

[Pioneering Schools](#)

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A New Breed of Holistic School is Cropping Up in India Breaking Out of the Elitist, Rote-and-Rule British Mold

Parts One and Two of our series on education in India [Sept. and Nov. '95] sketched its history as primarily a brahmin-boys-only affair and also traced that, despite some brave attempts, independent India adopted a British-dyed school system colored by a decidedly West-is-best world outlook. Part II dramatized the un-Indianness of the contemporary schooling syllabus where little of India's own spiritual heritage finds welcome. Now, Part III shares the efforts of one of many individuals determined to bring to earthly form a more heavenly educational vision.

Interview and report by Anandhi, Madras

Our school system is like a worn-out "Raggedy Anne" doll, a relic of British days. Once cute and upper-crust, now it's just foreign. "Decomposed" is the assessment of Election Commissioner of Tamil Nadu, T. N. Seshan.

Time has come to re-tool, to take stock of our own Indian idea of what learning is, what we as a pluralistic nation value and want our youth to learn and our society to be fashioned by. Maybe the first breakthrough idea will be admitting that India is not England--nor any other country for that matter. We are a

diverse land, extremely diverse--in language, religion and societal customs. Maybe our education should reflect that and stop forcing a "one-shoe-fits-all" educational scheme on everyone. Novel idea. But actually it's just one of dozens of innovative ideas racing around as India enters an exciting era of educational experimentation, determined to find learning systems more enlightened than the present degree-or-die battlefield where brahminboys and girls fight tribals over a few quota seats.

Determined to find saner learning environments, several individuals have taken matters into their own hands, building holistic learning centers--where things like spirituality, arts, crafts, culture, ethics, ecology, even manual labor are welcome, not taboo. Though certainly not the most radical, here is the story of one such noble experiment that is clearly a model success.

Indianizing the Syllabus--Like Olden Days

Mrs. Rajalakshmi Parthasarathy is senior principal of the Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan Schools in Madras which she founded 37 years ago. A well-known educationist, with degrees in math, journalism, education and history from the University of Madras, she has for decades been a prominent figure at international seminars exploring new learning approaches.

Hinduism Today: You started out as a journalist. How did you become an educationist and begin your own school?

Rajalakshmi Parthasarathy: I started out writing for the Mailand

later for The Hindu and Sports and Pastime. At that time, my eldest son was studying in missionary school. My second son was then three years old and ready to start school. But I was not very happy about the missionary school environment and the ideas my elder son was being exposed to. He also resented going there, because he was not allowed to celebrate any of his Hindu festivals. Nor was he able to practice his own culture there.

HT: You mean Hindu culture?

RP: Yes! Hindu culture. He had to face a lot of derision in the school. Once he tried to celebrate Vinayaka Chaturthi by taking a Ganesha idol to the school. He placed it near the idol of Christ. The principal suspended him for bringing this idol on the campus. This irritated all of us. We have a 5,000-year-old tradition, since Vedic times. We should preserve and nurture this wonderful way of life. But instead of seeing this heritage being revived, I saw it being reviled. I could not endure it.

At that time we were running a ladies club in a very simple thatched shed. The members of the club were all well educated. We decided we would start a school, a nursery school. Why should we not work on this? So we took it up as a challenge. The school was named simply Bala Bhavan and inaugurated by the mayor of Madras. From day one we started telling the children stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana. From these they learned values, like Lakshmana's devotion to his brother, Bharata's righteousness, and so on. We taught the beautiful verses from the great work on ethics, the Tirukural. We explained our festivals, how they are

celebrated and why. Before this, our children only thought of festivals as holidays, getting sweets and new clothes, nothing about religion. We taught that the kolampattern was not just a decoration to beautify the home. The rice flour used was also food for ants and small birds. We taught the ways we revere plants and the kindness with which we treat animals--all these are part of the Hindu way of life. We explained that we do puja to the tulsiplant not only because of its medicinal qualities. We taught the younger ones to do namaskaramto the elders on festival days and ask for their blessings.

We taught the children slokas, even to three-year-olds. We gave music classes and taught simple songs but in the classical ragas. We taught all the English nursery rhymes too! Whatever we may think, parents want their children to learn English. They have a high opinion of Christian convent education. So we followed that syllabus, establishing that we were not only as good as missionary schools, but could better them. Then we inculcated Indianness, pride in our culture and how we were superior in ancient spiritual wisdom.

We were very practical. For example, when we talked about architecture, we took them to beautiful temples and places of artistic glory like Mahabalipuram.

As our children grew up, so did our school. It kept expanding. We introduced classical music and dance with annual performances drawn from our epics and dramas, with themes of "unity in diversity" and "national integration." Gradually our children became Indian-oriented. All the children from standard I to VI learned dance.

HT: Besides adding classes in Indian arts and heritage, what else was innovative about your school?

PR: I travelled internationally a lot and gathered many valuable ideas from progressive schools abroad, particularly from ones in the US. My sister is working in a school there, and she took me to visit a number of schools. I also attended many workshops. We introduced in our school all the accepted modern teaching methods, like field trips, using film projectors, problem-solving sessions, and "hands-on" experiments and "discovery" approaches in laboratories. Now we have excellent language and mathematics laboratories.

HT: Where did you get all the money for this?

RP: We had no money when we started. We used to go door-to-door to collect funds for our school. When a film star was building a house, we asked him to donate a lorry load of bricks for our school, and he did. That is how the higher classes were added. The first year we sent our first batch of students to appear for the public examinations we had 100% results. Our students got first class.

HT: Is your success recognized?

PR: Certainly. All over India our school is well known. I also get many admission inquiries from abroad.

HT:Did you have examinations?

RP:Examinations were a big hurdle that burdened both parents and children. First we abolished ranks. We then abolished rewards and punishments and induced children to improve themselves out of personal desire and by their own performance. We initiated "continuous evaluation" instead of exams.

HT:Besides values, do you teach Hinduism as well?

RP:Yes, but we don't call it religion as such. We call it value education. The old schools had a moral education class after school hours and isolated it as if it had nothing to do with the normal syllabus of academic subjects. But in our school, we guide our students to find values in every subject. We ask them where intelligence comes from? Is it divine? We teach them that intelligence and all science is ultimately divine. "Nature of life is to grow. Opposites learn to live together." Knowledge of principles like this help children to cooperate in their team work where there is no competition, but cooperation.

We introduced Swami Dayananda Saraswati's book Value of Value to our students in higher classes and also a program called "quest" where values are discussed in relation to real-life situations. It is sad, but we have to remind students that it is not always injustice, cheating and corruption that succeeds. We teach that integrity and honesty give more self-esteem than all the money one could earn. Youth like

these high principles and they understand easily that once a person's trust and credibility is lost, it is hard to regain.

We teach them the law of karma and how it works--every action has an equal reaction somewhere, sometime. And that karma is not fate, predestination, that we always have the power to chose our own destiny.

For the older youth, we have "Atma gnanam" (Self-knowledge) classes. They learn pranayama, yogic breathing, diet and nutrition, right temperament, etc. They also learn Transcendental Meditation (TM) and hatha yoga.

HT:What are some reactions from the children's parents?

RP:Well, they used to feel that their children were being too pressured when they used to study just to score high marks on exams. When we changed to continuous evaluation, they no longer felt that way. But still, in the 10th standard and 12th they write for public examinations because we want them to feel on par with any student in any school on a basic academic level.

Parents also complained, "We are not told what is being done at school or what our children are learning." So now we are giving the students the kind of homework that more dramatically shows parents how much their child is learning not only about general knowledge but also about our Indian culture. This has made them very happy. For "slow learners,"

we have special classes and even individual help.

HT:You have introduced "lateral thinking." What is this?

RP:When students are given a problem, they ordinarily respond with the most conventional approach to solve it. We encourage students to find alternatives, new ways, their own ways, to solve problems. This stimulates creative, original thinking and expands the mind.

HT:Are your schools coed?

RP:Actually, we started as a boys' school. The School Trust decided to run it for boys because, unlike girls, boys are hardly exposed to our Indian culture. I would say boys are even misled. Ours was a Ladies club and 99% of our teachers were women. But Madras University stipulated that a woman cannot be the principal of a boys' school. I protested the matter through the All India Women's Conference, presided over by Indira Gandhi. She laughed when she heard this. The Conference passed a resolution and sent it to Madras University. Their objection was withdrawn.

HT:How are your graduates faring?

RP:Our students are high performers. After graduation they do very well in life. They are in all parts of the world. 50% of them have migrated to the USA.

HT:Does that disturb you?

RP:It's the hard truth. They get very frustrated with India. Although many want to come back, live here and serve the country, they see so much nepotism, favoritism and corruption they decide to stay abroad.

HT:What about education for the rural youth languishing in poverty?

RP:All children have a right for education. If reading and writing is too much, at least hygiene, diet and disease-prevention can be taught.

HT:Are enlightened educational systems catalysts for world peace?

RP:Yes! If we believe, and teach, that Parabrahmanis all-pervading and that the world is the manifestation of Parabrahman, nobody would then hurt another. This is the ultimate education. And ahimsa, non-violence, is not only in physical deed. It is also in thought and word.

HT:Since India is a "secular" country, religious instruction is not permitted in public schools. What is your opinion?

RP:This does more harm than good! In fact, all the

deterioration of values in India has come due to so-called "secular education" which was misinterpreted as teaching no religion, instead of showing the catholicity, goodness and common teachings of spirituality in all faiths.

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