

# CHILDREN of the EARTH, & ARCHITECTURE & ACTIVISM

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## *Namma Bhoomi as an Exemplar of the Erkindar Vision*

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by Sharon Caldwell

I didn't really know what to expect as we drove across one picturesque river after another, from Mangalore towards Kundapur in rural Karnataka, in December 2004. After a week in the squalor and chaos of Mumbai, I was bracing myself for yet another project which, while being promoted as "progressive" and "child centered," turned out to be yet another regular school. Three days later, standing alone, at almost midnight, savoring the silence that was broken only by the sounds of insects in the indigenous bush, and marveling at the sheer magnificence of buildings silhouetted by the light of the full moon, I was wondering if I had somehow wandered into paradise. It was difficult to grasp that this astounding campus, that could be the envy of wealthy schools the world over, was constructed and run by children who had been rescued from some of the worst exploitation imaginable, and that this lush landscape had been a virtually barren slope only a few years ago.

Namma Bhoomi is the regional resource and training center for a group called *The Concerned for Working Children* (CWC).<sup>1</sup> It is also a school and home for around one hundred or so teenagers who have all, in one way or another, suffered abuse and exploitation. I discovered that the poised and confident sixteen year-old, who showed me to my room and served my meals, had been sold into prostitution by her sister. She had escaped and somehow found her way to Namma Bhoomi, where she learned the skills necessary to get employment in the hospitality industry. She told me that she planned to, one day, own her own hotel. I wondered at the time if this was just a dream, but by the end of the week, based on what I had learned, I had no doubt she would succeed one day.

Unlike almost any other Montessori middle and high school, Namma Bhoomi grew out of a movement established by children for children.

Bhima Sangha, an association of, by, and for working children, was originally launched in 1990.<sup>2</sup> Over time, Makkala Panchayats (children's councils) were set up, which engaged with local government and earned first awareness and, ultimately, the respect of adult groups. With that respect came a recognition of children that, "is intimately related to their aspirations and lives."<sup>3</sup> Bhima Sangha's statement on the universal right to education includes the provision that, "This right to education should be translated as a right to an appropriate and relevant education that is made accessible to us and which enables us to be agents of change."<sup>4</sup> The phrase *agents of change* echoes Maria Montessori's concept of the Cosmic Task of the new generation.

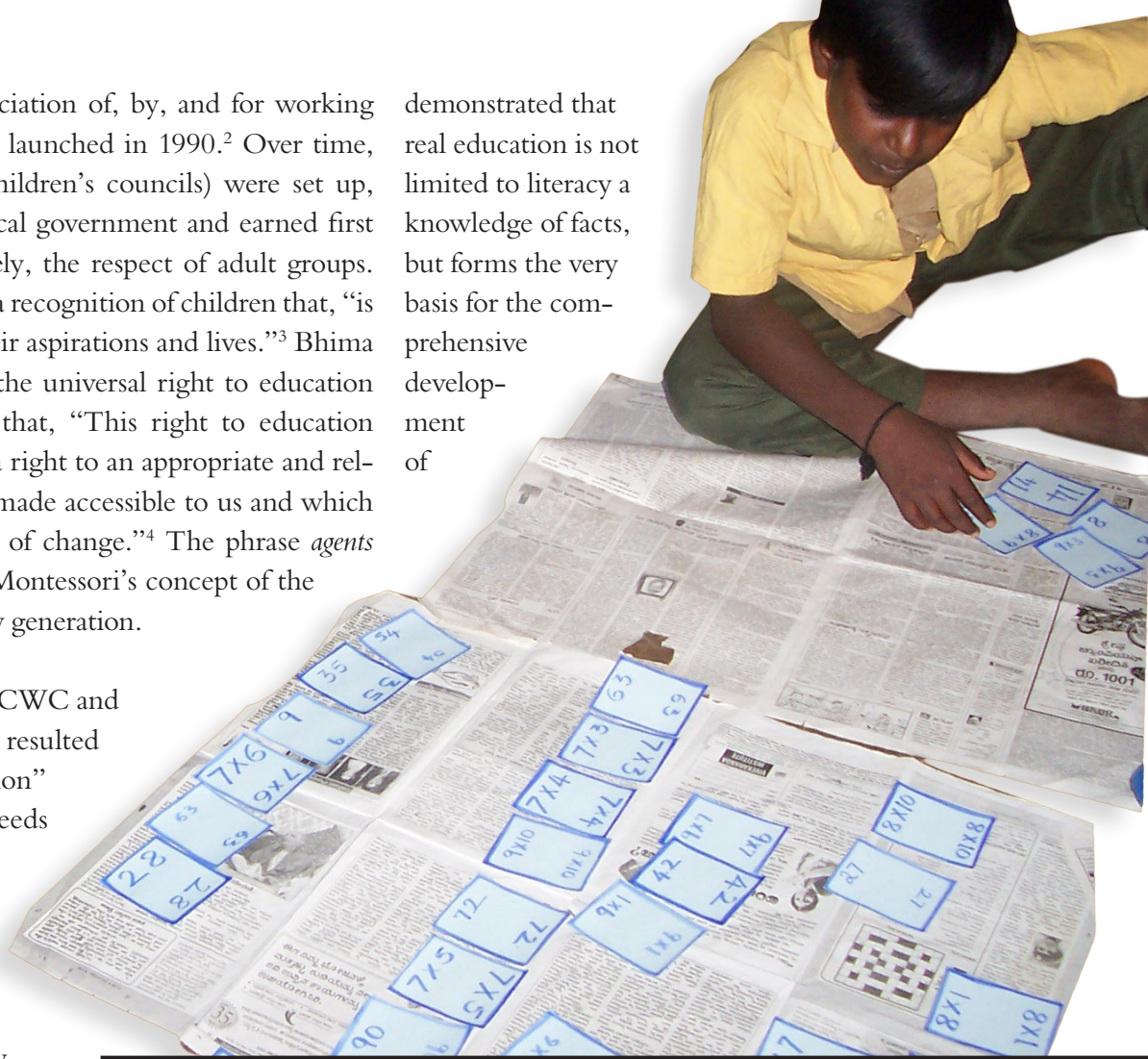
Collaboration between CWC and the Makkala Panchayats resulted in a number of "Extension" schools,<sup>5</sup> based on the needs and dreams expressed by the children themselves.

Working with a team of educators led by Amukta Mahapatra, the children and the representatives of CWC began to explore various education systems to design a program for Namma Bhoomi and the extension schools founded by CWC.

Maria Montessori propounded a fundamental conviction that children can, and do, make responsible choices when allowed to do so. It is not surprising, therefore, that the approach to education favored by the children of Bhima Sangha and the Makkala Panchayats draws heavily on the principles and methods pioneered by Maria Montessori. These abused, marginalized, and neglected children have shown Montessori's faith in children to be true - on a level way beyond choosing between various activities offered on a shelf, but in the context of real life choices.

Just like their much younger counterparts in San Lorenzo a century ago, these young people have

demonstrated that real education is not limited to literacy a knowledge of facts, but forms the very basis for the comprehensive development of



humankind. These youngsters inspire a vision of a new world.

## APPROPRIATE EDUCATION PROGRAM

We were convinced that education cannot and should not take place only within the four walls of a classroom. We identified the need to take aspects of culture, environment, geography, society and politics into consideration while assessing the appropriateness of the education programme. We had repeatedly observed that it was the western perspective or the perspective of the upper castes that defined the parameters of good education.<sup>6</sup>

Namma Bhoomi initiated what became known as

the “Appropriate Education Programme” (AEP) that defined an approach to education in partnership with the children and their community.<sup>7</sup>

You will need to search to find the word “Montessori” mentioned in the CWC website or literature, but, when you know what to look for, it is evident that just about every aspect of the AEP, the ethos of Namma Bhoomi, and the extension schools are firmly grounded in Montessori principles. The multi-faceted curriculum covers basic education (reading, writing and arithmetic) as well as a science equivalent to class ten in the government schools. Also included are syllabi for personal development, empowerment and vocational skills.<sup>8</sup> The curriculum clearly reflects the integration of academic studies, practical skills and cultural pursuits. The children are exposed to a range of cultural and spiritual experiences, including a weekly dance and drama performances in the amphitheater.

Anyone entering the AEP room at Namma Bhoomi would be forgiven for thinking it was a 3-6 room, where someone had mistakenly built the shelves too high. I sat in the corner and observed as a mixed group of teenagers filtered in, spread out newspaper on the floor, as if it was the most expensive mat, and proceeded to lay out golden beads and moveable alphabets with the precision of a young child at the peak of the sensitive period for order. It takes these students a matter of months to become fully literate.

We adapted Montessori methods to rural needs, ... produced low-cost kits and trained teachers. Where children took two years to learn the alphabets, the new pedagogy of extension schools equipped them to read newspapers in three months.<sup>9</sup>

Adolescents learn traditional skills such as basket weaving, leatherwork, local pottery techniques, and sustainable organic agriculture as well as “appropriate construction technology.” Experts in their fields teach the theory of the various vocational courses – master carpenters, tailors, masons and engineers instruct students with a severity and attention to detail that would probably leave most western students in tears. While at Namma Bhoomi, I witnessed one teenage boy build a wall only to have it torn down by an instructor, who told him his work was shoddy. I asked him how he felt about this; “He’s the best builder around here,” I was told by the student, “and we know he can teach us how to build better than anyone else.” I learned that students who graduate from Namma Bhoomi with “appropriate construction technology,” while virtually guaranteed a place in local firms, tend to form their own construction businesses and are in great demand as far away as Bangalore. When students graduate they can rely on continued support from the Makkala Panchayat as they establish themselves as independent young adults.

## EDUCATION FOR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN CIVIC SOCIETY

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The posters on the walls of the main meeting hall are an early warning that this is no ordinary high school. Slogan’s such as “Children are citizens now, not tomorrow,” and “Adults, why do you fear children’s participation?” boldly declare who owns this school. This standpoint is, however, not a challenge to the school’s authority, but rather an integral component of the curriculum.

We believe that while education prepares children for their lives as adults, it should simultaneously enable them to effectively address the issues they confront as children and adolescents. It should also equip children with knowledge and skills to question and challenge such traditional practices that are unjust and discriminatory. It should make it possible for them to understand their own lives and their world and acquire the freedom to define their own lives.<sup>10</sup>

The students do not simply learn conventional academics and vocational skills; matters of activism and governance play a crucial role in the curriculum. A Makkala Panchayat runs Namma Bhoomi itself. Activism, rather than community service, is encouraged at Namma Bhoomi, enabling students to gain experience in social and political engagement.

The children we are associated with have taken up the issues of child marriage, child labour, migrant families, female foeticide, HIV – and are pro-actively addressing them at several levels. They serve as resource persons in capacity building programmes for elected members of the panchayats, police, government officials and other NGOs. They have formed their own organisations and advocate issues that concern them at various local, national and international forums. It is their political, social and cultural participation that has empowered them to realise their self-worth, giving a new meaning to education.<sup>11</sup>

More than simply graduating with skills that will guarantee an income, the graduates of Namma Bhoomi return to their communities “as ambassadors of all

team from the Kerala based Centre for Eco-sensitive and Sustainable Development (ESDC) the students of Namma Bhoomi designed their school to meet their express needs. Instead of traditional school and hostel buildings, the students explained that they wanted their school to be designed as a village, and provision needed to be made for accommodations, not only for students, but also for field activists and visitors. There would be classrooms, a library, a laboratory and a clinic, as well as an amphitheater, a multi-purpose hall, an administration block, housing for the cattle, a kitchen and dining area, and on-site accommodation for visitors, which would be run as an inn to accommodate guests and allow the students specializing in the “hospitality industry” to hone their skills. There is also a shop where the children sell their work.



From the outset, the center was intended as a “live experiment” where “appropriate construction technology” would be taught and used by the students to build the village themselves. As with every other aspect of this amazing environment, the students played an active role. “The children had already experimented with building mediums; hence, they had a lot of practical questions for us,” reports architect Jeeth Iype, one of the consultants who worked on the project.<sup>14</sup> During my stay I observed students building walls, installing plumbing and electrical circuits and making furniture. I was impressed not only by the skill levels I witnessed but also by the aesthetic quality reflecting Lauri Baker’s style. Using only

the values and principles they believe in” to play their role in “actively shaping the politics and social practices of their communities.”<sup>12</sup> Thus the graduates of Namma Bhoomi became agents of social change, impacting the lives of many more children.

### **APPROPRIATE SUSTAINABLE CONSTRUCTION TECHNOLOGY**

The campus was constructed according to the principles pioneered by architect Laurie Baker.<sup>13</sup> Working with a

local materials, a high proportion of which are recycled, and hollow blocks with a unique bonding system, the buildings have an organic and earthy feel while being incredibly beautiful and significantly cheaper than conventional building techniques. The main office block, for example, incorporates antique carved columns, which had been rescued from a demolition site.

The school owns a seaside retreat, which was built by 30 students in 48 days using the materials from an old factory which had been dismantled.

## **GROW A GARDEN, GROW A CURRICULUM**

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Whereas Montessori originally recommended a residential facility for adolescents to facilitate their need for independence from their families, the rationale for a boarding facility at Namma Bhoomi was more complex. As the students are drawn from economically impoverished communities, living at the centre relieved the students from the daily challenges of survival, providing clean living conditions and a healthy diet. Working and learning together is essential to help to break down strong gender and caste roles to which the students had been previously subjected.

The ecological consciousness of Namma Bhoomi is evident from the first minute you set foot on the immaculate campus. On being shown my room I was gently advised that any non-biodegradable materials I might have brought onto the property should leave with me, and that only materials which could contribute to a compost heap or be recycled on campus should be placed in the room's trash can.

On my early morning walks around the property I noticed children working in the fields, scrubbing down the livestock, milking cows and cooking chapattis and idhli for breakfast. Many were singing quietly while they worked and there was not an adult in sight until classes formerly began after breakfast.

Rather than use commercial pesticides and fertilizers, the students of Namma Bhoomi began experimenting with organic farming techniques. This at first prompted some resistance from the adults. After switching to manure and other sustainable organic practices, the students discovered bees beginning to build hives on the property and producing honey which has subsequently become yet another source of income.<sup>15</sup>

CWC has set up a Sustainable Agriculture and Bio Diversity Research and Development (SABRAD) cell in Namma Bhoomi, partnering with students to establish a seed bank, a bio-intensive garden, rainwater harvesting and waste-water management and the Cherkadi method of cultivation.<sup>16</sup> During my visit I was shown traditional

seed storage structures that preserve the seeds without chemicals and keep them insect free.

## **VALORIZATION THROUGH ECONOMIC ACTIVITY**

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In the Erdkinder appendix, Dr. Montessori wrote about the importance of “valorization” for the adolescent. At Namma Bhoomi the concept of valorisation goes well beyond anything envisaged in western schools. The students at Namma Bhoomi in effect pay for their education through their labour, at the same time learning the very skills that will enable them to obtain employment upon graduation. Tailoring students make and sell clothing, sculpture students produce statuettes in high demand in the tourist markets and organic vegetables are marketed through self-help groups. Students in the “hospitality” course run Namma Bhoomi's on-site hotel with confidence and flair, offering outstanding catering and service. The school produces and sells various types of compost.<sup>17</sup>

## **RESEARCH**

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The science program at Namma Bhoomi begins with classic Montessori command cards, but soon extends to real life research. The Technical Lab at Namma Bhoomi is used by the students to test soil and water quality as well as research traditional and innovative methods to harvest rainwater and manage wastewater, utilize alternative energy resources and manage livestock. These methods are then shared with the local population. The water management system developed at Namma Bhoomi has resulted in improvements in the groundwater level of the area. Students have documented more than 130 species of plants in the area, including around 50 medicinal plants that are used by the on-site clinic.<sup>18</sup> Suffering from an acute dose of bronchitis at the time of my visit, I benefited from a tonic produced at the school.

## **EFFECT ON STATE EDUCATION**

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Designed through consultation with the children from the outset, the education program at Namma Bhoomi is setting the direction for state education. Based on the

expressed aspirations of its students, the curriculum is responsive to their evolving needs, with feedback from former students leading to ongoing adaptation. By 2006, Namma Bhoomi was recognized as a Community Polytechnic by the state ministry of Human Resource Development and enjoyed widespread recognition from other state structures. Namma Bhoomi's empowerment and development program has since been incorporated into the state schools throughout the Kundapur region.

“This has emerged as one of the pioneering models in integrated education for adolescent boys and girls, and has been taken note of by the Planning Commission, Government of India as a viable model for replication.”<sup>19</sup>

## EDUCATION FOR A NEW WORLD

When the Tsunami hit the east coast of India shortly after my return home, I received an email from Namma Bhoomi asking for donations towards the travel costs of their students. Immediately upon hearing about the devastation the construction students did not hesitate to travel hundreds of miles to begin pulling re-usable building materials from the debris and within days were constructing homes for those hardest hit by the freak wave.

Is this not the “new child” envisaged by Dr. Montessori?

*Note: Most of the content of this article is based on my own observations and interviews with staff and students during a stay at Namma Bhoomi in December 2004.* □

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

<sup>1</sup> CWC is a childrens' rights group set up by Damodaran Acharya in 1980. See for more details on the origins of CWC see *Working by day, learning by night*; Vimala Ramachandran *Getting children back to school: case studies in primary education* Sage, 2003. [Preview accessed on Googlebooks, 15 December 2009.] and <http://www.workingchild.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.workingchild.org/> - click on Protagonism on LHS menu. See also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhima\\_Sangha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhima_Sangha).

<sup>3</sup> D. Acharya, “Beyond formal education”, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2006/563/563-damodar-acharya.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.workingchild.org/> - protagonistism.

<sup>5</sup> Extension schools are schools for working children, run by and for the children on terms which suit their needs, such as classes at night. See for example M. Gupta, “Undoing a kind of tyranny.” <http://proxied.changemakers.net/journal/99november/gupta.cfm>

<sup>6</sup> D. Acharya, “Beyond formal education.”

<sup>7</sup> As defined by D. Acharya: A comprehensive education programme designed and developed by CWC based on learning material that enables children to learn at their own pace and interest. It covers the formal, rights and developmental syllabus.

<sup>8</sup> D. Acharya, “Beyond formal education.”; CWC website.

<sup>9</sup> D. Acharya quoted by M. Gupta in “Undoing a kind of Tyranny”.

<sup>10</sup> D. Acharya, “Beyond formal education.”

<sup>11</sup> D. Acharya, “Beyond formal education.”

<sup>12</sup> D. Acharya, “Beyond formal education.”

<sup>13</sup> Jeeth Iype, quoted in Natsha Iype, “Towards a sustainable future” Indian Architect, August 2001. Notes, December 2004 - conversation with Shivananda Shetty. For Laurie Bakers work see [lauriebaker.net](http://lauriebaker.net)

<sup>14</sup> Jeeth Iype, quoted in Natsha Iype, “Towards a sustainable future” Indian Architect, August 2001.

<sup>15</sup> CWC Annual Report 2003. 41.

<sup>16</sup> A method of paddy cultivation which yields large crops of rice without the use of mechanised equipment. CWC Annual Report 2003. 42.

<sup>17</sup> CWC Annual Report 2003. 42 and own notes, December 2004.

<sup>18</sup> CWC Annual Report 2003. 42-3 and own notes, December 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Ramachandran, V. & Saihjee, A. Looking back in order to look ahead, CWC - an External Review, 2001