

Educational Vision of the Pokhrama Foundation

The Pokhrama Foundation has, at the present moment, channelized all its energies into establishing an outstanding school in Village Pokhrama, District Lakhisarai, Bihar. The Pokhrama Foundation Academy, as the School is being called, will provide exceptional education to disadvantaged students, with several not having to pay for it. All students, including those who pay some fees, will be subsidised. This short note elucidates the educational vision of the Pokhrama Foundation.

Education and schooling are complex subjects. Creating a first-rate educational institution means engaging with numerous theoretical and practical variables and getting their interplay just right. Consequently, any discussion of educational visions runs the risk of looking less than comprehensive. Members of the Foundation have been thinking hard about the matter. We at the Foundation believe such visions are always in the making; they never appear to be fully made. Our vision will remain in-the-making for years to come, well beyond take-off. Therefore, we place below some key ideas that inform it as of now.

First, our children would feel happy to attend school, day in and day out. A crucial ingredient of this would be to banish all fear from their minds. Gandhi once said that the greatest gift any person can give fellow humans is the gift of fearlessness: *abhayadanam*.

Pokhrama Foundation Academy shall be a place of *abhaya*, fearlessness. No violence. No corporal punishment -- none at all. No bossing over children. No intellectual or cultural hierarchies. Children will not fear the Foundation, not their teachers, not other kids. There will be incessant dialogue. It will be open and free. Fear feeds on -- and triggers -- enmity, ego, greed, anger and the like. We hope to train ourselves, our teachers and students to fight these tendencies. In so doing, we hope to create an environment that the founders of our Republic imagined:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls...

Fearlessness is a necessary condition for the children to remain happy. But it is not a sufficient one. Other inputs into the children's happiness include understanding each child, classroom conversations, the whetting of curiosity, equal treatment of all and a genuine engagement with intellectual problems, cultural pursuits and sports.

This means education at Pokhrama Foundation Academy would simultaneously involve the head, heart and hand, as Gandhiji had urged. It would seek to create a deep interplay between these – that is, between the cognitive, affective, aesthetic, cultural and physical domains. All of us in the Pokhrama Foundation strongly believe this. An active sense of 'learning by doing', grasping several concepts (across the various curricular areas) through practices such as farming will be important for us. Pokhrama Foundation Academy will have a school farm, regularly maintained by children and teachers.

The education that Gandhi advocated may be summed up as an 'education for life, through life'. For him, as for several other educationalists, the contours of life must never remain far from learning. The *National Curriculum Framework, 2005* especially emphasizes that education must take place in the context of – and through – issues of daily life. Not only should it introduce the child to the dialectic of theory and practice, it should also be linked to the world of work. We are conscious that crores of Indian parents and children think of education as a surer route of social mobility. There can be no denying that all true education leads to the discovery and refinement of the self, to the intellectual and spiritual flourishing of the individual, yet freedom from poverty and drudgery is a necessary condition of happiness. At the Pokhrama Foundation Academy, education shall equip the child from all possible vantage points – the material, moral, social, cultural, political and spiritual. And the inner spirit that this education helps create shall draw upon the common and joint wisdom of all humankind rather than confine itself to chosen fragments. It may, therefore, be said that this education will prepare the child for life even as it uses the warp and woof of life itself to educate her.

Our lives in India – and the world at large – are marked by considerable diversity. If our education has to be in consonance with reality, we must use the baffling and famed diversity of India, the diversity of District Lakhisarai, of Pokhrama, Uren, Ghospur, Alinagar, Kajra and Surjagarha as a teaching-learning resource. Appropriate teacher enrichment can help establish this as a regular practice in the classroom, with teachers teaching local topics but also wider

ones from a local lens! Lessons on -- and from -- diversity, however, need not always be planned or formal. The very presence in an institution of students, teachers and others of varied backgrounds and social groups becomes a catalyst for understanding food, clothing, shelter, material culture, language, festivity, amity, religion, song and dance, love and life – and, at times, even approaches to science and mathematics! Today, the Pokhrama Foundation Academy is just about 30-strong, teachers, pupils, others, all put together, and yet it has in its ranks, Mesang from the Everest and Darjeeling regions, Bharati from Garhwal and Delhi, Pravin from Khandesh and Buhranpur, Gyan from Barh, London and Hyderabad, Nishtha from Bulandshehr, Kanpur and Princeton, Farah from Bijnaur, Aligarh and Delhi and, of course, several people from the regions of Patna, Lakhisarai and Mungher. This rich salad-bowl, we believe, is our enormous strength for it will help us learn that the world is a salad-bowl of joint and shared wisdom!

It has already been suggested that in getting schooling and education right, a delicate balance has to be struck between several putative binaries.

The first of these is between schooling and education themselves! One of India's pre-eminent educationalists, Marjorie Sykes, a disciple of Gandhiji and Gurudev (Tagore), distinguished between 'education' and 'schooling'. To her, the flavour of the two words was so different that education may in fact mean *de-schooling*. Education, Sykes explains, literally means a 'leading out':

I picture someone taking a child gently by the hand, walking alongside at the child's natural speed, encouraging new growth and new adventure, cooperating with the impulses of the child's own nature. But in contrast to this we use the word 'schooled' to suggest that the person has been conditioned to do something one would *not* naturally do – some of the poses and movements of ballet, for example. I am not claiming that education and schooling are incompatible; I am not saying that you cannot have them both. But I *am* saying that they are different and that we ought to recognise the difference.

Sykes firmly believed that teachers ought to be first concerned with education, not schooling. She likened a teacher to a gardener (for *kindergarten* is a garden of children) or a nurse (schools are *nurseries*!) who must provide the right environment for the growth of the children. Like an able gardener does with plants or a sensible nurse with her patients, the wise teacher should know when to leave the children alone so that they get on with their own growing,

‘do their own thing’ while the teacher steps back to watch, ‘concerned to understand but not to interfere’. But in stepping back to facilitate, teachers must help their pupils to refine the habit of questioning, something so natural in humans. They must themselves inculcate the spirit of enquiry. Children love to pose problems and solve them and teachers must learn this from them. So, our school must from inception remain sufficiently ‘de-schooled’, a tight-rope balance, difficult to strive for, let alone achieve!

There are other lesser balances to achieve as well: between literacy and numeracy; between Angika, Hindi and English; between the different curricular areas including the arts and sport; between abilities of argumentation and persuasion on the one hand and listening on the other; between developing anti-theses and syntheses; between education for self-discovery and refinement and for mobility and work; between understanding the home and the world; and between excellence and equity. Our success will perhaps hinge on achieving the right valencies in the combining variables in an enterprise in which too many variables feature.

Equity and Excellence! The *raison de'tre* of the Foundation's work is that we wish to make a modest contribution to the realization of greater equality and social justice in our country. Alongside we wish to demonstrate that excellence is possible in remote, disadvantaged places and can be achieved with modest finances. We shall strive for both excellence and equity, with faith in the people's ability to conquer the harshest adversities; and with faith in our abilities to create a free, fearless, joyous environment for our children. As we march forward, we shall raise questions and problems and doubts ‘about things that don't fit into the normal accepted pattern’. For, the great sages of education tell us that this is what good education is all about.