

NEEL BAGH

Where the mind is without fear

Amukta Mahapatra

Neel Bagh was a small rural school founded by David Horsburgh in the state of Karnataka, India. Many important Indian teachers were trained there, including Rohit Dhankar of Digantar, Usha and Narasimhan of Sumavanam and, as is clear from this article, Amukta Mahapatra herself. Lib Ed is grateful to Amukta Mahapatra for permission to post the article on this site.

David Horsburgh

I walked down the sloping pathway to the school. Through the doorway of the schoolroom I saw an "English" lady with a kind of a Victorian hair-do, sitting on the floor with a group of village children around her. The boys and girls, five to fifteen years old, were busy doing needlework – some embroidery on jute, some on huckaback. One or two were tacking the edges of a hessian sitting mat; while the rest were following a pattern on a sampler. It was a calm atmosphere with some serious work going on.

This was my first impression of Neel Bagh when I went to visit it, a year or so before I joined the training programme in 1977, and the class in session was the handicraft class being conducted by Mrs Doreen Horsburgh. She was virtually as central to Neel Bagh as David Horsburgh was, in creating an institution that continues to survive, live and thrive through the children and teachers it prepared and trained.

One cannot discuss Neel Bagh without talking about David Horsburgh. Fascinated with India when he was here during World War II, he returned to teach in a college in Mysore. He soon had to leave because he was seen to be on the side of the students, encouraging them to protest against the

authorities. Having heard of Rishi Valley, which at that time was just restarted with a new principal, David joined the team of visionary teachers. J Krishnamurti, the philosopher, spent a lot of time discussing things with the staff in those early days, lending clarity to everyday issues of the school; his ideas greatly influenced Horsburgh. Rabindranath Tagore's work and writings also inspired him and if I remember right, the name Neel Bagh is from one of his books. Once, standing in the middle of the many paths in the campus, he quoted Tagore, telling us that a village path is never a straight one because it is made over time by the feet of the people, in touch with the contours of the land.

David got his direction for practice also from the rationality of Bertrand Russell and the logical educational philosophy of R F Dearden. He was a man of varied talents and skills – he was a skilled carpenter and was often found in the workshop, especially when he was in a bad temper; he taught himself Sanskrit to the extent that he could compose *slokas* and poetry; he could play the *tabla*; he could teach mathematics; his usual handwriting in the italic style was so beautiful that one kept looking at it, rather than reading what he had written; he was well known for his work in theatre; and the list could continue. All this found expression in the school, with the children and others responding enthusiastically to David's infinite variety.

Let me highlight one important aspect of Neel Bagh that is also being currently discussed in academic circles. Frequently, one hears complaints about having to deal with a multi-grade class in government schools and it is seen as a disadvantage for the teacher and for the child. Many in the field of education want to convert these into one-room, one-class and one-teacher systems. But in Neel Bagh, and also in the Montessori approach, a mixed age group, a multi-grade environment is the preferred way of working.

It is thought of as an ideal learning environment for the child.

To get a feel of how it works, imagine having in your home not even 30, as is the usual minimum strength in a class, but perhaps 10 children of the same

age under your care. Again, suppose you had an identical number but children of different ages? Which would be better for you and them? Think about your experiences of the joint family and how children of various ages managed themselves without too much adult intervention. Think about social gatherings like marriages where it is difficult to pull a child away from the group of children who somehow find each other in the melee and organise their own activities. Think of our slums and villages where children of different age-groups play, work and socialise with one another meaningfully. Look at families where there are twins and where there are children of different ages. Observe and reflect upon children in such situations and how they look out for one another, how they learn from each other. We have many examples staring us in the face of how it is natural for children to function and learn in a mixed age group, or a family group as it is sometimes called.

But what do we do when it comes to school? As schools exist now, they are contrived, artificial institutions with no correlation to life and society.

Here are familiar instances. Language is taught almost as an alien Morse code without linking it to what is spoken fluently by the child. Mathematics is introduced as if it is a great problem that cannot be understood by man or god. And this is continued in every other subject as well. If one looks at methodology one sees that the research, the studies and work done around children and learning over the past century is not reflected in the normal class. The children are treated as if they are imbeciles who cannot turn a page in the textbook without clear instructions (how many times one has heard a teacher saying, "Turn the page children"!). Teachers turn themselves willy-nilly into bullies, having got absorbed into a system they feel they can do nothing about. The content, the methods adopted, the behaviour of adults in school are all rather out of synch with what is considered of value to human beings and their society.

David Horsburgh's vision realised at Neel Bagh.

With the schools in such a state, is it possible to turn them around to be more human, be more in flow with the findings on how children learn? If one wants to, one can change the school environment – it is not so very difficult. Schools have been created by men and women, only over the last few hundred years. For thousands of years people lived, learnt and helped mankind to reach this level of civilisation without such ghettos for children. I am not advocating that we do away with these institutions – we cannot. The education system has become our society's way of rearing its children and enabling them to become social beings. But what we can do is to make the school suitable to the child's developmental needs and relevant to his or her learning requirements, so that he or she becomes a full, contributing member of the human community.

To do so, we don't have to reinvent the wheel, but by keeping our biases aside, we can learn from history and from the work and life of many indigenous communities, individuals and organisations that have done path-breaking work in education. One such effort is Neel Bagh, where I spent about one and a half years being a teacher-trainee. It was a place where being a human being mattered, being a member of a community mattered and being an individual was also important. This was the basis for the rest that followed. A child might have learnt five languages – that was wonderful, but it was not the most important aspect of life. Another child might have designed an ingenious machine – it was celebrated, but again this was not the ultimate goal. The fundamental issue was whether you were evolving into a decent human being and whether the learning process was helping this evolution. Learning was crucial but development was the aim – the development of the individual, the group and the larger society.

The children, for most of the day, were together in a mixed-age environment, doing their individual work. There was a time-table for the subjects and teachers had a schedule. The children came together for short group presentations when the teacher felt they required it, or if they asked for it. For

subjects like environmental studies and science, a topic was introduced to all the groups simultaneously but the follow-up tasks were done individually or in pairs or in small groups. The groups varied according to the subjects depending on the child's level of work. For example, a child might have been with the older group for the language class but with the younger children for mathematics. Which level they were at was not made much of. Wherever they were, what was important was that they had to make an effort to learn. The pedagogical principle was that a topic can be presented to a group, but the learning occurs at the level of the individual. This implies that the immediate cognitive needs of the individual have to be catered to in the classroom.

At times, parents or others from the nearby villages would want to learn English or sit an examination. The morning English class time was then used, twice a week or so, to help them. And who would teach them? The children of course! Each of them was assigned an adult. They would teach sitting outside, scattered all around near the main schoolroom. Some others who were not teaching would continue with their English class. The age range expanded sometimes to cover three-year-olds to forty-year-olds. As teachers, we moved around to help only when required.

Learning is fine, but what about examinations, you may ask. There were no exams in Neel Bagh because there was no need for them. The teachers knew exactly where the children were, what they had learnt and what they were struggling with both in their academic work and in their personal lives. The children too, knew what they were good at and what they had to work hard at over the term. On the one hand one might say that there were no exams, but on the other hand, we could also say that there was an assessment going on every day, every minute. Teachers observed the children, gave dictation, asked them to recite poetry they had learnt with their hearts (and not "by heart"), used plenty of learning materials for which they had to read and understand. The observations and activities were not to pass judgments, but to help the children become conscious of what they knew and to move ahead. When the children were ready, with about a year's preparation, they sat for

the public school-leaving exams conducted by the Andhra Pradesh or Karnataka governments. Quite a few of them went on to college and a few did professional courses.

Can such practices be replicated? Each person brings into the school his or her unique self. The teacher and others working in schools need help to think through ideas, look at unexamined feelings and have classroom skills at their fingertips, so that they can arrive at a practice that is essential for children. Most people have grown up in families that are intrinsically authoritarian and then have attended schools, which are again rather dominating. To set aside this cloak of power and domination and work in an egalitarian fashion they need a professional training programme.

Any so-called “ordinary” teacher can be helped to become a good teacher. At Neel Bagh, a teacher who came from the nearby town of Madanapalle was trained to be a special kind of teacher. We cannot all be David Horsburghs, but we can each be our own Davids and battle against the Goliaths of the system to ensure a better learning world for our children. And one of the Goliaths is the assumption that all children can learn the same thing, at the same time and in the same manner. They cannot do so. Each child learns differently and there is an urgent need to recognise this principle in our schools today.

Amukta Mahapatra's articles about the work in Chennai and Tamil Nadu, described in the last posting on this site, are still under copyright by The Hindu. They can be read at:

<http://www.thehinduonnet/mag/2009/01/11stories/2009011150180500.htm>

and

<http://www.thehinduonnet/mag2009/01/18/stoires/2009011850130400.htm>