

# Anita

## A Working Schoolgirl

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*Over the last few years, our government has been paying increasing lip-service to female education and has launched high profile campaigns for adult and nonformal education amongst women. However, primary education, which should receive the most attention, continues to be the most neglected. Little is being done to ensure higher attendance rates or to halt the higher dropout rate amongst girls.*

*This study was undertaken over seven months in 1988, in order to gain some insight into what life is like for an ordinary schoolgirl, what the incentives and the obstructions to education are, and how, if at all, her education benefits her and her family. The schoolgirl whose life is here presented is a relatively fortunate one. She attends a school where some teaching actually takes place. She also has relatively motivated parents who, despite having three daughters*



*and no son, are desirous that the girls be educated and pick up basic literacy and numeracy skills. Anita herself, despite her fear of her teachers and her excessive timidity, says she would like to continue studying, an aspiration which throws some light on the overall harshness of her life which makes the school appear in a more attractive light than it otherwise would.*

*Yet, the school system has failed to be responsive to Anita's needs, or to make any special effort to ensure that she does not drop out. What would be needed to act as an incentive to parents like Anita's to continue their daughters' education? What changes in the education system are required to make it more useful to girls like Anita? This study does not provide the answers but it raises some questions by giving us a glimpse into the child's life and the pressures on her and her parents.*

ANITA, called Nitu at home, is 10 years old but looks five. Small, frail and sickly, she has short hair and is generally dressed in shorts and shirt. She could be mistaken for a boy, were it not for her excessively timid and shrinking manner. She speaks little, in a low voice, and never appears gay or playful. In the one and a half years I have known her, I have rarely seen her smile or laugh. Interviewing her was difficult because of her reticence.

Anita's parents, Sheela and Gokul, make a living by ironing clothes in a

block of private houses in Janakpuri, a middle class colony in west Delhi. They migrated from a village in Jaipur district, Rajasthan, over 10 years ago.

Of the 17 hours that she is awake, Anita spends about six hours helping her parents in their trade, five and a half hours at school, and the rest of the time on either housework or homework, also taking major responsibility for her younger sister. She rarely gets any time to play or to rest.

### Anita's Day

Anita's day begins at 5.30 a.m.

when she goes to fetch milk, carrying a steel can in one hand and leading her two and a half year old sister, Baby, by the other. Until a year ago, she used to carry Baby astride her hip. On her return, 15 minutes later, she sweeps the area outside her house. This activity is performed in a squatting posture, and requires strong wrist movements. Then, she goes to fetch clothes for ironing from three to four customers' houses. After this she has a bath, sometimes helped by her father, combs her hair, packs her schoolbag, serves

herself breakfast, packs a tiffin, and leaves at 7.30 a.m. for her school which is a five minute walk away.

She returns from school at 1.15 p.m. If she has not eaten her tiffin at school, she eats it now. Then she changes out of her uniform and immediately sets out on delivery rounds, taking ironed clothes to customers' homes. This work, with sometimes a short break to do some housework or her homework, occupies her till 4 p.m. when she again goes to fetch milk. This is again followed by delivery rounds which continue till 9 or 9.30 p.m. when she dozes off, exhausted. If she has eaten a *chapati* given by a customer or *puris* at the local temple in the evening, she has no other dinner. Otherwise, her mother wakes her at 10.30 p.m. to eat with the adults.

### Pace of Work

The pressure on Anita to help in the family trade is far more intense than the encouragement given her to study. Every errand Anita runs is timed by her mother. One evening, she took



longer than usual on a trip and was pulled up by her mother on her return. She had stayed back at a customer's house, on their invitation, to watch a children's programme on TV. The average time taken on a trip to one house is 15 minutes. On an average she visits 25 houses a day, and in about half of them she has to climb flights of stairs.

On my questioning her, she said that her shoulders ache every evening from carrying bundles of clothes all day. A bundle weighs

between one and two and a half kgs, and can weigh up to five kgs, and she carries it either on her head or in her arms. She has never told her mother about this pain because she anticipates her mother saying: "The clothes will have to be delivered anyway, whether or not your shoulders ache."

Anita can never be caught relaxing between trips. The pace at which her parents work and expect her to move pushes her into fretting if she has to wait around for a pile of freshly ironed clothes.

Sheela, knowing Anita would like

to have a bike, passed the word around and a customer gave them an old bike. Within a week Anita learnt from Gokul how to ride it. However, it was found that when she carried ironed clothes on it, these got crushed by the metal clasp.

Her mother forbade her to ply it for fun in the intervals between delivery rounds. For a while, it lay idle but Anita now (in July 1989) uses it to fetch milk and provisions from the market.

Sheela would praise Anita in my presence, for her industriousness, remarking approvingly that Anita is not precocious, bold or sly like other children, and that this is because they do not live in a slum where she can pick up bad habits.

### Nutrition and Health

Anita keeps poor health - she frequently falls prey to infections such as viral fevers and has relapses. Sheela attributes her poor health to her having not been fed on mother's milk for more than six months, due to Sheela's second pregnancy. A son was born within a year of Anita's birth and died at the age of 26 days. Sheela reverted to breastfeeding Anita after the son's death.

Anita's normal diet is completely inadequate, especially since she undertakes so much physical exertion. Her breakfast consists of one *chapati*



## Anita's Home

Anita's family in Delhi consists of her father, Gokul, aged 35, mother, Sheela, aged 28, and Anita's sister, Baby, aged two and a half. Anita's other sister, Sonu, aged six, lives with Gokul's parents in his village.

When the main part of the study was conducted, Gokul's sister, Gulabo, aged 17, was also staying with them. She had been summoned from the village six months earlier to help Sheela cope with work. Now she is married and has left.

Anita's parents have illegally built a dwelling structure on the brick pavement of a street inside the residential colony. They built it as a workplace nearly 10 years ago, when they were living in a slum nearby, and later shifted into it. They constructed this structure of burnt bricks picked up from here and there. The iron fence of an adjacent park has been incorporated into the back wall of the

structure which is eight by twelve feet in size and is divided into two rooms. One room contains two work-tables, one of which is used as bed when relatives from the village visit; the other has some cooking utensils and a seven by four wooden bed. Until some months ago, Anita used to sleep with her father on a string cot in the open, while Sheela, Gulabo and Baby shared the bed inside. For some time in 1988, Gokul had refused to have anyone sleep with him, so Anita had to share the bed with the other three female members. Now that Sheela is pregnant and Gulabo has left, Sheela has a bed to herself. The relationship between Gokul and Sheela appears to be amicable with Gokul indulging in good humoured bantering at her expense.

They do not have an electricity connection. Anita studies at night either by the light of a lantern or, more

often, sitting under the street lamp outside. Since the house is low ceilinged and overcrowded with bundles of ironed clothes and the family's belongings, all activity, except sleeping, and some cooking is performed outside. They often sit and eat on their two string cots in the space outside the hut where Sheela and Gokul also do their ironing. This space is right on the edge of a busy street. Baby has to be constantly watched lest she stray on to the street and get run over.

The family has constructed a privy next to the house by putting up pieces of sackcloth. This area is used for bathing and urinating. In the early morning, they visit an open drain about five minutes' walk away. Although there is a concrete public latrine nearby, the municipality fails to keep it clean, so most people stay away from it and prefer to use the drain.



and a cup of milk, tiffin one *chapati* and pickle or cucumber, lunch and dinner of one *chapati* each with curry or a cup of milk. Often, she eats only half a *chapati* for breakfast and takes the other half as tiffin. Sheela says that the thick *chapatis* they eat are equivalent to two fine *chapatis*.

Occasionally, a customer gives Anita a sweet or a piece of fruit. On my questioning her, she said she does not like the gourd yogurt salad her mother frequently prepares, but likes the *parwal* vegetable which is less often cooked. She likes *paranthas* which her mother rarely cooks. She has never told her mother about her likes or dislikes. On my questioning, she hesitantly admitted that she often would like to eat more than one *chapati* but has never told her mother as she is afraid she may be scolded for asking for more.

When she is down with fever, Sheela feeds her a special diet of milk, bread and biscuits, but due to the relentless pace of her own work, is not able to coax Anita to eat well. The loss of appetite due to fever makes Anita even weaker than she already is.

### Hard Pressed by Work

When I began this study, over a year ago Anita's family serviced a total of about 75 households. Each household gives clothes for ironing once in two or three days. At that time, Anita's parents and her paternal aunt, Gulabo, between them ironed about 250 clothes a day. Now that Gulabo has married and left, and Sheela is pregnant and cannot work as hard as formerly, they service only about 60 families. They have passed on the rest to Gokul's married sister who has set up shop about 70 yards away.

According to Gokul, their earnings have declined from Rs 80 a day earlier to Rs 50 or 60 a day now in July 1989. However, from my observation of how many clothes they iron in an hour, my own estimate is that Rs 60 is the minimum while the average daily earning now is about Rs 75 a day, and was Rs 120 earlier. When I first met them, both parents complained of overwork and fatigue, and this was one



reason for their passing on work to Gokul's married sister.

Sheela is thin, with a listless anaemic appearance, and looks older than she is. She was married at the age of 18 and has been pregnant four times in the 10 years of marriage. One child, the only boy, died within a month of birth.

She is now pregnant for the fifth time, and says she will get sterilised if a son is born.

Sheela says she has kept poor health ever since she came to Delhi, that is, ever since her marriage. She says she finds intercourse painful but submits to her husband's wishes. She suffers from a white vaginal discharge.

Her arms and back ache from wielding the heavy five kg iron for over eight hours a day. Many evenings, she gets a low fever due to exhaustion. Her sister-in-law, Gulabo, was called from the village, at her request, to help her cope with the workload. Though Gulabo, while she was here, worked like an automaton, ironing continuously all day, from 8 a.m., with only a break for lunch, and also taking responsibility for refuelling all three irons, Sheela continued to be overworked.

Sheela does all the housework, washing of utensils and clothes, cooking and serving meals, and collecting fuel by keeping a constant lookout for deadwood lying around in the neighbourhood. In 1988, Sheela cooked on a wood fuelled *chulha* even though she owns an LPG gas stove which she used only to heat food. Now, she cooks on the LPG and only makes *chapatis* on the *chulha*.

Last year, I noticed that Gokul was spending less time ironing, and was often seen sitting around. However, now that Sheela is pregnant, Gokul does most of the ironing, working for about 12 hours a day. In addition to ironing, the chores Gokul performs are fetching water from a tap in a house just across the street, and buying provisions. When he is away on a visit to his village or on business in town, Sheela has to take on these tasks or coax Anita into doing them. It is a big physical strain for Anita to carry the heavy canisters of water, even though the distance is small.

An important contribution Sheela makes to the family economy is through her interaction with customers, especially women, who bring clothes for ironing. The only time she can be seen smiling and pleasant is when conversing with them. Gokul is much more reserved. Sheela's sociability is an asset to the family since most of the family's clothing and regular gifts of food on auspicious occasions are given by customers with whom she has developed friendly relations. The work of going to Anita's school whenever summoned by teachers is also left to Sheela.

### Anita's Contribution

Although Sheela and Gokul are not willing to divulge their income, it is likely that they earn up to Rs 2,500 a month, and were earning Rs 3,500 or so earlier, when three adults were at work. The expenditure they recount is Rs 15 or so a day on fuel for the irons now (Rs 25 earlier), Rs 200 a month on wheat, Rs 300 a month on milk, Rs 75 a month on vegetables. Other incidentals are tea, sugar, lentils, medicine, soap,

oil, a *sari* for a visiting sister, undergarments, a pair of plastic shoes costing Rs 12 twice a year for Anita, *bidis* for visitors, sweets or other small indulgences for Baby.

They live rather frugally, considering their income, and spend little on improving their nutritional intake or buying consumer items. They save at least Rs 500 a month in "committees" -local group saving schemes. When they get a lump sum from the scheme, they use it to pay their debts.

Gokul says that when he first came to Delhi, he was under a debt of Rs 16,000. He later incurred a debt of about Rs 30,000 for the weddings of his three sisters. Loans taken from relatives carry an interest rate of two percent per month while outsiders charge six to seven percent. On Gulabo's wedding, recently, he spent Rs 30,000, the main heads of expenditure being clothes for her, and the wedding feast.

Gokul has also incurred debts in order to invest in land. In early 1988, he bought a 62 square yard plot of land in Jeevan Park close to Janakpuri. He says he bought it with the intention of building a house on it, since Rs 6,000 would have been sufficient to raise a temporary structure. However, he sold it hastily some months ago, for Rs 50,000, when a demolition squad visited the area creating a scare. Thus, he earned Rs 20,000 within a year by

this transaction. He says some of his relatives have earned Rs 200,000 on land bought for Rs 10,000. He regrets having hastily disposed of the plot under the threat of demolition, because he thinks it could have fetched a higher price.

With the money from this sale, Gokul has bought a 25 yard plot of authorised land in JJ colony for Rs 60,000. He says he does not intend to build on it, but will sell it later, to make money on it. On both occasions, he borrowed Rs 10,000 to make the land purchase.

It is difficult to quantify Anita's contribution to the family economy in terms of money, yet it is clear that the family income would be adversely affected if she were withdrawn from work. When they first took to ironing for a living 10 years ago, Sheela used to perform the task of fetching and delivering clothes, while Gokul used to iron for most of the day. Anita was five when she started going on delivery rounds. Today, the fear that a neighbouring rival will lure away their custom induces them to keep up an unremitting pace of work. The rival has sons who do not go to school, and thus, he has an edge over Anita's parents who can only rely on her, and that too only after school hours.

### Preparing for Womanhood

In the course of the seven months I spent observing Anita, and on my

visit to her in July 1989, after a gap of eight months, I noticed several significant changes in her life.

With every passing month, some additional responsibility is thrust on Anita at home. Keeping an eye on Baby and amusing her was always Anita's job, but now she is also expected to do other little household chores such as washing small garments (usually hers and Baby's), and small utensils like glasses and bowls. Some days, she is asked to make tea, and runs back and forth between the kitchen and her mother's worktable outside the house, for step by step instructions. This summer vacation, Sheela taught Anita to make *chapatis* and *paranthas*.

Anita told me that, until recently, her mother used to scold her if she postponed to Sunday the homework assigned on Saturday but, of late, her mother instructs her to do it on Sunday. Anita cannot understand this change in her mother. A few months later, on her mother's instructions, she had started doing homework in the half hour lunch break at school. Anita says no other child in her class does this.

When I first met Anita's class teacher, Brijbala Sethi, she told me that Anita was a good, regular student and had scored over 50 percent marks in the first term examination in class four. Four months later, this assessment was completely reversed. Mrs Sethi said

that in the last few weeks, Anita had shown little interest in class, and, on a few occasions, had not done her homework. When Mrs Sethi scolded her Anita began to cry and said she could not find time to study. Mrs Sethi then called Sheela and told her that Anita must be given time in the day to do her homework as she is only a child and cannot be expected to stay up late at night doing homework, after working all day.

Mrs Sethi apprehended



## Anita's School

The primary school Anita attends is a single storeyed building with 13 classrooms, one office and one store. The classrooms are not enough to accommodate all the classes from nursery to class five, as each class from one to five has three sections, so four classes sit outside on the verandah, and sometimes, two classes are taken simultaneously in one room. The principal says for the last four years, the school has sent many written and verbal requests to the assistant education officer, for construction of more rooms. Although there is space for 15 more rooms, the principal says not more than five will be constructed.

The school has a 70 square metre compound, half of which is completely overrun by weeds. The teachers say the gardener employed by the corporation is never seen during school hours and is not accountable to the headmistress. A few garden plots are cultivated by students and staff as an extracurricular activity. The school has 18 teachers and a principal, all women.

The school provides wooden benches and tables only to students of classes four and five. Younger children sit on two feet wide strips of sackcloth or rugs placed in rows on the floor. The children prop their wooden slates on their knees when writing. The school has no provision for room heating in winter, and there are no curtains on the windows. The thin rug strips are placed on a cold floor. The children often implore teachers to hold classes in the sunshine outside but this is not permissible under the corporation rules. However, when sweepers, who are supposed to sweep the rooms before classes begin, turn up late, classes are often held in the open while the rooms are being swept.

Most of the children in the school are from low income families. The fathers of the majority are in such occupations as betelnut seller, brick-layer, bus conductor, police constable, rickshaw puller, tailor, driver, farmer, dairyhand, factory worker, washerman. About 10 percent of children have mothers employed outside the home, mainly as



domestic servants. Several of the children, including boys, help their parents with the family trade and/or help with housework and care of younger siblings. Only a very few of the students are children of teachers, engineers or property dealers.

The teachers are from middle class backgrounds. The difference in the dress style of teachers and children is starkly apparent. Although the teachers interviewed expressed sympathy for the students' underprivileged backgrounds, manifest in their lack of warm clothes and shoes, and also said that in view of this, school inspectors' general characterisation of these children as "dull" is unfair, yet there were signs that the relationship between teachers and students is affected by the disparity in background. On one occasion, when the school's woman peon was absent, I noticed teachers having lunch and students washing the dishes.

Although teachers say they are not supposed to hit students, they acknowledge that all of them routinely do so as "this is the easiest way" of disciplining them. The children are caned on the hands, back or legs with a wooden footrule, generally for not having done their homework. In my presence, even when a teacher was mildly rebuking latecomers, I observed the offending child reflexively shrinking and shielding

the head with the arm as if to ward off an expected blow.

Anita, matter of factly, without any trace of anger, stated that she is afraid of all teachers as they beat up children. She also said she likes her classteacher because she gives children *prasad* to eat every Saturday.

Teachers say that about 50 children are admitted into each batch in class one, and by class five only 35 to 40 remain. The rest drop out, and more girls than boys drop out. On an average, every year, three to four children drop out of each class. Teachers attribute this to parents migrating to their villages, returning months or years later and being unable to afford resumption of the child's schooling. If the parents do not obtain a school leaving certificate when the child leaves, readmission is difficult.

Teachers say that most students of class one and two show a high attendance rate, but both absenteeism and drop out rates escalate thereafter. On an average, seven to eight children of class four are absent on any one day - due to illness, either their own or that of someone at home. While the teachers say this makes extra work for them as they have to go over the missed lessons with the absentees, Anita, who is frequently absent due to ill health, said her teachers had never gone over any missed lesson with her.

that Anita would be unable to secure the 33 percent marks required to pass the half terminal exam and the class four final exam. In fact, Anita just managed to scrape through into class five, getting, according to Gokul, 33 or 34 percent marks.

### **Education or Memorisation?**

The education provided in the municipality-run school Anita attends basically consists of a great deal of irrelevant information couched in incomprehensible language, that children are expected to memorise and reproduce in the examination.

The school is one of the better municipal schools, in that some teaching actually takes place, and for this reason there is a great rush for admission here. In 1988, Anita was in

class allots half an hour for games, this time is utilised to cover the syllabus of arithmetic, social studies or science. The teachers say these syllabi are so extensive that no time is left for games. A full time games teacher is employed but all she does is drill the children for 15 minutes after the daily 10 minute morning assembly. No music or art teacher is employed. The school makes special arrangements for musicians when asked to prepare an "item" for January 26, said the principal.

The basic teaching method employed seemed to be for the teacher or a student to read the lesson aloud from the textbook, and for the reading to be punctuated by the teacher asking questions. Students are supposed to raise their hands and answer when called upon by her. Once this process

By Anita's account, another teacher completed a lesson on living organisms simply by having it read aloud by a student. Though the lesson contains lines like: "If there is no pond near your house, ask your teacher to show you plants that grow in water", she did not bring any plants to class.

The lessons I attended often contained very difficult words but these were usually not explained by the teacher. Generally, she gave a synonym that was just as difficult as the original word. In one lesson, the phrase *tarun paudha* (young plant) used in the text was repeated by the teacher several times. During the break, at least five children I asked to explain the meaning of *tarun*, frowned in amazement, revealing that the word had not even registered in their mind.

All of the textbooks are couched in highly Sanskritised language very far from spoken or even ordinarily written Hindi. The arithmetic text for primary classes (part four) has the following list of contents: *samay; guna aur gunankhand; sarvagunankhand aur sarvgunaj; badi sankhyayen; sankalan (jorna) aur vyavkalan (ghatana); gunan(guna) aur bhag; ekik vidhi; map; bhinnatmak sankhyayen; bhinnatmak sankhayaon ka sankalan (yog) aur vyakalan (ghatana); dashmalav; rekhakhand; parimap.*

The science text for class four uses terms like *khanij, dravya, aavardhak lens, shushka, yatheshta*. The text for class five is entitled *Paryavaran Adhyayan* which means study of the environment. However, not only Anita but many other children too said that *paryavaran is vigyan* (science). The contents include: living organisms, our bodies and food, our health and cleanliness, natural resources on the earth, air and water, machines for work, the moon and its satellites, shadows and eclipses, and one chapter entitled *Ayatan, bhar aur ghanatva* (volume, weight and solidity), which none of the women at **Manushi**, including graduates, postgraduates and habitual Hindi speakers, could translate without a dictionary.



class four which had 36 children, both boys and girls. The class teacher, Mrs Sethi taught all the subjects, arithmetic, Hindi, social studies, general science and drawing and painting. The last subject is never taught, but an examination is held. The exam consists of the teacher drawing a picture on the blackboard and the children being given some time to memorise it. Then she erases it and the children attempt to reproduce it. Thus, this subject, too, which should draw on creativity, has been reduced to memorisation.

Although the time table for each

is complete, the teacher writes questions on the blackboard and then goes round the class, checking the answers as the students write them in their notebooks.

The methods employed seem to differ from teacher to teacher. One teacher whose class I attended actually conducted experiments in class. She asked students to fetch various items, such as a tin pot, some cotton, legumes, and showed them a cut section of a plant through a magnifying glass. She also instructed the students how to conduct an experiment at home.

| शब्द     | अर्थ           | धारात शब्द         |
|----------|----------------|--------------------|
| सुनहरे   | चौनिजौ सी पीली | कच्ची - पक्की      |
| वालिद    | पिता           | इमानदार - बहुमान   |
| धैलाम    | ब्लैकबॉनमस्टे  | उंधकार - उजासा     |
| विश्वाशा | गच्छा          | उम्र = निकद        |
| नौक      | अच्छा          | अपराधी = निष्पक्षी |
| यौजे     | श्रृत          | नौक = बुरा         |
| आतिथी    | मेहमान         |                    |

When I asked Anita what living organisms are, she said those that can eat and walk. The text attempts to take the young readers into confidence by inviting them to observe and collect plant life, with the ingenuous phrase “*Aao avlokan karen.*” Anita understands *avlokan* (observation) to mean “find out something”.

She could not say what tadpoles or larvae, mentioned in the text, are. She identified the duck in one illustration as “buck” - presumably, she misheard *batak*. The illustrations in the text, of ducks, tadpoles and larvae, are not captioned, so the child who has not seen any of them, has no means of finding out which is which. The narrator concludes by innocently asking: “*Tumne in avlokanon se kya kya sikha?*”

The same chapter also contained a paragraph on camels. I asked Anita to tell me any thing she remembered of this passage. She said: “The camel has

cushioned feet.” This was not mentioned in the text. After much prodding, she said it was her father who had told her this. When I asked what it meant, she pointed to its hooves in the picture, and said that cows have similar feet, and these are unlike ours.

This chapter uses the phrase “*pani ki satah*” (surface of the water). Anita said “*satah*” means *jagah* or place where water is. She identified a yak in an illustration as a rhinoceros and said the teacher said so. She identified the bear correctly. By her account, this chapter was read aloud in class. A simple experiment to germinate seeds by putting them under a damp layer of cotton was not conducted either in class or at home. The elaborate description in the text is accompanied by two uncaptioned illustrations. Anita could not identify the cotton or the dish but correctly pointed out the sprouted seeds.

The class five book on social studies *Aao padhen aur khojen* (Come, let us read and find out) has a chapter entitled “Lars and the wolves” about a Lapp boy, Lars, who fights wolves. Anita said this chapter had been completed two months ago in class. She did not know what “Lars” was. The word “reindeer” had been explained as “a *barasingha* like animal” but Anita has not seen a *barasingha*. Anita pronounced the word “*radiar*” and, when asked what it was, said “it must be something to do with a radio”, pointing to the family transistor. When asked what moss is, she quickly looked up her guide and said it is “water grass.” She has not been shown moss.

The class four social studies textbook gave elaborate (though outdated) information on how to travel to places like Kashmir. This made little sense to the children, most of whom have not seen even the major monuments in Delhi. The school claims

that the children are taken on an outing once a year but the children I spoke to said they had never been taken out, nor has Anita ever been on an outing.

Her mother says Anita has seen one film *Sherawali*, but Anita does not recall it, and says she has never seen a film but would like to see one if it is shown in her school and if her mother will not scold her for seeing it. She rarely watches TV. Small wonder that despite the chapter on the Taj Mahal in her textbook (in a series "Beautiful places of India") when I asked her where the Taj is, she replied "Agra is in Taj Mahal." When I repeated the question, she said after a long pause: "It is in the book. It is a temple." While thinking about the question, her lips moved inaudibly as if she was trying to recall memorised lines.

Anita said that her favourite subject is Hindi "because it has poems." She named some poems and recited one, "Parvatraj Himalaya." Although she could recite a poem about the Himalayas, Anita, when questioned, did not know what the Himalayas are - a bud, a tree, or a garment. She did volunteer that the Himalayas are not edible. When I talked to a group of students from class five, all of whom recalled having studied the same poem, none of them knew what the Himalayas were. They said they had never seen a picture of the Himalayas. However, the class four social studies book has a picture of a lake ringed by mountains in the chapter on Kashmir, and when asked what *pahar* (the simple Hindi word for "mountain") is, Anita knew, as she has seen hills from a train window on a trip to her village. Clearly, the connections had never been established for the children.

The questions on social studies expect the children to know, among other things, the difference between a lagoon and a lake, why protected forests have been created, how national integration is strengthened by the mass media, which states are known as the seven sisters, where *bidri* work is done, and why the directive principles have been included in the Constitution. It

also exhorts them to meet and talk to a member of parliament and to find out how work proceeds in parliament.

When I looked at Anita's notebooks I found that her answers had been marked correct so long as they followed a particular format, that is, began and ended in a prescribed way. Several misspellings and inaccuracies were overlooked and the punctuation marks omitted by Anita were not inserted by the teacher. For example, to the question "What is the capital of Jammu and Kashmir?" she had replied "Hamari Jammu ki rajdhani Kshinagar hai" and this had been marked correct. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the written work had actually been checked, in however perfunctory a manner, which in itself is unusual for a municipal school.

It is a natural fallout of a system devised to test a student's ability to learn by rote, that the children will rely on aids designed to assist them in this process and thus to get through the exams. In 1988, Anita bought a guidebook which, according to her, was recommended by the class teacher. Mrs Sethi, while denying that she recommended the guide, added: "It helps them to cover up lessons they may have missed when absent from class." This guidebook in Hindi, for students of class four, covers all the subjects prescribed and costs Rs 25. It claims to be "authored by a council of experienced teachers" and to be the only base for "sure success in the exams."

This year, in class five, Anita has purchased the guidebook at the beginning of the term. She says she bought it because, unlike her textbooks which only contain questions at the end of each chapter, this book provides answers as well, and

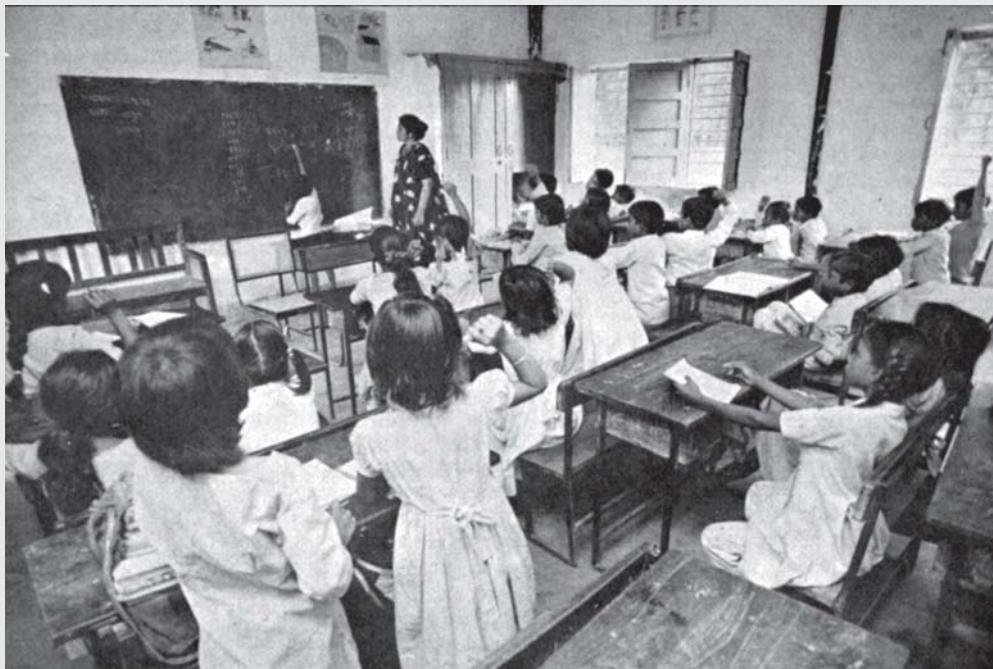
the meanings of difficult words too. Gokul agrees that the guide is a help to him when tutoring Anita, and adduces similar reasons. He says when he has difficulty in locating the answer to a particular question he has merely to refer to the guidebook and it provides all the answers. He thus feels less harassed by Anita. However, though the guide may help Anita get through her homework faster, it does not really help her do well in the exams, as her poor result testifies.

The guide does not explain the lessons in simple language. It simply provides answers to the questions set in the textbooks. Often, the answers are couched in even more difficult and highflown language than that used in the texts. For example, one question set on the chapter on the Taj Mahal, required the child to explain in his or her own words, certain sentences from the text. The purpose presumably is to see whether the child has understood the lesson and can put it in simple language. But the answer provided by the guide uses words like *amit chhap* (ineradicable impression) *vishesh anand*, and *vastu* instead of the commonly used word *cheez* (thing).

In addition to providing irrelevant information in high-flown language, the guidebook also provides sheer misinformation. For example, the chapter on Kashmir says the girls in Kashmir wear frocks, *salwar kamiz* or skirts and the women *saris* and blouse!

Extracurricular educative ideas are imparted in a rather haphazard manner. The 10 minute morning assembly, for example, consists of prayers including the *gayatri mantra*, thrice repeated (teachers proudly cite this as a factor in the school's good reputation), and a moral lecture by any one teacher on topics





## Girls and Boys

By a recent policy decision, all primary schools in Delhi have been made coeducational, since it was felt by the authorities that not enough girls were attending to justify the expenditure on a separate girls' shift. Fairly rigid segregation seems to operate in the coed classroom, with boys and girls hardly talking or interacting. Boys and girls sit on separate benches in class. It is amusing to see with what speed these little boys vacate a girls' bench if a girl approaches it, as if tabooed from sitting next to a girl.

When observing the class, I noticed that boys show much greater confidence and articulation than girls. When the teacher asks a question, girls timidly raise their hands but boys frequently answer out of turn. Girls, even when they speak collectively, are near inaudible, but individual boys raise their voices high enough above the din to be heard by the teacher. Even when a girl is called on to answer, she is generally interrupted by boys proffering the answer. In my presence the teacher rebuked them mildly for

this, but this had no effect. When the teacher goes out of the class, she always appoints a boy, never a girl, to perform a monitorial role. When she fails to appoint anyone, a boy will on his own assume this role which a girl never does.

Mrs Sethi, who has earlier taught for 20 years in an all girls' government school, says that pupils there were far more confident than girls in this coed school: "I don't know why it is so. One just cannot hear girls' voices here. I don't know why they stay so silent." Teachers generally ascribe the different behaviour patterns of boys and girls to their innately different "natures."

During the course of my visits to the class, the attention paid by the teacher to the girls, especially to Anita, increased. Anita visibly gained in confidence from this attention. Her passivity in class gave way to active participation. The teacher began to call on her more often, and she too began to raise her hand and speak up more often.

The teachers say boys and girls play the same games. But this does not appear to be the case. In the compound boys play with the only ball allotted to the class - a few of the younger girls join in briefly. Girls are more likely to play with a skipping rope or a badminton racket brought to school by one of them. They also play ludo. Anita does not know how to play ludo. She says a carrom board is kept in the classroom cupboard. Once, the boys took it out and played with it in the teacher's absence, for which they were caned when she returned. Other children said that once in a while the teacher takes out the board for 15 minutes and each child in the class gets two tries to strike. None had ever played an entire game.

In the absence of swings and slides, the children hang from iron poles and rafters supporting the asbestos roofs of the verandah. Boys were more excitedly performing these antics but a few girls too climbed up walls and slid down pillars.

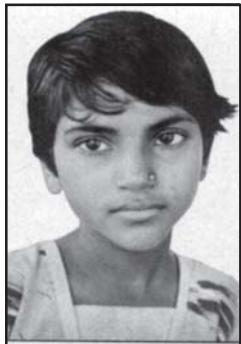
ranging from respect for elders to lives of great people to health and hygiene. When I attended, the lecture mentioned, in the light of the prevailing cholera epidemic, the need to drink boiled or clean water and to keep the nails clean. One teacher asked the question "Of which country are we citizens?" to which children replied in unison: "Bharat." She followed this with the rather irrelevant question: "We do not live in Pakistan, do we?" and the children chorused "No." Three or four painted tin boards put up in the school bear inscriptions like "Do not let the wrinkles of old age show on your spirit", "Keep your eyes sharper than your tongue", "A grain of honesty is more precious than a thousand bricks of gold."

### Exposure to the World

Although Anita goes to school, her exposure to the world outside her immediate environs is extremely truncated. She does not interact much with other children. Both parents forbid her to talk to boys. If she talks to Kaku, a six year old boy from a neighbouring middle class family, she is called away. Anita understands that speaking to boys is somehow wrong. She knows the names of boys in her class but does not talk to them. She says that her mother does not forbid her from talking to her paternal uncle in her village, who is four years older than she is, and studies in the same class as she does.

Anita cannot mix with girls from families like hers because none of them live near her house. Sheela sees this isolation as desirable since Anita would pick up "bad habits" if they lived in a slum. Sheela also discourages Anita from playing with middle class girls in the neighbourhood, because she may pick up habits unsuitable to their income level.

Until a couple of years ago, Anita used to play with neighbouring girls or watch them play, but no more. She says she has occasionally played skip rope, and owns one fashioned from a



jute string, but does not take it to school. She recalls having skipped with an elastic rope brought by a girl to school. When recounting this, she unconsciously takes a few skipping steps. Thus, Anita's friendships with girls are limited to doing class work together, and borrowing stationery from each other in school.

On my probing, Anita hesitantly admits to feeling that her mother favours her sister, Baby. Anita has never had a toy. Slowly and hesitantly, she admits to wanting to play with her sister's toy—a man riding an elephant, fashioned of cloth. This toy was given by a customer. Baby makes believe the toy is a fierce dog and goes around frightening members of the family with it. Anita has only touched the toy, not played with it. She is afraid that if she does so Baby will cry and her mother scold her. Anita is in awe of her mother and does her bidding docilely. Very rarely does she answer back. Reluctance or tardiness and, occasionally, silent tears, are her only form of protest. On my most recent visit, in July 1989, Sheela said that Anita has become stubborn - formerly, she used to perform various chores without being told, but now will not sweep the floor unless told to do so. She sees her father as lenient. He has never slapped her.

Anita knows one song, taught by her classteacher. She has seen her mother and other women sing and dance in the village. After much persuasion, she timidly adopts a dancing posture for a split second, looking around all the while lest anyone see her. She describes the transistor as an instrument her father listens to, from which men's and women's voices emerge.

### Expectations from Anita's Education

Anita is one of the fortunate few in her class who has attended school uninterrupted from nursery to class

four. Although textbooks are provided free at school, and tuition costs a mere 85 paise a month, her parents say they spend an average of Rs 25 a month on her education, mainly on stationery items such as notebooks, ballpoint pens, pencils, crayons, and the guidebook purchased from an agent at school.

Sheela is illiterate, but Gokul, the son of a peasant who owns 25 to 30 *bighas* of land, studied up to class 10 in his village school. All the boys in his family were sent to school, but none of the girls (he has five sisters and one younger brother). However, Gokul saw daughters of better off people studying in the village school. He says he decided to send Anita to school because other people he knows here send their daughters, although in the village, girls of his family are still not sent. A female cousin, age 14, recently married, was never sent to school.

Gokul also says he wanted Anita to be able to read bus numbers, read signs and ration card entries, and be able to sign documents. To this extent, Anita has fulfilled his expectations. In his absence, she conducts money transactions, including those at the ration shop. She maintains the account book in which track is kept of those households who get their clothes ironed on credit and pay at the end of the month. When Gokul and Sheela visited Mathura last year, leaving relatives to carry on the trade in their absence, Anita was left behind to keep accounts and to identify which clothes belonged to which family.

Gokul says he will educate Anita up to class five. When pressed, he said he would educate her up to whatever level she is capable of attaining. However, he then said primary education seemed to him enough learning for a woman. He literally turned up his nose at the suggestion that she study up to class eight, and said he did not think she would be able to cope with the studies beyond class five. He also stated that there is no question of her studying beyond class eight, as

the elders of their community will frown on this. He readily admitted that had Anita been a boy, she would have been educated up to high school level, as a boy's education does not provoke disapproval.

In my last conversation with him, after Anita had passed into class five, he was adamant that she will not be allowed to study beyond this class, as it will be difficult to find a husband for her if she does. Sheela was in two minds about it, but a deterrent factor is that the middle school is farther away than the primary school, (although still within walking distance).

Gokul intends to educate his younger two daughters as well. He is dissatisfied with the quality of education his second daughter, Sonu, is getting in the village, and says he will bring her to Delhi and admit her into Anita's school.

### Parents and Teachers

Anita's school is unusual in making some effort to involve parents in the school functioning, at however minimal a level. The school has, on its own initiative, started a Parent Teacher Association. Of the 85 paise collected as fees, 25 paise goes to the PTA fund, which is used to appoint a gardener, to distribute sweets to the children on August 15 and January 26, and to buy socks and wool for "poor and deserving" students.

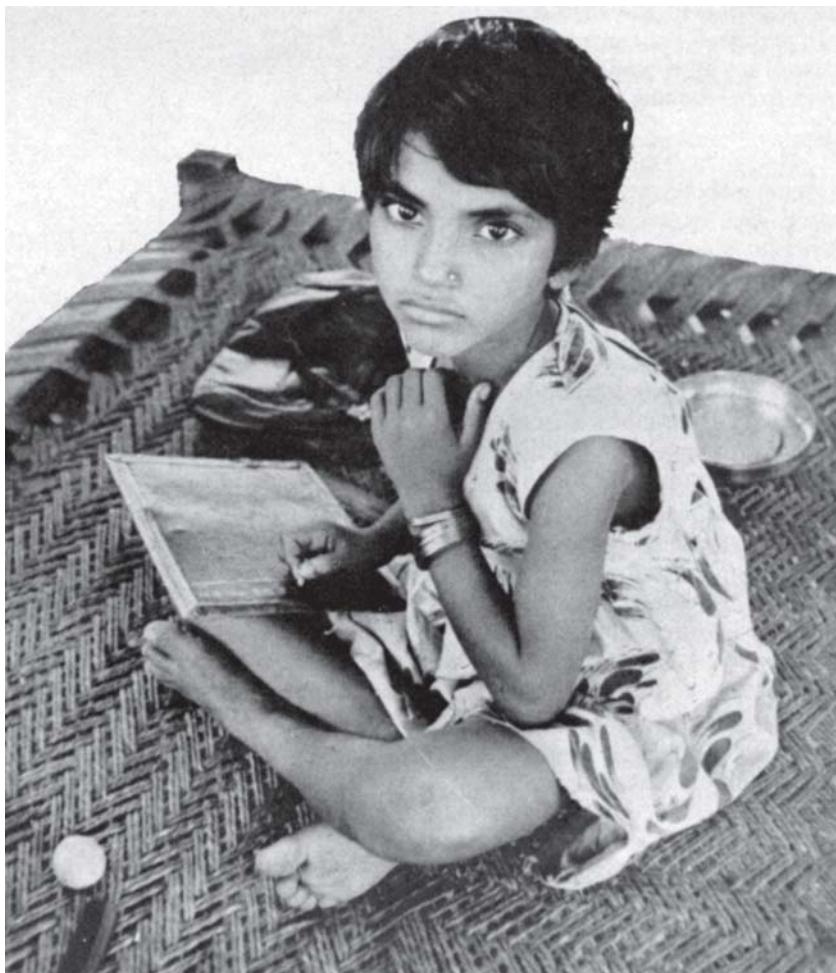
However, from Anita's parents' account, it appears that parents are in awe of the teachers and feel pressured to live up to the teachers' demand that they tutor the children at home. Gokul says he does not visit the school because he is not fond of listening to complaints against Anita. The teachers constantly ask why she is so thin, why she doesn't perform better, why she doesn't pay attention and score higher marks. Gokul ironically remarks that his wife is "fond of listening to such complaints". He also remarks that if the teachers were men, he would perhaps be able to address them as equals (meaning that he feels uncomfortable addressing women as equals, even perhaps superiors, as the teachers may

consider themselves). However, Sheela's perception is that Gokul shirks the task of facing Anita's teachers and leaves this to her, not because she is fond of it, but because it is a hard task.

Gokul emphatically blames the inadequacies of Anita's education on the fact that her school is run by the government. He says that if the school were privately owned, he would be able to question the teacher as he would be paying for Anita's education. Here, the teachers, according to him, do not pay Anita adequate attention. He says he was taught elementary skills like sewing on buttons, making buttonholes, hemming a kerchief, at school, but Anita has not been taught these skills. He feels she should be taught these skills, not because she is a girl but because he learnt all this at school.

The teachers I spoke to at Anita's school uniformly blamed the children's disadvantaged home backgrounds for their poor academic performance and for their dropping out of school. They said that the children's performance improves visibly when their fathers help them at home with their studies.

The teachers do not seem to realise how poorly this reflects on the quality of school education. If an otherwise employed father, untrained to teach, and probably not much educated, can improve his child's performance by helping the child for short periods at home, why cannot teachers, employed and paid for the specific purpose of teaching children, help the child improve during the hours spent at school? If the burden of helping the child cope is to fall on already overworked parents, they have little



incentive for continuing a schooling that only adds to their work burden besides being a financial liability with no certain rewards.

### What the Future Holds

Asked what she wants to be when she grows up, Anita innocently says: "I want to continue studying. I like to go to school, and to answer questions at the end of a lesson." When the question is repeated, she says: "I will be whatever my mother makes me."

Remembering that her mother has often held up a local lady doctor to her as model, she added: "If my mother tells me to be a doctor, I will be one." A few months later, when she seemed to have gained confidence from the attention I was paying her, she firmly said she would not be a doctor but would be a teacher.

When the question was posed to Gokul, he could not imagine Anita doing anything other than ironing

clothes for a living. Sheela immediately interrupted to say: "We will see that she learns tailoring. I know she is capable of learning to sew and knit. She will operate from the house - this will not be disapproved of by the community. Whatever happens, Anita will be capable of earning enough to support her family." She also said that when Anita begins to stitch clothes, her earnings will be used for household expenses until she marries and leaves them. □

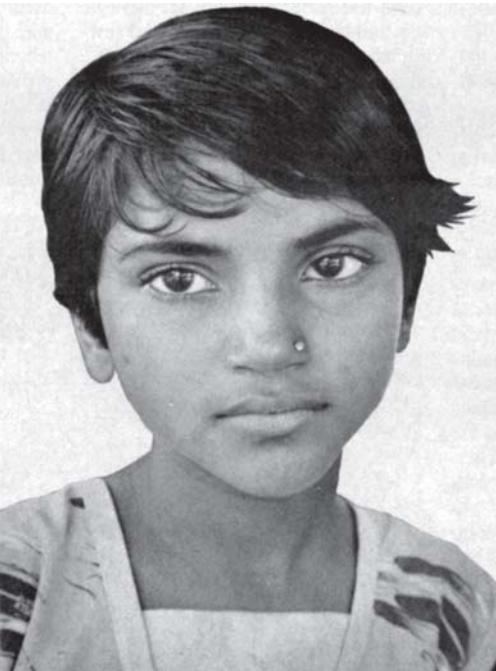
## Conclusions: How Schools Discourage Parents

Gokul's aspirations for basic literacy and numeracy skills for his daughter are modest but still unusual. These are among the basic skills women need to acquire minimal control over their lives. Sheela too wishes Anita to have a better, less hardworked life than her own, although she cannot conceive of any other way to do this apart from teaching her tailoring.

Given that Anita is a hardworking girl of average intelligence who expresses a clear desire to study, and that her parents are more motivated than many parents of girls in the country, why is it that the school has failed to enhance Anita's parents' aspirations for her, or to indicate to them how school education can make Anita's life better?

Far from encouraging her parents to educate Anita beyond class five, the school system has given them the impression that Anita will be unable to cope beyond class five, an impression that her class teacher shares.

The decline in Anita's performance is not attributable to any individual disability or lack of inclination. It is partly attributable to the increasing pressure of work at home. But, since this pressure is an inextricable part of the life of most girls and of many boys of her age and income level, why does the school system place heavy



pressures on her to spend several hours studying at home? It should be perfectly possible for all studies to be done in the five and a half hours she spends at school. In many countries, the concept of homework for children of Anita's age does not exist. Homework in fact, is a way for the burden of teaching to be passed on to parents. Parents who have made the decision to spare the child for the hours she is at school, should not be made to feel that schooling is impossible unless they also give her more time to study at home (and also study along

with her in order to teach her!)

Instead of indicating how education will improve Anita's life, the school has only made life more difficult both for Anita and for her parents. During exam time, Gokul tutors Anita for a couple of hours after completing his work at 10.30 p.m. This may continue till midnight or 1 a.m. Anita is also expected to do homework which, given the compulsions of their trade, can only be done at night, sacrificing precious sleep. Anita's teacher knows that she distributes clothes, but does not know how many hours she spends doing this. The strain of studying at night is compounded by the family's not having an electricity connection.

In a rational school system, extra study after school hours would be completely unnecessary for a child of Anita's age. What a child like Anita needs, apart from literacy and numeracy skills is some knowledge of the world around her, basic information on health care, nutrition and other aspects of living a fulfilling life. Exposure to the larger world is especially vital for girls, given their already restricted mobility and the increasing restrictions likely to be placed on them at home as they grow into women.

Anita's schooling has dismally failed to enhance her understanding of the world she lives in or to widen

her options. This is primarily because the education system - curricula, teaching methods, and testing system (exams), resembles a kind of obstacle race designed to eliminate those who are less able to memorise and reproduce increasing amounts of largely irrelevant data. That elimination, not enhancement, is the aim, is indicated by the fact that the syllabi require the children to remember facts about remote places that have no relevance to them, such as Lapland, while telling them next to nothing about their immediate environment, for example, about the city they live in.

The ones eliminated from the obstacle race of schooling are bound to be the less privileged - those from lower income groups, deprived sections, and girls. The system, overall, is designed to cater to children of the urban educated middle class, whose parents, educated through the same system, can push them through it, with the help of various aids, including, often, expensive extra tuitions. The stakes are high for middle class parents because the child's prospects in life - whether in the form of a well paid job - or marriage to a man with a well paid job are enhanced by its success in the obstacle race. This incentive does not sexist to the same degree for children, however intelligent, who attend municipal schools, especially for girls who attend these schools (since boys can aspire to jobs like those of peons, bus conductors, even clerks, although even they are not equipped to compete with English educated middle class children for better jobs).

Even in a school like Anita's where there are almost no middle class children, the norms set by the requirements of that class act as serious pressures on the students, through the assumptions of curricula and teachers alike. The education provided is in no way geared to the lives and needs of the students receiving it. Instead, it makes unrealistic demands on them. Unable to cope with these demands, children and their parents sense that this

education is not for them and will not be of any use to them that is commensurate with the strain it imposes. Girls drop out at an earlier stage due to discrimination against girls built into family and community norms, but most boys too dropout much earlier than do middle class children.

What would a school system geared to the needs of the majority of children, especially girls, look like?

First, it would be based not on the principle of testing the children through exams and eliminating the supposedly unfit as "failures", but on that of equipping each child with the skills and information that she needs to gain control of her life. This would involve a complete overhauling of the present irrational, burdensome and irrelevant curriculum.

The system should have inbuilt processes for helping children to overcome gaps caused by absenteeism or periodic migration. There should be no unnecessary red tapism or bureaucratic procedures to undergo for readmission. Admission or readmission should never be denied to a child.

Special incentives and nutritional supplements should be provided to girls to encourage their parents to continue their education. Parents should be actively involved in the process and asked what would facilitate the girls in continuing. The system should be flexible, to accommodate as many of the special needs of girls as possible.

Parents should not be made to feel guilty or backward for not being able to help their children with studies, nor should this task be placed on their shoulders. Instead of parents being placed in the dock by teachers and summoned to school to account for the child's poor performance, it is the teachers who should be held accountable by the parents. The school is set up with the

explicit aim of educating children and should not be allowed to fob off its responsibility onto parents.

At present, parents are powerless. Anita's parents have no say in the kind of education she receives nor can they exercise any control over her teachers, of whom they are afraid. On the principle that parents are much more likely to have their child's welfare at heart than are teachers, the controls must be reversed if the system is to function efficiently. Parents should be empowered to monitor the education provided, and collectively to exercise control over the functioning of the school. Teachers and the school administration should be held primarily responsible if failure rates and drop out rates escalate. This can only be possible if curricula are rehauled to make them comprehensible to the children.

There is no doubt that the funds allocated to primary education are abysmally low, as was evident from the disgracefully low level of amenities provided to the children, and the absence of many basic requirements. When such is the condition in the capital city, the condition of schools in small towns and rural areas can well be imagined.

In order to make a school an attractive place for children, the least that can be done is to provide an equally comfortable if not somewhat better environment than that available at home, for example, to force them to study in freezing classrooms when the sun is shining outside, because of a mindless rule, is ridiculous. In addition, learning aids, story books and toys should be freely available to primary school children. Play (not just drill), and creative activities such as singing, dancing, exploring the surrounding areas, drawing and painting, not competitively for an exam but in a free environment, are crucial to a child's education.

—Manushi

