

## A Case Study of Mirambika: a Child-friendly Approach to Pre-school Education

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### Abstract

*To foster child centric and joyful learning and provide an enabling environment we have to make our 'schools ready'. It is not just about making 'a school' child friendly— it is about a transformation of the system with child-centred planning, focusing on overall development of children. A school that is ready for children will accept all children, with sensitivity to cultural diversity. It would provide opportunity for enhancement of potential of each individual child. It would ensure smooth and seamless transition for the child from home to ECCE centre to formal education. Such a school will form effective relations with parents and community. In the present study the author has tried to understand the pedagogic/philosophic significance of Mirambika— the reason for its existence; its innovations and experiments especially from the point of view of pre-school education.*

### Introduction

“One of the timeless messages of early childhood is to treat children with respect and value their unique perspectives on the world.”

– Jalongo M.R., Stevenson, Abigail C.Davis, Marjorie L Stanek (2010)

In the recent past there has been large scale expansion in the provision of ECCE centres as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme has been universalised and

now there are 14,00,000 Anganwadi Centres sanctioned by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, covering each and every habitation of the country. Similarly, Right to Education Act-2009 has mandated the states to provide for a primary school in neighbourhood, within a walking distance of one kilometre. This has led to a phenomenal expansion of school infrastructure and facilities, significantly widening access to schooling.

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The Working Group Report on Elementary Education, 12th Five Year Plan highlights several initiatives that have been taken by various state governments to provide education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school which satisfies certain essential norms and standards. The Working Group Report on Child Rights, 12th Five Year Plan also mentions about formulation of National ECCE Policy and laying down of quality norms and standards for ECCE provisions. But these are, as yet, policy statements on paper and would take long to actualise on the ground.

A major achievement in the field of education has been the enactment of Right to Education Act-2009. Today RTE guarantees free and compulsory education to all children from 6-14 years in India. Though there has been notable expansion in enrolment figures in the last few years, national drop-out rate is 24.93 per cent for all categories between Class 1 and 5 and 42.25 per cent for Classes 1 to 8 (*School Education Survey, 2008-09*). A probable reason for this is that it is not only the children who have to be ready for school; the schools also have to be ready for children.

We can say that a 'school is ready' when it is child-friendly, i.e. it responds to the diverse needs of the young children and safeguard their interests. A school that is concerned with well-being of the whole child, fosters development in all domains in an integrated and holistic manner, and gives children the best possible

start in life is a school that is ready. Such a school should be affordable and easily accessible as well.

### **What Makes Mirambika Different?**

Many alternative visions of schooling have emerged in our country. 'Mirambika' in the city of New Delhi is one such exploration. Mirambika is an alternative school located in and run by Sri Aurobindo Ashram, New Delhi. The author has made observations of the school and also interviewed the staff and teachers. Apart from that informal interactions were conducted with the parents.

Modern schooling and society has destroyed elements of fraternity amongst human beings. It deprives the child of the joy of learning and kills the spirit of innovation. Thus, Mirambika came as an alternative school striving to bring out child's innate potential and providing him/her the experience of creative joy and inner growth. Few others see it as part of the home schooling movement that is critical of mainstream education system. As an institution, they have adopted the philosophy of education as a liberative principle. One really feels that these children are moving towards developing a holistic personality that is sensitive to the issues of wider social life.

This centre has a small innovative school, at present with classes from lower kindergarten to Class VIII. Small, on purpose, because all involved with its functioning prefer quality, above quantity. The school is instrumental in

spearheading educational development and provides a training ground for educators from all over India. The different learning styles help children to grow up as responsible and self-reliant individuals. Respect for the individual, harmony in diversity, a freedom, which asks for, an inner discipline not based on fear or guilt, are components of the school culture. When new ways are explored and new activities developed, research and evaluation are a must. To cater to this, Mirambika has a research wing. It provides the necessary inputs for further development in the school, the teachers training and the resource centre.

### **Philosophic Foundations of Mirambika**

As the name 'Mirambika' signifies, the school derives its inspiration from the charisma of the Mother—her educational philosophy and the way she sought to accomplish the spiritual agenda of Sri Aurobindo. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that Mirambika, as a school, is an experimental vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

The main objective of education is to enable the child to realise his/her potential and to develop the faculties of learning, not to bombard them with mechanical book-learning and a store-house of facts, information and second-hand ideas. Once these faculties are developed, the child would be able to learn everything with more intensity and creativity. Sri Aurobindo

gave concrete suggestions on the development of mental faculties, like the power of observation, the ability to differentiate and to judge.

“...this unfoldment would be a natural and joyful process of growth and learning which would flow from within to without. Learning would then be free of structures that bind and stifle and would become more and more a dynamic process of self-discovery and self-actualization”.

### **Free Progress Education**

As an alternative, the main focus of Mirambika is on the child; the child's innate potential and his/her ability to unfold it. This faith in the child frees him/her from the fear of punishment and the life-negating pressure of examinations. According to my opinion, Mirambika is a school that reminds one of 'happy childhood'—a school without homework, exams, grades and ranking. It is seen as a 'child-centred' school where everything is possible.

We would, however, like to point out that the meaning of 'free progress education' at Mirambika is far deeper. It is not just the absence of fear and punishment, or of conventional and routinised form of learning. Nor is it merely a negation of the mainstream. It is something more profound. It has a distinctive agenda—a spiritual agenda to transform the character of the human species.

The prospectus of Mirambika— a text which is worth studying in its own right—asserts its educational principles, quotes extensively from

the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and argues why it celebrates the concept of 'free progress education'.

"Mirambika's free progress concept was born of a profound spiritual vision and understanding: that education is the process of awakening and evoking the true being, the psychic presence within, and through that process, bringing about a progressive unfolding of the whole person."

### **Infrastructure**

A cursory look at Mirambika is enough to convince one that the school is of an altogether different kind. Its splendid architecture—its geometrical symmetry, openness, its harmony with nature—is overwhelming. Indeed the architecture reveals the philosophy of the school. Here is the school that does not confine children to an 'enclosed space' for forceful learning. It is a school that does not look like a cage. Instead, its openness invites freedom. The visitor can visit the school at any time, move around and experience its beauty and calm. There is nobody—not even a security guard in uniform—who asks questions or expresses doubt about the 'intention' of the visitor.

From the winding, tree-shaded paths that meander through the campus, to the intimate, stony buildings designed to harmonise with the natural landscape, Mirambika School is a visual oasis, a peaceful, yet dynamic environment rich with opportunities for traditional and non-traditional learning. Organic gardens, a student-built greenhouse, ceramics

and painting displays, a rich library, athletic fields, tennis courts and playgrounds. Inside the Main House, organic vegetarian meals are lovingly served to the students.

What one notices here is the absence of structured/reutilised practices. Instead, the free movement of the children is all pervasive. When some children are engaged in art work, others may be learning rhymes. Likewise, when someone is playing, his/her friend may be busy in making a boat in the classroom. Small classes in a natural environment are guided by experienced teachers who encourage discovery and inquiry while supporting exceptional academic, creative and personal growth. The school, it seems, tries to respect the autonomy of the children. The beauty of Mirambika lies in its small/humane size.

### **Teacher-student Relationship**

A school like Mirambika, it is obvious, needs teachers who are qualitatively different. Given the radical educational agenda that Mirambika has chosen for itself, its teachers ought to be gifted.

Teachers in Mirambika are fulltime teachers, i.e. those residing in the Ashram; trainee teachers, i.e. those doing NTT practice teaching and volunteers who are part-time teachers. The volunteers are mainly parents who take up some specific activity or help the teacher and are from various institutions and private organisations. The idea of teacher for Mother was "We do not need teachers with opinion and the degree to teach the children, we

need living being who can impart a sense of value, who can help to evoke in children what is best in them, who can help them discover their own inner light and nurture the instruments to express its truth.” Therefore, the ideology expects the teacher to bring out the child’s creativity, curiosity and interest in learning. This means that the teachers here ought to be quite knowledgeable and research-oriented. They try to challenge the hierarchical power relations and practice the egalitarian ideal. They are expected to respect the autonomy of the child. No doubt, it is not easy to find such teachers.

Mirambika has a Teacher Training Wing on its premises which conducts ongoing training for its pre-service as well as in-service teachers. The training programme focuses on the school ideology and philosophy, principles of learning which form the basis of teaching-learning in school. The Ashram runs a teacher training course with a rigorous practical and a hands-on experience in Mirambika School for three years. They are then appointed as teachers.

The teachers in Mirambika Nursery School are called ‘dijas’. The term ‘Dijas’, is coined from the words ‘didi’ (elder sister) and ‘bhaiya’ (elder brother). As explained by a teacher: it symbolises ‘beckoning the light, the one who kindles the light in children’. Teachers are not salaried staff but are paid a token stipend which varies for full time and trainee teachers. The teachers are chosen on

the basis of their interest of working with children, affection and motivation to do their job. Teachers, it seems, join Mirambika either to work for the ideals of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother or because of the popularly acquired image of an innovative school and which they would like to ‘see for themselves’ or are ‘interested’ to know more about. Volunteers are strongly motivated people who join because of their love for children and interest in teaching. Since the volunteers are not paid, it is only the genuine people who voluntarily come to teach.

One thing that radically redefines education is the teacher-student relationship that prevails at Mirambika. Teachers at Mirambika are treated at almost an equal level. One would naturally expect children to learn from the teacher’s example. Unlike conventional school where paid teacher teaches, holds exams and ranks children, Mirambika appears to be a sacred zone of meaning. The beauty of the teacher-student relationship seems to be not corrupted by the ‘fear of punishment’.

### **Learning Spaces**

In Mirambika, learning takes place everywhere, starting from the play ground to verandah to classroom to dining hall. From nine to twelve in the morning children work on topics. A ten-year-old child chooses independently a topic, decides the area of work—which portion to study, which activities to do, what experiments to perform, and what points of view to be

included. This helps children learn to take, to study independently, reason out things clearly, be more self aware and responsible. There is freedom in the way the children study and relate to their 'diyas' (the name given for the teachers in the school), the way they play and participate in various activities, the way they move around and radiate their experiences of joy. There is no school uniform and no 'fixed' work for the children of the same age. This striving for a distinctive identity explains the meaning of the different groups the classes are divided into according to the age group—Red, Blue, Green, and Orange.

The children get to know of their responsibilities; the importance of their participation. For example, it is not difficult for these children to respect time, to live with it and maintain a schedule, in spite of that there is no 'disciplinary' school bell to tell them when they should do what!

### **Classes and Learning Materials**

Children are grouped according to their age and each group has a name given to it. For the younger children the groups have names of colours which are chosen by the teachers namely—the youngest group is called the Red group and has children from 3 to 4 years of age. The next group is the Blue group having children of 4-5 years of age followed by the Green group (5+ years). The teacher-pupil ratio and student-classroom ratio is 1:18, that means each class has only 18 children and one Diya (teacher).

Though the school has a very small number of students by contemporary standards, it gains prominence by having a reputation of being popularly known as an 'innovative' school.

The physical organisation of the classroom bestows a structure on activities carried out. It is, therefore, significant to know that the classrooms or the workspaces of children in Mirambika are designed keeping in mind the needs of different groups. The classes have large areas of work, low tables and durries for sitting. The classrooms have an annexe which their teacher explained, 'is used by children for sleeping in or for those children requiring special attention or for attending to a crying child away from the curious eyes of the peers'. The round sunken area in the corner of the room is used for activities like singing, story-telling, and playing with children. Making children sit in this area helps the teacher to be close to the children, keep them in one place without actually saying anything to them. 'Diyas' were seen sitting in between the children narrating stories and reciting poems, children often sitting on diyas' laps or climbing on their backs.

We always talk about using indigenous materials for teaching children but, what we see in reality is that children use readymade materials bought from the market which are sometimes not only non eco-friendly but also not suitable to the age and context of learning. But in Mirambika it was observed that children were

mostly using the indigenous materials for learning and even folders used to keep activity record of each child were made of old newspapers.

### **Health and Hygiene**

A close look at the school reveals its child-friendly atmosphere. The school premises are kept very clean including the toilets. It is also surprising to see that the infrastructure is child-friendly and 'usable' for the nursery children. Keeping their age in mind they have made lowered wash-basins, drinking water tap. Every child keeps an extra dress and a pair of socks, in case if they wet their dress while playing in water. Throughout the activities, the child is made aware of the 'self discipline'. Each child puts the things back in their respective places after the use. To the concern for the health of the children, healthy lunch is provided in school.

### **Selection Process**

Admission is undertaken as per the government rules for admitting children in nursery class. In the process of selection, the children are not interviewed. This speaks of Mirambika's concern for child. Little children, the school believes, should not be subjected to the oppressive process of examination, interviews, evaluation or ranking. The process of selection is aimed at choosing only those parents who are willing to appreciate the alternative educational agenda that Mirambika seeks to pursue.

### **Parent's Involvement**

The parents are, no doubt, deeply involved with Mirambika. With a school like Mirambika, it would be difficult for anyone to remain content with merely contractual relationships (i.e., pay the school fee and demand 'results'). No wonder, a parent of a child who studies at Mirambika manages time for the children of the school and assist them in some activities.

### **Disciplining Strategies**

Generally when we enter into the classroom, we see teachers using the sentences like 'keep quiet', 'don't make noise', to control the children. But in Mirambika not even a single time teacher used these words. Neither corporal punishment nor verbal aggression by teachers performs any role in school interactions. The focus in Mirambika is on developing 'inner discipline' in students. Alternatives to punishments are attempts made to develop inner discipline. Some controlling strategies evolved by the 'diyas' for the younger groups include: calling peace – symbolic gesture of hands, to quiet children down; asking children to become 'statue'; symbolic gestures indicating that noisy rat inside the child is thrown out; putting on music to make children dance and spend their extra energy; playing tug-of-war with the trees in the grounds; or talking softly to get the attention of children which in turn makes them lower their noise level.

The value of cleanliness and hygiene is also inculcated in the child. The best part of it was that, teacher did not ask them to do these; they were doing on their own.

### **Parent-teacher-child Interactions**

Teachers and children view themselves as learners in Mirambika which fosters closeness in relationships as well as informal sharing of views. Teachers see this as a means of strengthening the teacher-taught bond and make the environment homely. This makes them receptive to the faults or mistakes pointed out by the children. Teachers view their relationship with parents as 'wonderful' and open and feel that parents' involvement in the child's work at school or at home is substantial. Most of the trainees feel that parents contribute a lot in school activities like projects, plays, model making, etc. The interaction with parents is 'trust-based', 'good', 'open' feel some, while others expressed that support of parents in school societies and interactions is not limited only to PTA meetings as in other conventional schools. Parents' voices as participants of Mirambika are of significance like those of the teachers and the children. It is because parents comprise a significant group of participants in the various school activities by way of their contributions, involvement, pressures and opinions. The perspectives the parents hold result in their forming

specific identities in relation to their environment, which interacts with the social identity of the school. This results in a school culture which may be taken as a part of parent culture as well as teacher culture.

### **Conclusion**

Our society – or, to put it more specifically, the career conscious, ambitious, anxiety-ridden middle class – wants school to deliver the goods, that is, it wants children to acquire knowledge, improve their career prospects and achieve 'success' in life. 'Good' schools, therefore, are required to be careful with their 'products' – the products with a 'market-value'. In this scenario, the existence of Mirambika – a school that seeks to implement the educational agenda of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother – is indeed surprising, mainly because it aims to accomplish what, according to the mainstream way of thinking, would be regarded as an 'impossible' project. No doubt, a school like Mirambika would never be free from difficulties and challenges, as it dares to do what seems to have no meaning in an intensely competitive, fragmented and divided world. Yet, the fact that Mirambika has been around for more than twenty years shows its innate zeal, its ability to meet challenges and difficulties, and grow, despite the many unresolved contradictions and the resultant anxiety regarding its survival.



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