



In Search of Teacher-ness (Shikshatva ki Khoj)

Binduben



I was just lying down after returning from the school, when someone knocked on the door. Vijay, from grade 5th and Rakesh from grade 6th were standing at the door. They entered and demanded,

‘Ben, we want bhakhri’

‘Please, I am tired. Not now,’ I replied.

‘But Ben, we will help you. Please do it.’ They brought me to the kitchen.

I know making bhakhri is my one of the favourite tasks, and eating is theirs! It has happened several times. I just thought, do children have the right to force me to do this? What is that element which forces me to make the bhakhri even when I was tired? Perhaps it is my training, during my education, may be it is the Nai Taleem which is part of my past.

My primary education and professional course for teachers was completed in Lokbharati, a pioneer institute following Nai Taleem. I completed my secondary education from Gram Dakshinamoorti, Ambala, which is a well-known Nai Taleem post-basic school, now a heritage school. As a student, I never had any extra tuition or even additional books like guides to support my studies. If we had any difficulty, we just went to the teacher’s house always on the campus as a part of the Nai Taleem philosophy. They never said no. The word ‘punishment’ was not in their dictionary.

Chhatralaya (hostel) life is one of the non-negotiable aspects of Nai Taleem and taught us democracy, something new in our society where our decisions were always made for us. Chhatralaya promoted participation.

Nai Taleem is based on

1. being residential
2. doing productive work and dignity of labour

3. education in the mother tongue

4. being co-educational

Residential Education:

An important part in Nai Taleem is the daily schedule, which is split into two parts. The first part may be for three hours (7 am to 10 am) and the second from 2 pm to 5 pm. These six hours of theory are supported by tasks like working in Chhatralaya, playing, prayer and many other activities which help to absorb daily learning.

In Lokbharti, festivals, which are usually holidays, were fun as we celebrated all of them. On Uttarayan all of us enjoyed eating sugarcane, provided by the institute. It was the same on Rakshabandhan. Festivals were really holy days, with folk music and dance. This was only possible because it was a residential school.

We had ‘parents’ on campus. During my hostel life, my parents were Arunaben and Raghubhai who took very keen interest in us, only next to our parents. Although they joined in our fun, they checked our behaviour and helped us improve. They allowed us to have fun, but as our guardians, they were always alert. Once I failed in a test. Raghubhai taught me and when I got full marks, he was happier than I was.

I would like to mention some of our very interesting collaborative work. One was khajana ni shod or treasure hunt and another was community lunch or samuh bhojan. Such activities increased our community feeling, leading to social development. The area for the treasure hunt was very large, sometimes nine to ten kilometres, through hilly terrain and would take even half a day. When we returned, lunch would be waiting. We would eat with our teachers.

Self-cooking included breakfast, lunch and dinner.

We were given a limited budget and we had to plan and cook the meals ourselves. Dinner was with all the students, teachers and their families. Everyone had to participate and this made the food even tastier. Today we know it was social building process. Nai Taleem is not just training, it's a capacity building for citizenship.

Today our schools are exam-oriented schools, not life-oriented. Though my school was not exam-oriented, we were serious about our exams. This was because what we were taught was for our life, not just the curriculum. We would revise our lessons under a mango or chikku tree, where we prepared very seriously for our exams. We would go back only for our food. Our seniors were strict with those who talked too much and they would wake us in the morning. There were no 'teachers' – we did everything ourselves.

On examinations days, we had the liberty to sit anywhere in the classroom which was anywhere on the campus. If we didn't understand a question, we could ask. During the final exams, which were in the summer, we got iced lime juice or fennel juice, served lovingly by our seniors, like our own elder brothers and sisters.

After this glorious education I became a teacher in 1989. First 12 years of my teaching life I spent in Bhavnagar district of Gujarat. I always try to provide love and support to the children, who are like my own. I felt that what I had got from my 'family', I can pass to my students.

After 12 years of education I realised that if I want to give 'total'/holistic education, my students and I would have to live together so as to make education a lifelong process. After marriage, I moved to Rajpur School in a small village with just about 300 people. At first, I travelled 23 kms. everyday. I wanted to move to the village but could not as there was no proper sanitation facilities. Now we have got the convenience and have moved, and although my husband has to travel 50 km to his office, he happily accepted this for my dream.

Rajpur primary school is a 'normal' government primary school. Nothing special, except that as a student of Nai Taleem, I have started applying its principles. We know the village well. There is

superstition, bad habits like drinking, etc. and I thought I should start reforming the village, beginning in the school, which is the place where the basic foundations are laid.

Most of the villagers believed that if one gets ill, s/he should take a vow to god but not take medicines. Child mortality, infant mortality, maternal health are key issues. Even buffaloes are at risk because of such superstitions. We started by giving glucose and some fruits. We also started to say, "let us take both the vow to god and medicines". We got the result we wanted! People were benefited. At the same time in the school, we started with cleanliness. Nail-cutter, comb, towel were our key instruments! Change was not very easy but by recalling Gijubhai Bhadeka's Diwaswapna, we were able to spread the message. We also started to stitch their clothes, and teach them how to stitch buttons on the shirts. We planted trees on the campus after cleaning it and after two years, everyone's health has improved and absenteeism is almost zero.

Sacrificing goats is very common in the village. Although I know the entire village is non-vegetarian and I have no objections, I felt animal sacrifice is a superstitious belief and I went on a day's fast to show my disapproval. The villagers were shocked but sided with me. So the common sacrifice was stopped, but individual homes continued the practice. After some more fasts, they finally agreed to stop and now make a sweet instead of sacrificing an animal.

It is Nai Taleem which taught me to think. This process of thinking helped me a lot in many cases. Early marriage is one of the big challenges of our village. It is very common that a girl of age 8 to 10 gets married though married life may start later, when she is around 14 -15 years. We all know that early marriage is not only against the law but early child-birth also creates numerous health problems. As a teacher, I know that it can even result in children with learning difficulties, extra marital affairs and other related problems. For instance, I got involved when a Grade 7 child was going to be married. Though the parents agreed with me, they could not stop as it was part of a 'chain'. So she got married but stayed on in our village till the 10th class with her in-laws' support. This is not an isolated

case. It is a social evil which will be eradicated only when the whole of society agrees.

I already mentioned belief in superstitions. For example, if someone does something wrong, that person will act as if a spirit is occupying his/her body and that spirit is acting wrongly. The person is taken to a bhuva (exorcist) and various things are bought to get rid of the spirit. We have discussed this and the children agree that there is no truth in this.

Now about constructive work. We know all this happens because of poverty and the best persons in any family to make changes are the women. So we have started a self-help group in the village as well as a students' bank. Today we have more than two lakh rupees in the SHG and a little under a lakh in the students' bank. They have a voice in the family and have become financially independent.

Democracy is the biggest thing in the society and the basis of democracy is in the school. We started a students' council in the school. Every year students have to elect six or seven students to the council. The whole school is managed by the students. We have identified the tasks in school, such as cleaning

of the school, drinking water, conducting the prayer, looking after guests, the garden, etc., all managed by students with the authority to make decisions. For example, should the school have a uniform and if so what kind? This concept of a student council is helping us a lot in the village also. Now after 12 years of our practice, many of our alumni are older and have become the decision makers in the village. Their process of making decisions is democratic and allows all voices from the village. As a part of democracy, we also apply the concept of bal adalat or Students' Court. There are so many small issues in the school and home which may not appear very large to us, but to them it is very important. The issues are written down and put into a box and on Wednesdays, instead of prayers, there is a bal adalat session. This consists of two members of the students' council, two students from the rest of the school and one teacher. This helps us to educate children who are in need of guidance.

And finally, I say that even day-scholars are a part of Nai Taleem - outside of school hours, they are either in the school or at our home. This is by choice and we are enjoying it!

Binduben works as a government primary school teacher in Rajpur primary school. Her affiliation with the school is since 1989. She was born and brought-up at Lokbharti Sanosara. She has been involved in writing and reviewing textbooks for more than a decade. In 2006, she was awarded the best teacher award (Chitrakut Award). More recently, she was awarded the "Ma-baba Award" from Nai Talim Sangh, Wardha for her contribution to village development through education. She may be contacted at parthesh.pandya@ceeindia.org