

A Child's View of the World

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CRY – Child Rights and You

Despite our heartfelt wishes, we grown-ups continue to remain aliens to a child's world. This book aims at extorting a glimpse or two from that world which has banished us forever. Besides conducting researches and publishing reports on pedagogy, health and other developmental sectors, the Pratichi Institute seeks to publish booklets in order to stimulate extensive public debate and discussion. These booklets try to tone down the severity of academic research and present the theme in a more reader-friendly format. This booklet is one such attempt. Esteemed author and journalist Anirban Chattopadhyay has presented this booklet with an wonderful introduction. Everyone at Pratichi remains greatly indebted to him. We also thank the teachers whose kind inputs have helped us develop the content. We sincerely hope everybody who is working hard to further the cause of education and pedagogy would find the book useful.

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Introduction

Anirban Chattopadhyay

A couple is walking down the street, their five-year old a little ahead of them. Mother and father are walking quietly, in a straight line, steadily forward, not looking left and right at all. And why should they? It is a perfectly ordinary street, like any average street in any average city.

But the child is endlessly curious. He stops every two steps and looks around. A cinema poster on the wall; a dog spotted in pink, sitting on the street (Holi was just a few days back); a smoke-belching round machine on the other side of the street, mixing stone chips with tar, and the sweet smell of melting pitch; a crow sitting on top of a water pump, swivelling its neck this way and that. In the time it took him to see all of this, two yellow leaves from an oldish tree twirled twice on their way down.

The boy keeps dropping back. His annoyed father sharply instructs his mother to pick him up. “Oof! Take him in your lap”, he says. “If he keeps walking like this it’ll take us all day to get there!”

I read this description a long time ago. The name of the writer, the context of the description... none of that has stayed with me. But the description did. At the end of it, the author had commented, “This child is still capable of creating his own happiness from within himself. But he won’t be able to for long. He’ll grow up soon”.

This little anthology reminded me of that scene, imagined long ago. The individual pieces made me think, once again, how individualistic children really are. We, the adults, are constantly trying to chip away at them to make them fit into pre-ordered moulds.

Thankfully, not all of us manage to do all of it to all children all the time. When the little Nischindipur-boy Apu stepped out of his village for the first time, he kept slowing his father down by pointing out the wonders of the road – a flash of wings, perhaps, or a glimpse of floppy ears. Father Harihar had to scold and chivvy him along. Upon their return, he complains to mother Sarbajaya: “Taking that boy along was such an annoyance! He wanders off here, wanders off there, I can’t keep him under my control”.

Yet Apurbakumar Roy still remains that little Apu at heart. Indeed, his annoyed father’s

own repressed romanticism prevents him from being moulded into an average adult. But most children inevitably grow up to be like most adults, and inevitably pour the next generation into the same moulds.

Schools are our chief weapons in this moulding process. The poet Kalidas Roy wasn't entirely accurate about generations of school children. Those that come every year in masses to the shrine of education do indeed leave it in a joyful chorus soon after, but the children who arrive and the children who leave are not the same people. There's a metamorphosis in them. They stop being children, and start learning to be adults. And so they should. After all, that is the goal and the prescription of an education system. Philosophers have analysed and interpreted this system in various ways, and their research is undoubtedly very valuable. But wasn't there a philosopher who once said, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point is to change it" What if our children ask us to take the same approach to their world? If they do, their answer will be silence. We do not know how to do that.

Actually, we do. But we do not want to acknowledge that we do. Because, if we change the world, our familiar rules and regulations will change with it, changing the shape and nature of power. If we admit that every child is really most like herself, then how can we control children? We will be forced to respect their individual wishes and preferences, their idea of what is right and what is wrong. We would be forced to admit that a regimented segregation of 'study-time' and 'play-time' are not always the best idea, and a break from fixed routines might actually make both work and games more appealing. We will have to agree that some days only Bangla and poetry feels right, and doing sums are the only way on other days. But if we admit to such knowledge, the empire of power would come tumbling down, so we pretend we do not know any of this.

There are, however, a few people who try to change the mould while still living in it. When they teach at schools, they do not make the classroom into a prison or the training camp for the armed forces. To them, each little boy or girl is an individual person, with independent ideas that must be respected. They realise that in our society, children are far too easily disrespected and their own ideas about their needs ignored. It is not that the rest of us adults deliberately set out to crush youthful sovereignty or the need for it, but our very adulthood is based upon its dismissal. To ignore it is ingrained its bones. The people

who resist the temptation to float easily in this current, and work against it to carve a different world – I haven't the arrogance to congratulate them on a job well done. But I welcome their efforts, and wish them the best in it.

The succinct few pieces of this anthology embody both pain, and the assurance of hope. Perhaps we shall see a time when there shall be no reason for this pain, and hence no need for this hope. For now, however, we must feel both the pain, and the hope. To us as we are today, however, they are each as important as the other.

In Their Own World

The eponymous child in Tagore's poem, 'That Boy', is a supremely powerful creature. He is capable – so the adults attest – of single-handedly disrupting the smooth flow of village life, unleashing frequent chaos on unsuspecting victims. Exasperated, they have simultaneously labelled him an impish mischief-maker, and a no-good fool. Eventually, his harassed teacher brings the matter to the poet. "He is such a thick child", the teacher complains, and "that he refuses to read even *your* poems. He cuts his books up into tiny little pieces, and then says the mice have nibbled through them!" Clearly, his student's literary inclination bewilders and appals the man.

One sympathises with him. If children reject the syllabi carefully compiled for them by expert pedagogues, what is a poor teacher to do? Administering the unwanted to the

unwilling is hard work. And, as common adult wisdom has it, imparting an education to children is the hardest work of all. 'That Boy', for instance, would much rather endure shouting, public scolding and even the occasional beating, than pay attention in class and learn more about this wonderful world from carefully-compiled textbooks.

The poet – and educator – however, had the rare gracious humility of a perceptive grown-up, as well as a constitution strong enough to withstand rejection by a ten-year-old critic. “It's my fault entirely that he dislikes those poems,” he tells the indignant teacher. “Had there been a poet of his own world, the flitting of ladybirds would have come so alive in his rhythm that child and book would have been inseparable. Have I ever been able to write about tragedy of a dying stray dog, or about the truth behind frogs?”

This rare sensitivity to children's worldviews was not limited to Tagore's own poetry and prose. He encouraged it in his peers and colleagues, and in the institutions he left behind as a legacy. The publishing house at Vishwabharati developed under his personal direction. In 1946, shortly after Tagore's death, it published a remarkable booklet called *Shishuder Mon*, or *A Child's Mind*. The researcher-author, Sukhenlal Brahmachari, observed children playing with dolls, and realised that they reflected their family and school's treatment of them in their behaviour towards their dolls. At the same time, they also talked freely to their dolls, because dolls do not interrupt them, tell them they are wrong, police their every move, or force them into pre-defined moulds.

The milieu in which dolls were the only toys available to children is, however, long past. The new map to a child's inner world lies in spending time with them, in talking to them, in listening to them, in playing and spending time with them. Sometimes, it can be found in the pictures they draw and the stories they want to tell, on slates and notebooks and the walls of their homes. One must merely have the inclination and patience to put the puzzle-pieces together.

Indeed, the biggest argument against homogenising children – in policy discourse or in the classroom – is the diversity that one notices in their drawing and writing. Some of this is acquired through differences in their social contexts. In our experience, children often depict their own environment in their pictures or writings. Those from the villages tend to draw rivers, boats, birds on branches. Sometimes they draw a stick-figure with a stack of

hay or sickles and hoes, and say it is their father, uncle, or brother. Their landscapes are usually the thatched roofs and green fields of their own neighbourhoods. City kids, on the other hand, often draw their favourite superheroes – Shaktimaan on television or Spiderman from the big screen – blocks of flats, fluffy pet dogs, and stick-figure fathers in shirts and trousers. (The stick-figure mothers, however, usually remain constant across the rural/urban divide, wearing a sari and cooking.) Sometimes, the children of better-off households reproduce pictures from their colourful, expensive books. In short, and unless deeply troubled by something, children tend to depict things most familiar or dear to them. Several such glimpses into children’s inner worlds have come up in the reading festivals organised by CRY (Child Rights and You) and the Pratichi Trust at Birbhum earlier this year. At one such festival, a visibly delighted child wrote,

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(I really liked it today. I really really liked it. I had no idea I could ever like something so much.)

Looking at the original Bengali, an adult might frown deeply and say, “Goodness! Look at all the spelling mistakes! This child has learnt nothing! What good are our public schools? Are our children learning anything at all?”

It just might be true that academically, this child has not learnt much. Perhaps his spellings need a little mending. But surely it is not the child’s fault if he or she has not been taught to express himself adequately in institutionally approved forms? Indeed, by focusing on the mistakes in spelling and grammar in a little primary school child’s writing, we are not only not giving the child credit for expressing himself, but we are shaming him into probably never wanting to express his spontaneous ideas in public ever again. “You are children, you will be corrected, not listened to” – this is the message we unconsciously, but inevitably, send them.

And yet, does having ‘well-disciplined’ children – frightened (or sullen) and uncommunicative – make our job as parents and teachers any easier? Quite the reverse, say the voices of experience. Adults who do have the patience, curiosity and affection to listen to children are rewarded with glimpses into their own worlds: rich, vibrant places

where the smallest things are an exciting adventure. To better teach children how to walk in our world, we must first learn how to keep step with theirs.

Some of children love the surprise of new lessons. Others like to run with their friends, discovering ‘secret’ nooks in a familiar neighbourhood. Some find a fascinating new world in books. Others love to sing and dance. Sometimes when someone comes to school late, she bursts into speech from the doorway, “Didimoni, didimoni, listen to me, listen to what happened to me! So yesterday night I had a terrible stomach-ache. Fever and everything! See, my forehead is still warm! This morning I woke up, and went faaar away to the doctor’s chambers. Then I got the medicines, then I ate the medicines, *then* I came to school. That’s why I am so late”. Right then, another bunch of her classmates come rushing in and gasp, “Didimoni, o didimoni, please please let us go early today? We caught a fish this morning, we’re going to have a picnic after school!” And then there are children like Akaash, who wander completely off the tracks we are familiar with. Akash has learnt to sing kirtans from his father. When he grows up, he wants to be a wandering minstrel, going from from village to village on foot, playing his little musical instrument and singing devotional hymns.

If there is a ‘good’ teacher, these secrets can be confided to him or her. In their own world, where stray dogs matter, where silvery fish in the pond behind their house matters, the kite matters, and learning the alphabet through songs matter, those didimonis and mastermoshais who step out of the adult world and into the child’s, become firm favourites. When they extend their hands, children do not hesitate to take them.

On the subject of didimoni and mastermoshai – female and male teachers, respectively – we made quite an interesting observation about primary school-age children. The little children, really little children, do not understand the difference between boys and girls. They relate to each other as separate entities, but not as entities separated by gender. The difference is something ‘sensible’ adults force upon them, in remarkably unsubtle ways, over and over till they internalise it. Girls are going to take care of domestic responsibilities – ‘share their mother’s hand’ – as it is locally said, and they are going to play indoors with domestic toys like dolls and tiny utensils. So when talking to a little girl, these are the things adults touch upon. For boys – who like to and ‘should’ play loud,

messy outdoors games – the topics are likely to be cricket, football, or what they want to be when they grow up.

Yet when we talk to the girls, they say, “I am going to live in our own little flat with my father and my mother. I am going to work so I can buy the flat for them. But if they fall ill, I’m probably going to skip the flat and use the money for doctors and medicine for them”. Not only does this transcend the traditional within/without paradigm of gendered labour, it also shows that pragmatism and a sense of responsibility are not as alien to children as adults tend to think. Yet we frequently complain that children have no idea about what is good for them. Or we make them out to be perfect tabula rasa, pristine in their ignorance. Some people do listen to children, but either label their knowledge of the adult world a sly, unseasonal ripeness (‘pakami’, in Bengali), or dismiss their hopeful view of the future as a naïve, ‘innocent’ hope for an impossible utopia. In either instance, children are rewarded with rebuke or mockery for expressing themselves. As Tagore’s ‘that boy’ also found out, when the disempowered do not fit into ill-informed constructs of them, they usually end up taking the blame.

Rezina Khatun from Haldibari is astonished that the number of vans far outstrip the number of people of the Haldibari township. About her hometown, she writes just one sentence, “Van beshi, manush kom, etai Haldibari” (“Lots of vans, a handful of people. This is Haldibari”). She thinks this is downright odd. Why are there so many vans? Clearly, people don’t need these many vans, so why do they trundle up and down, belching smoke, honking shrilly, and keeping pedestrians on edge? In her mind, there is a much better world, a cleaner, nicer world, a world that is less smoky, less noisy, more peaceful and safe. The vans, the cars, the crowds – all of these, in her eyes, make her hometown not her hometown at all. She feels displaced, threatened, and ousted, but of course, no one has time for her fancies. Get rid of vans, indeed. How will people earn their livings then?

But is regulating traffic really that difficult?

Another girl, when asked what she wants to be when she grows up, says, “I want to be a boy”. “Why do you want to be a boy?” we ask.

“So I can pee wherever I like”, she replies.

This is perhaps not a very sophisticated answer, or even a very hygienic one, but it telegraphs this child's astute understanding of the world. Not yet out of primary school, and she has already worked out that being a boy in a man's world is being in the black, but girls are always chalked up in red, and frequently written off.

Inabilities, Constructed

A morning at a primary school in a Bengal village.

The chorus of children's voices reverberate across school grounds. Classes have just begun.

In a Class 3 classroom a teacher – a didimoni – is teaching children how to do multiplications. The children are sitting together, listening attentively. Suddenly, a slight movement at the back of the classroom reveals a girl, sitting alone in the very last bench, crouched low enough to be missed by a casual glance.

It was immediately evident that she wasn't paying multiplications the least attention.

We asked the teacher who the girl is. Didimoni was dismissive. "That one? She doesn't pay attention in class at all. I keep calling on her, but all she does is hang back and draw in her notebook. She hasn't been able to learn anything at all so far". The children from the front benches, who had crowded around, agreed immediately. Most of them were eager to impress upon us that they had nothing to do with the 'back-bencher'. "She is not our friend", they told us firmly.

One of us left the crowd up front, walked to the back of the classroom, and tried talking to the friendless child. At this sudden attention, the child was acutely embarrassed, and tried to curl herself into a tight, stiff ball. This is how our colleague recorded their subsequent interaction.

I sat next to her and kept talking to her. After a few moments of one-sided chatter, she slowly relaxed and became more friendly. She told me her name. From the name I worked out that she belongs to a community different from her classmates. There are no other children from that community in this particular class.

At this point, she pushed her notebook full of sketches eagerly at me. The drawings are impressive since she was completely untutored. After I leave the

classroom, a question haunts me for the rest of the day. Is this child really incapable? Can she really not learn anything? Can't she be taught how to read, write, add, subtract, multiply? Or has she been deliberately, but unconsciously, been shoved at the back of the class because she is different? Even if she is not that bright, the fact that she is sitting almost drowning in her shame and making these beautiful sketches in her notebook, using her imagination to combat social alienation – is this capability for survival not on our list of desirable qualities in children?

Just imagine, we are incapable of teaching a child of Class 3 what she needs to learn, and to cover up this incapability, we go around telling everybody, especially her, that it is *she* who is incapable of learning anything! What can be a more cruel way of excluding a child, who has no power in the classroom environment?

Children are sensitive, especially to contempt, dismissal, and lack of affection. We forget this all too easily. Often, unconsciously, even casually, we act in ways that are so rude and dismissive towards them that it leaves a raw, deep scar. The children who disrupt the comfortable flow of classroom delivery by being a little slow, or by being a little distracted, or by simply being a little different from the rest, are frequently pushed out of the mainstream, and told that it is her problem, or his incapability, that they cannot learn like 'the others' do.

In most such cases, such as in this one, such conclusions are entirely inaccurate. However, after being told this for a sufficient number of time, these children who might otherwise have been quite talented (as this girl was), slowly start believing that he or she really is stupid, or dull, or completely deficient in everything that makes a child a 'good' child. As a result, they lose interest in the few things that they *can* do well, and indeed, want to do well. The 'useless' label, spuriously applied, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

An instance of this is Lakshmi Das. After her father's death, Lakshmi and her mother have had to work all available hours to keep the roof over their heads and put food on their plates (with limited success). Her mother works as a domestic help in several local

households, leaving the domestic responsibilities of their own home to Lakshmi. Because of this, Lakshmi's attendance in Class 3 was abysmal. Naturally, in Class 4, she fell behind a lot of her classmates in schoolwork. Indeed, when we met her for the first time, Lakshmi couldn't write even her own name properly; her knowledge of the Bengali alphabet was nominal.

During our stay in her village, a member of our research team took it upon himself to teach Lakshmi the letters. She picked them up very quickly. By the third day, she could write her own name and spell a few words completely on her own. Even her teachers were impressed. The expression of their astonishment, however, was thus: "That Lakshmi? *She* wrote this? How? She can't do anything at all in the classroom, she's completely useless!"

In a second, Lakshmi's delighted, proud smile vanished. First she hid her face in acute embarrassment, and then ran away. Neither were we prepared for this reaction. The way we saw it, a perfectly intelligent child in difficult circumstances had failed to learn much in the public education system. This is unfortunate and needs immediate attention, but is nonetheless a common enough occurrence. What is not common is such a child taking an interest in her own education, and learning what she needs to know from other available sources. Her teachers, we imagined, would be proud of this remarkable initiative and achievement. Instead they reminded her, dismissively, how 'stupid' and 'worthless' she was till a few days back.

At teachers' training, there are modules about child development and effective classroom communication. Do teachers thus trained fail to realise how such casual cruelty cripples children? After such a response, will Lakshmi ever want to take an initiative on her own, want to learn something new? And if she does not, whose fault will it be? It certainly will not be hers.

This contempt for the less fortunate, masked as a 'rational' reaction to their presumed – and as we saw, largely imagined – incapacities, are quickly absorbed by the other children in the classroom. Soon, they begin shunning these 'stupid' children socially.

In another classroom, on another day, smiling, we asked the children sitting at the front of the class why they were sitting away from those at the back. An enthusiastic chorus

explained, “They can’t do anything! They don’t even know the simple rhymes, didi! Ask them and see!”

The children at the back withdrew even more into their shells. After this, though we coaxed and cajoled and tried to play with them, they refused to participate in the poetry-recitation that was part of that day's schoolwork. Indeed, every time we tried to involve them in this activity, the seven or eight children sitting in front laughed. “They *really* can't do anything”, they assured us. “That’s why sir has to tell them off every single day!”

Of course, the children sitting in the front came from relatively well-off families, and had family members – or even private tutors – recite nursery rhymes with them, and ensure that they sat down with their books every evening, going over the lessons learnt at school that day. The children at the back, on the other hand, came from far poorer families. Before and after school, they are kept too busy sharing the burden of their family’s poverty to indulge such educational luxuries as studying. By refusing to recognise this difference, the ‘sir’ in question has made the performance of his better-off students the baseline against which every other student must measure themselves, and given their many deprivations, usually find themselves wanting. If a responsible, trained adult thus ignores the lived realities of children in his care, and expresses his irritation or frustration with them quite so openly, then it is no surprise that the privileged children sitting at the front of the class would develop a condescending, contemptuous attitude towards their classmates, and eventually for their fellow-men and women.

An encouraging – and interesting – fact that emerges from observing several such situations, though, is that children who withdraw from dismissive, contemptuous or stern teachers often learn very quickly from classmates they are friendly with. A didimoni drew our attention to a child in Class 1 who, she said, was very resistant to learning from her (and from other adults), but had no problem learning from his peers. For some time now, she had been trying to engage his attention, using prescribed pedagogic methods to reach him, but he has not responded. Finally, after watching him interact with the other children in class, she asked an advanced student to teach him what she had been teaching the class. In a few minutes, the child picked it up. These days, she frequently outsources the job of teaching him to other students in his class.

Her solution might raise a few eyebrows, but since a way around this child's lack of response to adult instructors cannot be found immediately, we think this didimoni's technique is worthy of praise. Not only did she observe her students closely, but she also used these observations to solve a problem that in many other schools has led teachers to declare children incompetent, dull, or unsuited to the classroom environment. Besides, this situation, when contrasted with the ones described earlier, shows how a harmonious and friendly environment in the classroom works not only to the students' benefit, but also to the teacher's advantage. A child who is hesitant to ask a teacher to explain something might easily ask their more advanced classmates. Teachers, too, can work more effectively with scant resources if they have children to delegate some responsibilities to, but this can only succeed if they nurture an atmosphere of inclusive friendliness in their classrooms. Such 'arrangements' might not be the ideal form of classroom delivery, but as we all know from personal and observed experiences, the ideal forms found in policies, manuals and expert recommendations do not always reflect the actual functioning of the system on the ground. If more teachers were willing to step beyond the strict call of duty, then perhaps fewer children will go around with 'worthless' and 'stupid' hanging like labels around their necks.

One afternoon at a far-off primary school in Birbhum, the students had been lined up to showcase their extra-academic prowess for us. Poltu – the class singer – was instructed by his teacher to sing either a Robindrasangeet or a Najrulgeeti. When he started singing, however, it turned out he had overridden instructions to sing a song from a popular Bengali film. A little surprised, we asked him where he had learnt the song. Grinning through his gap-tooth, Poltu informed us that there was currently a music box in his village, thanks to the fair camped next to it. This box played a mixed tape of recent hits all day long. It had taken him just a few days to learn all the songs by heart. His teachers were considerably less than pleased. “Do you see how it is with these children?” they asked us. “They listen to film songs and learn those by heart, but they can’t remember a word from their textbooks!”

The accusation is not entirely baseless. We think, however, that it should be dismantled and examined closely with reference to ourselves, instead of directing blame at the children. If a child listens willingly to songs and learns them perfectly, yet shows a

certain slowness of mind in the classroom, then instead of labelling him or her incapable of learning, we should ask why such 'stupidity' is so widely spread. Why is a song – the words of which the child does not even understand clearly – much more appealing and easy to learn than things we teach in the classroom? What is the lapse here that needs further discussion? Is it our method of delivery? Or is it the content being delivered? Is there a responsibility that we are avoiding by blaming the children? Would these responsibilities be impossible to fulfil? These are things we need to talk about.

We have discussed Akash before, who has no interest in his books or studying, either at school or at home, but who sits down every day with his father to practise his singing. He does not need to be scolded into doing it, or even prompted. He is determined to become a wandering kirtan-singer when he grows up, and for that he is eager to practise as much as he can. On the other hand, we have Ranjit Lohar, who never misses school if he can help it. But he does not do this because he loves his classes. He goes to school every day because his school provides him with the opportunity to indulge his love for athletics. “Running is what I love best”, he says. He has participated in several track events on behalf of the school, and brought back trophies and prizes. His teachers are very proud of him. “Ranjit is the pride of our school”, they told us.

There are other children like Akash and Ranjit, who excel outside the traditional spheres of education. If we try to clip their wings and push them into the little boxes of syllabi and examinations, they will be miserable – and do miserably – in both their academics and their extra-curricular. If Akash and Ranjit were given the opportunity to sing kirtans and run to their hearts' content without being told that these are a waste of their time, then they might have stopped seeing their studies as a hindrance to their preferred path, and taken an interest in them. However, the world has been depicted to them as a place where they must pick, very young, either something that they love doing and want to do for the rest of their lives, or something they have absolutely no interest in. And it has been made very clear to them that they are expected to pick the latter. It is little wonder, then, that caught between these choices, many children lose interest in both schoolwork and extra-academic activities altogether, giving up on their lives frighteningly young.

If we do not want to destroy children with great potential for excellence, in a variety of fields, then we should stop focusing on things our regimented education system says they

are 'worthless' at, or on things that they cannot or do not want to do, and focus instead on putting into the curriculum things that they can do, and things that they love doing. If we do not bother to find out why they object to an education system we think is well-suited to them, then the chances of us ever designing a curricula they do want to participate in is very slender.

Adults' Whipcords

In the 'chaturashram' – or 'four-stage' – lifestyle prescribed by the Vedas, a (male) child's life is chartered by an evolving set of duties and expectations. In his childhood, he is required to be an obedient student. Upon reaching sexual maturity, he is required to be a married householder, involved in economically productive activity. Several decades and grandparenthood later, he and his wife are advised to retire to the forests and hills, detaching themselves from family ties and civilisation's artifices in the hopes of a 'natural' and peaceful transition into the next life. (For the few survivors of this stage – the vanaprastha – the Vedas suggest sanyas, a life of renunciation and contemplation in solitude.)

The eponymous – but anonymous – child in Banabihari Mukhopadhyay's *Shishur Kotha* (*The Biography of a Child*) prescribes a reversal of this traditional system, to better suit reality as he perceives it: "The world belongs to you [adults]. By all means, enjoy it. And instead, please send the children to live in the forests, away from their families".

After all, as Mukhopadhyay's *Everychild* points out, adults are used to society's structures and norms, and wield a certain amount of power in it. Children, on the other hand, float bewildered and helpless, trying to work out the rules through a haze of shouting, scolding, disciplining, beatings, and even the rare indulgences. Therefore, if any group deserves the privilege of being far from society's madding crowd, it is the latter, not the former.

A little girl we met said, helplessly, "Mother asks me to bring home the water. When I don't, she beats me". The child does not want to trek to the distant water source and carry heavy pots of it back home when she could be playing with her friends, or even sitting in class. Mothering her even younger siblings and playing housekeeper are the last things she wants to do. But this 'truancy' costs her parents' affection. Undone chores and a

disarrayed household at the end of a hard day infuriate her exhausted, daily-labouring parents. Her mother is especially angry about this 'irresponsibility', because she knows the day's worth of chores will now fall to her. When asked why she doesn't encourage her daughter to have a carefree, joyful childhood, she responds just as helplessly as her daughter, "Is fun and games meant for children from families like ours? We're too poor." In her own way, she's right. Survival here is a demanding mistress. She needs all available hands on deck. All over West Bengal, therefore, little children are forced to play at being adults. Six-year old children running errands with their infant sibling in their arms is a common enough sight in rural Bengal.

Another young girl is known for starting fights at school. She is visibly malnourished, inattentive in the classroom, and generally irritable. Her chief grievance in life is that all her mother's love is lavished on her younger brother. "Ma always picks on me, beats me if I do anything wrong. But she never even scolds my brother". Unwanted and unloved – at least in comparison to her brother – her worldview is being shaped by anger and hurt. Hunger and poverty only compounds her bitterness. In a family of straitened means, gender-preference like this often spells systematic starvation and stunted development of the girl child, and a strong message about being unlovable – or not-as-lovable – merely for being who she is.

It's not surprising, therefore, that there are children who do not want to go home from school. Chores await, families' expectations and disappointments wait. On top of that, these days, there is the threat of private tuition. "No, we don't want to go home!" children chorused at us after the final bell at a school. "Going home means being made to go for tuitions". They would much rather stay with friends and classmates in the safety of the schools and streets, learning and playing together. Parents, however, think it is in their best interests to be immersed in texts and lessons all day. Many of them work themselves to the limit – and sometimes beyond it – to pay for tutors (and the commute to and from). "How else will they do well?" they demand. "We don't want them to end up like us".

Since life is dictated by adults, these children spend theirs in chores and classrooms, becoming 'adults' in mind long before their bodies follow suit. Such premature adulthood brings with it the feeling of being burdened and pressured – with books, with exams, with

the competition to do better, with chores, poverty and responsibility. It also often brings with it the certainty that this is what the rest of their lives will be like.

In such circumstances, can one really find fault with the children for being resistant to learning, and stealing what moments of freedom they can? Or for being inattentive, distracted, even sullen? Never mind a lost childhood, when they fail to fall in step with the prescribed model of 'manush howa' – 'becoming human', a Bengali euphemism for becoming a socialised adult – do the people in charge of their welfare and development really try to find out why? If they did, a class teacher would not have to learn from visiting researchers that the lonely, unresponsive boy who sits at the corner of the class is lost to the world because his father abandoned him after his mother's sudden death. Reared grudgingly in an aunt's house, this silent child's entire being curls away from reality by refusing to participate in it. And no one seems to particularly care.

The situation is not always better for children whose families do take an interest in their upbringing. Seven-year old Malati Marandi, for example, has already learnt her place in the world from rhymes her family has taught her. The one she cheerfully recited for us went:

Morning is for cooking and for tying up my hair
For tightening its knots and putting flowers there.

The rhyme is fun, and cooking is certainly a necessary skill for people of all ages, but we have yet to notice a single male child being taught this (or a similar) rhyme, or for that matter, being in loco housekeeper for his working parents. But nearly every school we visited reported a marked dip in female attendance during seasonal migration of agricultural labour. Young boys also disappear at agricultural cruxes – sowing and reaping times, but the absence of little girls are longer and more consistent. Seven or eight-year olds tell us with perfect ease that they are skipping school because they have to 'cook rice' for their younger female siblings, older and younger male siblings, and elderly male relatives who have stayed behind to keep an eye on them while their parents travelled in search of work.

Families, of course, are not solely responsible for reproducing this gendered structure of responsibilities. A similar pattern was noticed amongst teachers by Achin Chakraborty, while conducting a study in the district of Murshidabad: "School hadn't started yet. The

children were busy with their various duties in the little school yard. A boy was sweeping the floor with great enthusiasm. Dry leaves and bits of paper were whirling around in a tiny storm, showing no inclination at all to settle down in a neat heap. After a while, the amused (female) teacher told him affectionately, 'Tapan, give the broom to Pinki. You silly child, is sweeping a boy's job?'"

Gender roles and gendered social expectations poke these children relentlessly in the eye even before – as we pointed out in an earlier chapter – they fully understand the difference between girls and boys. Some might say this helps socialise them to society's expectations of them, so that the rules don't chafe as they grow older. But is blind reinforcement of rules handed down from a different time and social milieu the 'adult' thing to do? Especially for those adults who are involved in imparting a 'modern', 'rational', secular education and who frequently complain about the regressive sexism of their student's parents?

We are not suggesting that traditional education – the reading, writing and doing sums – is not necessary. Quite the contrary, we are suggesting that a little leisure and the chance to do things children like to do – singing, dancing, painting or merely running about – makes schoolwork more interesting. Our current ways put academics in opposition to everything most children like doing, making them hostile towards their education and reject school and schoolwork. Neither does it take the students' inclinations or fears into account when teaching. A student of the Brahmankhanda Primary School in Birbhum writes in his classroom's wall-magazine,

Addition is what I like

Multiplication not at all.

Ma scolds me about this

I lose myself in tears.

The original Bengali is written in Birbhum's local dialect, and some teachers might think it needs to be changed to the received standard. But far more important than that is finding out why this child does not like doing multiplications. If he writes a poem about it, he is probably quite willing to talk about it too. He just needs adults who are interested in listening to him, and then acting on what he says to help him overcome this dislike (or

fear). Forcing him, scolding him, beating or humiliating him and worse, ignoring him, will not solve the problem.

If we can make children – and ourselves – believe in equality in the classroom, and in the idea that schoolwork and 'fun' things exist best in complement to each other, instead of editing the latter out of their lives in the belief it will facilitate interest in the former, we would be far more successful in bringing up happy, well-educated, and well-rounded children.

Judged: 'Abnormal'

Tagore's 'That Boy' had wanted to make one recorded economic transaction in his school days (or, more accurately, in his running-away-from-school days). He had wanted the youngest Pakrashi boy's magical kaleidoscope, and in exchange he had steeled himself against giving up his favourite hand-crafted mango-stone flute, and sharp-edged seashell. But the Pakrashi's youngest scorned his offer. 'So therefore', the poet reports matter-of-factly, 'it [the kaleidoscope] had to be stolen'.

The elders in charge of his moral development applied themselves to his correction both physically and verbally. Their alarm, decontextualised, was justified: it is certainly an adult responsibility to discourage under-age criminal behaviour. Even in context of a failed transaction, stealing is difficult to condone. In 'that boy's' life, however, there is a complete lack of adult attempt or desire to even explore this context, to understand why he does what he does, and address unacceptable behaviour at the root.

Ajay suffers from a similar problem. A beloved only son, Ajay's parents lavished him with gifts. But toys, as they are, do not appeal to him. Finding out what makes them work does. So Ajay patiently takes apart his new toys, discovering an amazing world of intricate mechanism within. His parents, however, see this is an undesirable destructive streak that needs to be taken care of before it gets out of hand. They have reasoned, scolded, and finally raised their hands to him, but it has not 'cured' Ajay. Finally, his parents have told him that he shall not have any more more toys till he mends his ways. The poor boy still does not quite understand why playing with his own toys the way he wants to makes his father so very angry.

We know another child, who delights in making boats, birds and flowers from bits of paper. Paper is in short supply in his poor household, so he makes do with sheets from textbooks and notebooks. When this was discovered, he was roundly scolded by his teachers and family, who construed his hobby as a demonstration of disrespect towards his studies. Since then, not only has he been stopped from crafting things from his textbooks, his access to paper – scant enough earlier – has been curtailed as a punishment for his truancy.

In her school magazine, Class 4 student Anita writes

One after the other, I learn

Bangla, Hindi, English...

But why can't I still

Understand birdsongs, learn their tongue?

None of you understand how much this emptiness hurts¹

Ten-year old Sumit, at least, is left to his own devices. The son of daily-labouring parents, Sumit is left alone to do as he pleases from dawn to evening. Sometimes, he stops by school. Sometimes, he does not. Wandering about with apparent aimlessness is what he likes best. The rice and dal at home, or the school lunch served via the Mid-day Meal programme, is not up to his standards. He would prefer the food served to guests at social gatherings, or the food people pay for in shops. He goes off in search of generous hosts or shopkeepers sometimes, and comes home when he wants to. His family and neighbours can see him come and go, but it is almost like Sumit lives in a different world. One he has made himself, to suit his own tastes. Central to this world is a white-lidded box, that remains hidden in a pile of bricks next to his house. In this box, there are a few metres of wire, a tangle of fairy lights, and a few used batteries. Sumit's greatest joy is in making this wire and the used batteries make the lights – called toonie bulbs locally – come to life, even if it is for a few seconds. To this end, he experiments with his tiny inventory, trying to supplement it when he can. Once, he had been given a beautiful book full of pictures. He loved that book. After a few days, though, he hardened himself against necessity and sold the book for ten rupees. His parents spent a great deal of time and energy in locating its new owner, and paid that owner to get it back. Sumit promptly

1 Tepantor. Birbhum District Primary School Council, 2011.

sold the book again, this time for four rupees. With this money, he bought wires and other supplies for his box.

Yes, he loved that book. He wished he could keep it. But how else, apart from selling it, could he afford things that made him genuinely happy?

In a short story by Ashapura Debi, a little boy is lectured frequently about the importance of being honest. He is disciplined for the smallest deviations from the truth, till one day he decides to be especially forthright, and reports every unflattering comment his parents make in private to their extended family. For this act of honesty, of course, his parents severely reprimand him. A child can hardly be blamed, however, if he finds this contradictory adult world bewildering and unattractive. Sometimes, like Ashapura Debi's character, they can wreak deliberate mischief with our double standards. At other times, like Banabihari Mukhopadhyay's *Everychild*, they might want to run away from it all into a world of their own. At the end of the day, however, they learn to live up to the expectations of this strange, inconsistent world eventually, because their very survival depends on it. Children have very little power to make adults take an interest in – or understand – their worlds, or take into account their likes, dislikes, joys, emptinesses, and desires. So instead they fit themselves as best they can to the world that is presented to them as the 'real' one – one quite different from their own. In so doing, however, many of them leave behind those qualities and inclinations that make them unique, and uniquely productive members of society.

So before we regiment children's worlds rigidly, we must ask ourselves: is the comfort of administering a forcibly homogenised childhood worth producing a generation of limited adults, living in a stagnating society that their wasted talents might otherwise have helped progress?

Breaking Boundaries

Kartik studies in Class 4. When he can find the time for it, that is. His chief occupation is to wander from field to field, picking up the odd handful of crop dropped during harvest. These, he sells to local tradespeople, and with the money buys biscuits from Kalidas' shop.

On one of his recent visits to the school, Kartik discovered that one of his classmates had been absent for several days. The teachers were worried, and trying to find out how things stood with the boy from their other students. They had, Kartik gathered, had words with this boy's parents, and the parents had told them that chores and employment came before an education in a family as poor as theirs.

The next morning, the elusive child was back in school, accompanied by Kartik, grinning from ear to ear.

The teachers were astonished. They asked the former absentee what had changed his parents' minds about his coming to school. "Kartik did", said the boy. Earlier that morning, apparently, Kartik had walked into his home, and fought with his parents about the importance of an education till they relented and allowed their son to come to school. Of course, this episode of advocacy has not changed Kartik's own preference for staying away from the classroom. But it did change the casual pity with which one would normally view such chronic absenteeism as his. Earlier, we had assumed, as all-knowing adults tend to do, that Kartik's truancy was the fickleness of childhood, encouraged by his poor, rural family, unenlightened about the importance of an education. Now, we saw clearly that this little boy understands the value of an education at least as much as his teachers do. He just does not want it for himself. Perhaps his choice is not a very well considered one, or even very advisable, but it is nonetheless an informed decision, and not the ignorant juvenile irresponsibility most people first encountering Kartik assume it to be.

Indeed, poor socioeconomic conditions compel many of our public-school students to abandon all traces of youthful 'irresponsibility' and 'grow up' very quickly. Our friend Roma narrated the following incident about a young girl she is very fond of. (Only, as her story illustrates, the girl turned out to be much less of a 'child' than Roma had assumed her to be from her chronological age):

I buy oven-fresh hand-made rootis every night from a shop next to my place. The shopkeeper's daughter Sulekha – she is in Class 7 now – helps her mother run the place. Her books are always piled in a corner of the shop. She studies during lulls in business. After weeks of regular little chats, Sulekha and I are now quite good friends. The other day, knowing she had done very well in her finals, I took a bar of chocolate for her. But when I tried to give it to Sulekha, her cheerfulness vanished, and she absolutely refused to take it,

shaking her head constantly. Finally when, thinking her shy, I pushed her to take it, she said, “Don't, didi. You are spoiling me with something I can never afford on my own”.

Such blunt practicality from a pre-teen shocked Roma into silence. “How easy it is for us to overlook the poverty right in front of our eyes, isn't it?” she asked us later. “In our own little everyday struggles, we forget how much we take for granted that other people cannot even imagine having. With one little phrase, that girl ripped the veil from my eyes. She showed me how stark and cruel 'reality' really is”.

Sulekha's story resonates with Mangal Hansda's predicament. Mangal comes from the Pathar Khadan (literally, 'quarry') area of Rampurhat block, where children do not share our indulgent, more privileged illusions about childhood. Extreme poverty and the struggle against it is the only life most of them know. Helping out at home or going out to work is not an optional 'chore' to them; it is central to their idea of a childhood. This is what children in their world do. Despite working before and after school, frequently worrying about the source of his next meal, and not having private tutors like his better-off classmates, Mangal is the best student in his class. When we spoke to his father about his academics in glowing terms, however, his father, to our considerable surprise, started weeping. His helplessness was tangible. There is no way, he said, that he can assure Mangal's education beyond the free primary level. There is no way he can let Mangal off his non-academic responsibilities, either. And there is certainly no way he can afford Mangal the help or the indulgences he sees other parents lavishing on their children.

All through this, Mangal stared at his father with his large, still eyes. We can only wonder what effect a father's helpless tears have on so young a child.

The silver lining to this dark cloud -- the one positive collateral of rushing children into adult responsibilities -- is the near-parental affection we often saw in the older children towards those younger to them. This was especially evident during the making of wall magazines². The children were very excited to work with colours and pictures, but they were just as keen to involve the younger students and teach them what they were learning from us. As Rojju Sheikh put it to his 'brothers and sisters' at school, “Come watch us carefully. We must all learn this properly. We will be making the magazine this time, but

2 We have assisted several schools in designing wall-magazines, with the active participation of their students. The children showed great enthusiasm for it. Such interactive methods of learning not only foster creativity, but also helps them learn in a more joyful, effective way.

you must learn too, because you are growing up, and next time, it will be your responsibility.”

Some of us smiled at this, a little amused by Rojju's generous big-brother act. To us, a child of Class 4 is just as much a 'child' as one of Class 2. But amongst them, the age difference is a perceptible one, and those that are looked upon as older, and presumably wiser, take their positions seriously.

But not all our experiences with wall-magazines have been pleasant. At quite a few schools, the sight of children laughing and chatting as they drew and painted appeared to upset teachers. “Of course they like *this*”, they said. “It's colours and paper and fun and games. Nobody's keeping them quiet, there's no discipline, no one's asking them to study. Of course they're happy! But will pictures and paints see them through? Reading and writing's the real thing”.

We are not dismissing their opinions. As we have mentioned earlier, we consider reading, writing and mathematical skills very important. But can these only be ‘properly’ learnt in a stern, joyless environment? Does education lose its value if it is tempered with fun and colours and affection? Several teachers – colleagues of those mentioned above – disagreed emphatically. In an account published in the Pratichi Institute teachers' writing anthology *Kalamchari*, a contributor writes:

The first time I met Saraswati Hajra was on my first day of teaching Bangla to Class 1. Every child was trying to show me something that they could do, but Saraswati kept saying, “I can't write anything. Really, I don't know anything”. She also kept putting her slate and books away. I called her to my desk and tried to encourage her to show me her writing, but to no avail. Her books remained inside her bag. Later, I asked my colleague who lived in her village if he knew anything about Saraswati. My colleague said that her mother had passed away a month back, and her father had remarried since then.

The next day in class, I called Saraswati to me and asked, “Did your mother give you your rice this morning?³” “Yes”, she said timidly. I patted her head and said, “You're a very good girl, Saraswati”. This little show of affection seemed to melt her defences. She smiled happily at me, and stood next to my table for sometime. I smiled back at her, and asked her to start

³ “Have you had rice?” is a common way of asking after people locally. It is a direct enquiry about meals, but also – as in this instance – an indirect question about the person's health, affluence, and/or general well-being.

writing with all her friends. This time, she eagerly took out her slate, and with a little help from me, started writing the letters.”

Ten-year old Rohit Sheikh is luckier. He has the love of attentive parents. His problem, however, is this: Rohit loves dancing. No cultural event at his school or neighbourhood is complete without a performance from him. His teachers applaud his talent, and want to see it nurtured, but his parents, though otherwise loving, are very unwilling to have a dancer for a son. “What good will dancing do?” they ask. “He should study harder instead. That will earn him a living, not dancing.” In a poor family such as theirs, concerns about a child’s future livelihood cannot be dismissed. They are, in their own way, thinking of what is best for their son in the long run. It is not their fault that the society they live in measures young people by the marks they fetch in examinations. So Rohit's dancing dreams have been shelved, and from an excellent dancer, he has been reduced to being an average, indifferent student.

His teachers, however, have not given up entirely. They, like some of their enterprising colleagues elsewhere, have dedicated themselves to adding a little colour to the drab, routine school-year by organising cultural functions for the students to perform in. They spoke to parents about letting their children off some of their chores, to give them time to practise. Most parents were sceptical at first, and some were even hostile, but when they saw their children up on a stage singing and dancing in costumes, enjoying themselves immensely, they changed their minds. They are still not convinced that singing, dancing or painting could be viable professions for children from impoverished families, but they are at least happy to let their children pursue it while still at school.

The trouble with our traditional approach to childhood is in the contradictions inherent in them. On the one hand, our expectations of children far outstrip their years and healthy emotional capability. The responsibilities we saddle them with – from domestic duties to demands of academic performance – force them to leave all hopes of a free, happy and emotionally healthy childhood behind. On the other hand, we remind them that they are

'merely' children, when it suits us to treat them as 'stupid' and ignore their individuality and ideas.

All adults cannot always be blamed, either. They have their own constraints. Often, it is exploited and deprived adults who replicate their marginalisation in their relationship with children. It is the only space where they have some semblance of power. This is not always conscious abuse. Most families that demand domestic labour from their children often have no other alternative, and stern parents often believe that a strong guiding hand benefits children in the long run, acclimatising them to a hard world. But with the power of adulthood comes great accompanying responsibility: the responsibility to create a world where children are not victims of our experiences and our convenience.

It might also be tempting to imagine that an authoritarian environment – where children are talked at, not talked to, and disciplined for the slightest transgression – is more streamlined, and therefore more efficient, than the 'messy' new participatory systems. But a joyless, routine exercise of power can be as dull for the ruler as it is for the subjects, and just as difficult to work with. As our work with schools and children over the last few years have shown, and indeed as we have noted several times in this text, the inclusion of things that are interesting and vibrant does not just make learning a more attractive process, but teaching too. Lively and happy children in the classroom also makes the administration of 'discipline' easier, although the 'discipline' thus administered might be a different beast from the cowering, sullen silence elicited by the regime of the cane.

Working towards an education system where Sumit's experiment and Akash's music are as welcome as Anita's desire to learn the language of birds, and Mangal's father can rest assured that his child does not need the help of private tutors to continue doing well at school, is a very welcome prospect indeed. For, as we have mentioned earlier and never tire of repeating, nurturing happy, well-rounded children into an inclusive adulthood will ensure a brighter, happier, and more vibrant future for us all.