Socialisation and Education:

The process of socialising a child can be seen as a continuum representing the quest for independence on the one end and dependency on the other, with numerous possibilities in between. In countries like India the child is socialised towards being a part of a collective, accepting and securing both the rights and responsibilities of the collective, including a share of the burden of the survival strategy of the family. The West by and large socializes beings towards independence where the individual is supreme, when at the age of 18 years - a virtual stepping stone set by policy makers - the child is supposed to miraculously acquire the attributes of 'adulthood' and is pushed out of the nest. These represent two opposite extremes of the continuum.

A universally acknowledged concept is that of the socialisation of the child is the process by which the child not only seeks to relate itself to others, but to its environment in general. If one examines the process of socialisation of a child - formal school is not the only component. Work, life, the state and the environment are also integral parts of the socialisation processes, more so in developing countries where the interaction and impact of these are more immediate.

This interactive process determines the development of each person, because it is during childhood that the human being is the most prepared and motivated to learn. The richer the process of socialisation, the greater and better will be a person's life experience. One thing is the classroom; the other is the school of life.

The issue of children, work and education have been inexorably linked through the ages. Initially work was seen as a means of socializing (educating) a child. But cast and economic barriers determined the extent of the child's access to information and skills and as a response; education was seen as a leveller or equalizer. Through education, society aimed to give all children the same opportunities.

However, of late the approach adopted is that of promoting compulsory education - the magic wand that supposedly solves all problems. It assumes that if we can push all working children into schools from 9-5 we have solved the problem of child work. Myron Weiner says in his book 'The Child and the State in India': "*Compulsory primary education is the policy instrument by which the state effectively removes children from the labour force. The state thus stands as the ultimate guardian of children, protecting them against both parents and would-be employers.*"³

This view places the child as the ward of the State, a meek recipient of a bureaucracy that has proved unimaginative, insensitive and uncaring. Worse still it brands the parents as the ultimate villains that are out to exploit the child. A critique of what actually happens within the four walls of the school and is passed off as education is not allowed, such questioning is considered sacrilege.

The assumption is that forcing children into schools automatically brings about the necessary pressure to change the system for the better. The responsibility of change is on the children and the teachers. What happens in actual fact is that the system collapses.

In 1924 Gandhiji wrote in Young India: "*All compulsion is hateful to me. I would no more have the nation become educated by compulsion than I would have it become sober by such questionable means. If the majority wants education, compulsion is wholly unnecessary. If it does not, compulsion would be most harmful. I should resist compulsory education at least till every effort at voluntary primary education has been honestly made and failed. There is more illiteracy in India today than there was fifty years ago, not because the parents are less willing but because the facilities they had before have disappeared under a system so foreign and unnatural for the country. It is not reasonable to assume that the majority of parents are so foolish or heartless as to neglect the education of their children even when it is brought to their doors free of charge.*"⁴

Let us look at a real life example. Prema is a very poised young girl. She lives in a tiny village called Uppunda that nestles between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats in South India. It is a fishing village. Prema and her family belong to a low cast in the social hierarchy. The boys in her family are taught how to fish and the girls and women run the home and do all the menial chores. A primary occupation is the collection of firewood from the forests on the slopes

³ The Child and the State in India: Child Labour and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective, Myron Weiner, 1991.

⁴ M.K. Gandhi - Extract from Young India, 1924

of the foothills. This means waking up at 2 am, walking 10 to 11 kilometres and returning with a head load of firewood by afternoon.

Prema went to school for a few years but found it impossible. She learnt nothing and nothing made sense to her. The teacher could not manage the class of 100 children and just made the children repeat the alphabet and numerals after him. She found no relevance in what was being taught in school to her life. It did not help her cope with her domestic problems; there was no information on health. It did not help her understand the physical and emotional changes she was experiencing. It did not tell her about reproduction, the protection of her body or childcare. School did not help her to deal with the forest guards when she went to collect the firewood, or show her ways of coping with her position as a girl from a low cast family in a patriarchal community.

Instead, Prema was treated badly in school because of her cast. Finally her teacher told her that she was only good for carrying cow dung and breaking fish heads. She felt humiliated and she left school like many others. After four years of schooling she could barely read the alphabet⁵.

All children, including working children have a thirst for knowledge and value learning and education, but many have rejected formal schools and the so-called 'education' provided within those four walls. The reason is summed up by well by Amuktha Mahapatra. She says that *"Schools makes children feel that something is wrong with them, that they are not interested in learning and that they are not fit to be in school. Whereas actually it is the other way around. The school is inappropriate. Schools are meant for children, who are the clients. If the majority of the clients are rejecting this facility, then something is wrong somewhere. The service provided has to be redesigned if we want children to continue using the facility."*⁶

The Little Prince in Antoine de Saint Exupery's book by the same name says: *"Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."*⁷ All children are complex beings, street and working children, more so. Each one of them is a small bundle of contradictions and they teach us something new every day. They are angry yet very affectionate; rebellious but loyal to their friends and loved ones; they often 'violate' the law, yet have a strong sense of justice. They feel the

⁵ Please see *Education for Empowerment and Children's Citizenship*, by Nandana Reddy, Executive Director, The Concerned for Working Children, Key Note at The National Conference 2001 of The Indian Montessori Centre (IMC) Chennai, February 20001

⁶ Amukta Mahapatra -Education Consultant

⁷ The Little Prince - Antoine de Saint Exupery

need to do the right thing but break the boundaries of so-called 'morality' that we have set. Children feel injustice more sharply than adults and possess a strong desire to right wrongs. They want to improve their situation but not according to the middle class norms we follow.

Learning is fundamental and inseparable from engagement in the world. Knowledge is integrated in the life of communities; learning is how people gain membership and participation in community. Learning is an act of membership; motivation in learning lies in the intimate relation between the desire for participation and the role of new knowledge in enabling that participation. Knowing depends on engagement in practice, but in the classroom knowledge presented in the abstract. Engagement is inseparable from empowerment and the failure to learn is the result of exclusion from participation; people denied membership with the right to contribute in the creation of meaning cannot sufficiently engage to learn easily.⁸

Children question society and social structures for good reason. Working children feel that society has rejected them, that they have been pushed out of the class triangle, relegated to live on the periphery, marginalised and ignored. They have no reason to trust us because we have given them no cause to do so and they tend to build protective walls around themselves in an attempt to insulate themselves against the oppression and exploitation they are subject to in their daily lives.

The children of Bhima Sangha⁹, a union for, by and off working children feel that education should help them to be brave, to have the courage to face life and improve their situation. It should encourage them to question and seek solutions. It should facilitate them to integrate with their communities and live with their families. It should teach about occupations and enable them to gain respect and recognition. Education should inform them of their rights and show them ways of using political structures and processes to realise these rights.¹⁰

For these reasons the socialisation of the child cannot be an unconscious or uncritical process, separated from reality and governed by the paternalistic attitude of adults. It cannot be compartmentalised into tiny unrelated boxes. The ideal would be to aim for a process of socialisation that fosters interdependency; an integrated approach that interweaves all facets of life [crafts, arts, politics, economics, social science and culture]; a natural symbiosis between adults and children,

⁸ Martin Woodhead – at the Child Rights Conference, Kathmandu, May 2000.

⁹ Bhima Sangha is a union by, for and off working children in Karnataka.

¹⁰ Extract from the summary of the presentation made by Prema at the IMC, 2001.

especially senior citizens and the environment 'mother earth'. And most of all education should be as Lohia believed, the fearless exploration of the unknown. This should be enabled without hampering or pushing the child's development and should contribute to children attaining a sense of self-esteem and security.

Breaking the Chains of Caste, Class and Gender:

As a child there was always the strong presence of Lohia at home, and not only when he stayed with us during his visits to Madras (Chennai). He was a constant factor and an integral part of my childhood and growing up. At home there were no separations between our politics, my parents' careers in theatre and film and the way we lived our lives.

In my world there was no dichotomy between Lohia presenting my mother with a costly and exotic gift of perfume and discussing strategies for liberating the majority from the shackles of poverty and powerlessness. My mother would stop in the middle of the street to protect hapless cyclists from abusive policeman and I saved stray dogs and wounded owls at school. We agonised over the plight of women and the state of electoral politics; discussed literature and the arts; and enjoyed rare family treats from the proceeds of the sale of old newspapers.

Ours was an open house filled with artists, writers, actors, film makers, political activists and politicians from India and abroad and we entertained endlessly, experimenting with Italian, Spanish, French and a multiplicity of other cuisines. There was a seamless integration between all this. Home was so exciting, a living school, that formal school was drudgery - a sterile environment within four walls where information was presented in the abstract with no connection to real life.

Many years later, inspired by Lohia and my work as a trade unionist in the informal sector, I helped found a private development agency, the Concerned for Working Children (CWC)¹¹, to work in partnership with child workers. CWC decided to enable and empower child workers by providing an education that was liberating and enabled them to find new solutions to old problems - discover better ways to organise society and build a better world. We realised that this education could not be confined to the four wall of a school and so we designed an Appropriate Education Pedagogy (AEP) that we call 'Education for Democracy' and with the village as the school.

¹¹ A private development agency dedicated to address the problems of working children and enabling all children to secure their rights
- Website: www.workingchild.org E-mail: cwc@pobox.com

Through this, the learning arena of the child is expanded to include other social institutions such as the home, the Panchayat, the world of work, culture and spirituality. Grand mothers tell children stories, children do projects on cultural and environmental history; grow their own food, run their own post office and bank; they collect information on resources and plan their dream village.

Let us see how this impacted on Prema. After her disastrous experience in school, Prema joined *Bhima Sangha*. She began attending our extension school and benefited from the Appropriate Education Programme. She acquired both knowledge and skills. She was able to share her problems and frustrations and gain great strength from knowing that there were others like her. Collectively with other children she began to find solutions to the problems they faced and Prema's self confidence grew.

Self Determination:

However the children were not satisfied with this. They wanted to interact with the *Gram Panchayat* (Local Government) and for this they felt the need for all the children of an area or village to come together. With our help they set up the '*Makkala Panchayats*¹²' or children's local governments in five districts of Karnataka.

Prema was elected to the '*Makkala Panchayat*' in her village and she became the President. At this time all the children decided that they needed more information about the causes of child labour and the resources available in their communities if they were to influence their local governments to take corrective action. They decided to do a house-to-house survey in 12000 households and asked for our help to design this piece of research. Prema supervised the survey in her cluster of villages.

During this process Prema had to interview her old teacher and his family. She was also the one to present the findings to the adult '*Panchayat*' and argue for the demands made by the children, her electorate. She managed to get all the demands accepted and many of them have been effectively addressed such as the implementation of a more appropriate and quality education, full day child care centres, easy access to fuel, fodder and water, the construction of foot bridges and more freedom for girls.

¹² The Makkala Panchayat (Children's Panchayat) is a structure recognised by local governments. All the children of a '*Panchayat*' elect a parallel children's government through a secret ballot. This election is held by the formal government administration and the secretary of the adult Panchayat acts as the secretary of the children's Panchayat. A *Task Force* that is chaired by the District Minister links the adult and children's Panchayats. Since 2008 *Makkala Grama Sabhas* have been mandatory by a government order in Karnataka.

Her moment of glory came when her old teacher stood up in a 'Panchayat' meeting and honoured her. He said that he was amazed at her capacity to handle the complexity of the survey and her presentation skills. He apologised for what he had said when she was in school and praised her intelligence and leadership.

Ambassadors of Change:

Prema is now a respected and proud member of her community. She not only reads and writes, but also represents her constituency in national and international meetings. She has travelled to many countries. She made a big impression on the children of Japan who have as a result initiated a Children's Rights Movement there. Prema now stands tall. Her dream is to become the president of the local government - a dream that is more than likely to come true.

We live in a paternalistic society - a society that is controlled by the minority elite that in order to protect its interests suppress the majority, where the body politic uses structures to marginalise the weaker and less fortunate. Most of all we ignore our children, the future generation - the title-holders of the new millennium. State structures, the judiciary and parts of civil society all collude to keep vast groups of people at the bottom of the socio/economic and political triangle - and children have no place at all, no voice, no strength and no control.

In most cultures, children and youth are kept away from 'politics' as it is considered 'bad' for them until they are 18 years old. At the dawn of this biological milestone, they are expected to attain sufficient civil and political maturity to participate in direct democracy as members of the Grama Sabha or in indirect democracy as the electoral constituency of various levels of State¹³.

Just as the environment influences the child, the child can also influence its environment. The relation of the child to reality cannot be marginal and devoid of contemplation or questioning.

Children, from an early age, should be encouraged to gradually further their capacity to learn, question and transform a reality that is not capable of upholding the legitimacy of their rights.

This should be enabled without hampering or pushing the child's development and should contribute to them developing a sense of self-esteem and security.

¹³ Kavita Ratna, Director Samvada, The Concerned for Working Children, *Children's Impact on State Governance: Over arching issues* - August 2009

Language:

A universally accepted principle is that children should be taught in their mother tongue. Countries like Norway are mandated to provide instruction in the language of the child even if the language is that of a remote African tribe.

When Lohia reviewed my first book of poems in Mankind, he speculated at how much better it would have been if I had written in an Indian language. It is clear that he was against English, but his motives need to be put in perspective.

I feel that Lohia's position on language has been grossly misunderstood. He was not a 'Hindi' fanatic - his primary concern was that the English language was the tool of dominance. He felt that "..... *English (had) made the Indian people feel inferior. Not knowing English, they think they are no good for any kind of public activity and they abdicate. It is precisely such abdication by the mass, which is the foundation for minority or feudal rule¹⁴*".

This is as relevant today as it was in the 60's - the majority of Indian children, especially rural children, studying in schools where the medium of instruction is the official language of the State (Kannada, Tamil, Telegu, Oriya or Bengali) suffer from two disadvantages. First, for many, the language of the State is not their mother tongue and is as alien as a foreign language; and secondly after they have completed 12 years of schooling in the State language they find that English is the passport to prosperity!

To their dismay they discover that the English they have learnt as a second language is barely functional. In State Schools, English, as most other second languages (Hindi, Sanskrit, etc:) are taught with scant respect for the language and its literature. This is probably because most Indians have an inherent aversion to the power and domination that these languages represent. These children, the majority, feel inferior, dis-respected and worthless.

Lohia understood this, he knew that; "*As long as prestige and power and money go with the English language, it will be foolhardy to expect a parent who can afford it not to give his child an English education¹⁵*". The pull of 'success' proves greater than the primeval need to express oneself in one's mother tongue, a strange dichotomy created by the patronisation of English for all official transactions. Today, in Karnataka alone, more than 850 government schools¹⁶ will be closed this year for

¹⁴ Ram Manohar Lohia, *Language*, Rammanohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1986 Edition, pg 78

¹⁵ Ram Manohar Lohia, *Language*, Rammanohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1986 Edition, pg 62

¹⁶ Deccan Herald, Bangalore 8th February, 2010, page 1

lack of students as the children have moved to private schools. One of the main reasons is that these children and their families see the importance of learning English.

Lohia's anger and frustration was against the promotion of English as an administrative language in India. *"India is the only civilised country in the world, assuming that we are civilised, with an ancient way of life that refuses to die, which runs its legislature, courts, laboratories, factories, telegraph, railways and almost all government and other activities in a language (English) which 99% of the people do not understand¹⁷".*

Gandhi said that he would refuse to *"...put the unnecessary strain of learning English upon my sisters for the sake of false pride or questionable social advantage. I would have our young men and young women with literary tastes to learn as much English and other world languages as they like, and then expect them to give the benefits of their learning to India and to the world, like a Bose, a Roy or the Poet (Tagore) himself¹⁸.....But I would not have a single Indian (to) forget, neglect or be ashamed of his mother tongue, or to feel that he or she cannot think or express the best thoughts in his or her own vernacular.¹⁹"*

There are of course several other issues that require resolution. How do we bring about unity in a nation where that are more than 21 official languages apart from Hindi and English and 1,652 unofficial languages and dialects?²⁰ How do we provide quality education in so many mother tongues? How can English or any other foreign language be taught with respect and depth? When should the other languages be introduced and should this be optional?

It is said that it is during the first three of schooling that children have the highest capacity to learn languages and that besides the mother tongue, other languages should be introduced. The mother tongue and the other 'second' and 'third' should be taught with the same depth and width. Unfortunately, one can see that even the mother tongue and the State language are treated in a very functional and bookish way that does not reveal the vernacular beauty or the linguist vigour of these languages. Most children are unable to speak these languages, can barely read and write them and definitely cannot use them for creative expression.

¹⁷ Ram Manohar Lohia, Quote from **Language** in *Lohia In His Own Words*, Lohia Vichar Manch 2002 pg 21.

¹⁸ M.K.Gandhi, *Young India*, 1921

¹⁹ M.K.Gandhi, *Young India*, 1921

²⁰ The Indian census of 1961 recognised 1,652 different languages in India (including languages not native to the subcontinent). The 1991 census recognizes 1,576 classified "mother tongues" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_India - Accessed 9th Feb. 2010

The pressing need however, is respect and dignity for one's mother tongue – the language of the womb, the vernacular of creativity and expression and this should also be the language that brings with it social dignity and participation. English or any other foreign language should be the language of communicative utility, literary exploration and international mobility.

In Conclusion:

The role of education in nation building and in moulding the disposition of the citizen of tomorrow was recognised in post independence India and the Viswa Barathi institutions of Tagore, the Kalakshetra schools of Rukmani Arundale, the Besant Schools and the Valley schools of Krishnamurthy were all attempts to do just that. Somewhere along the way we seem to have lost this important mission and got wedged in the morass of the 'hoary perennials'²¹ of education or all that is wrong with system. We must rediscover this mission if we want to make a difference.

Education cannot be seen in isolation from children's lives and the pressures they face. It is only through a holistic approach to solving children's problems that universalisation of education can be achieved and all children are enabled to benefit from an education that is appropriate, qualitative and at least equivalent to the formal system.

We need a 'learning revolution'. This is no different from any other kind of revolution, and yet it is unique as education strikes at the roots of our civilisation. Education in its broadest sense is the foundation on which a civilisation is built. It lays down the basic tenants of culture, values, vision and the structures that define the model of development we as a nation adopt. If we can find a way of delivering the very best of education to the majority of our children and enable them to mould structures closer to the ideals of a true democracy we would have achieved two major objectives – the empowerment of the marginalised and the regeneration and preservation of democracy in our country.

So let us rededicate ourselves to bringing about this revolution – to rediscovering the secrets of childhood and in doing so let us open the doors of discovery to our nation's children. Let us together with them build a safer world for them to inherit. Let us no more peer down at these children through our microscopes treating them as mere subjects of our interventions and recognise that children, just like us, want to be the masters of their destiny and wish to shape the world they will inherit from us. We need to shift our paradigm and view the

²¹ A term coined by Geeta Sen Gita Sen, Sir Ratan Tata Chair Professor since 2000 at the Indian Institute of Management.

world through the eyes of our children and perhaps even ask them to take our hands and lead the way to a vision of a New World.

Nandana Reddy is a political and social activist working on issues of democratic decentralisation, human rights, civil liberties and children's right to self determination. She was born into a socialist family and was closely associated with Dr. Lohia who was a frequent guest in their house.