

THE MEADOW SCHOOL

By Tarabai Modak



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Experiments in Education

THE MEADOW SCHOOL

by

Shrimati Tarabai Modak



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FOREWORD

Shrimati Tarabai Modak is a pioneer in the field of pre-primary education and there are not many persons in our country who can speak with such great authority on the subject as Shrimati Modak. During the last twenty years she has been running an experimental school at Kosbad (Thana District), Maharashtra, for the children of Adivasis. This pamphlet which was originally written in Marathi has now been translated into English so that a larger number of teachers and parents may benefit by experiences of this veteran educationist.

We are at present engaged in planning education for our people out of which a good proportion are Adivasis. We have therefore to give special attention to their problems. In the process of taking the modern civilisation to their doors we must make sure that it does not do any violence to their culture which has given them a sense of security, beauty and dignity to their life. We may have to change many of our preconceived notions about civilisation when we are dealing with the Adivasis. I, therefore, welcome this publication by one of our eminent educationists—Shrimati Tarabai Modak—and I sincerely hope that it will be read widely by our teachers.

K. L. Shrimali.

*New Delhi,
December 12, 1961.*

PREFACE

The Nutan Bal Shikshan Sangh, founded in 1926, with the object of spreading right ideas about the education of pre-school children among parents and teachers decided, in 1945, to extend its work to the rural areas. The work of organising and running a rural centre was entrusted to me and the Gram Bal Shiksha Kendra was started at Bordi in Thana District. Round Bordi, there are a number of hamlets or wadis inhabited chiefly by Adivasis. While working in our centre at Bordi, we came face to face with the problem of the education of Adivasi children. Though there were a number of primary schools in the area, these children are unwilling to attend school regularly and receive education. At first, the reason for this unwillingness appeared to us to be economic. It was necessary for children to earn money to keep the family going and their parents could not spare them for schooling. We, therefore, tried to make it possible for the children to earn while they learnt in the primary school we started for them. Then we came up against another difficulty. We found that because these children were used to a life of roaming about as they pleased, the usual school routine appeared very irksome to them and they absconded from the classes on the slightest pretext. We, therefore, felt that if they were to attend a Balwadi for a while they would gradually get accustomed to school routine and develop habits of application and steady work. There was also the problem of the younger brothers and sisters who had to be looked after by our pupils. The toddlers accompanied the elder children to school and would not leave their juvenile guardians. We reconciled ourselves to the situation and decided to try an unorthodox experiment of combining a creche, a Balwadi and a primary school in one unit. The plan, we felt, would make it easier for the children to fit into the disciplined life and programme of a primary school.

But we soon found that this was not enough and that something more was needed. We reached the conviction that certain fundamental needs of these children were not met by the present type of primary school. The teachers engaged there were entirely unsuited to inspire them to learn. Not only is the average teacher not equipped to deal with rural conditions and village emergencies, but he has a positive dislike of rural life and is anxious to be relieved from what he considers a punishment and exile. Nothing could be a more serious disqualification than this in a teacher who is to work in the Adivasi tracts. The course of studies also is thoroughly unsuited to rouse the children's enthusiasm and the school routine is extremely boring and

dull. This was the real crux of the problem which we were out to solve. We were in search of a new type of school that would fit in with the Adivasi way of life and, at the same time, bring them the benefits of education. The result of this long research was "Our Meadow School".

We tried different measures as problems arose and modified them in the light of our practical experience. "Our Meadow School" is thus a novel and to a certain extent an original way of tackling the problem. Our experiences in this line were very encouraging and open before us a new vista of work.

Here we came into closer contact with these children and their parents, and understood their way of life and learnt the basic facts of their socio-economic conditions. The following pages describe faithfully the situations—both physical and mental—into which we continuously ran, while running our meadow school, and the daring adjustments with which we tried to meet them. It is far from my intention to claim that our findings are the last word in the matter. Our procedure was frankly empirical. We went ahead in an unorthodox manner; mixing with the children freely and informally, utilising their natural environment, and leaving aside the idea of going there with a set purpose to teach. We proceeded to find their inner urges, leanings, skills and aptitudes, as well as their likes and dislikes. There were of course certain broad ideas at the back of our mind to guide us, and our goal too was clear. It was to evolve a new type of school that would harmonise with their simple life, and at the same time, enrich it. We felt we could achieve this by kindling in them a thirst for knowledge and helping them to understand Mother Nature, who seemed to be so intimately connected with the whole gamut of their existence.

After a long period of observation and earnest thought, I am convinced that mere multiplication of the type of school considered or reckoned successful in towns and cities will do no good to the backward areas. The average teacher today is not equipped to deal with rural conditions and village emergencies. Nay he suffers from a more serious disqualification still, his dislike of rural life and his anxiety to be released from what he considers an exile. Unless the Education Department is prepared to overhaul the whole set-up of primary training in rural parts and to bring about radical changes therein, I do not see any ray of hope in this respect. On the other hand, I feel that we have definitely found the way, the direction in which to proceed if our programme of education is to succeed, not only in the scheduled areas, but throughout the backward countryside. Many more surveys

will be needed regarding the subject, for India is vast, and conditions and habits of life differ markedly from place to place. Further research on strictly scientific lines will have to be undertaken. In doing this, it is important to select varied fields in the districts, such as sea-coast places, hilly parts and jungle tracts. This is essential because the basic conditions in such typically different regions are sure to be unequal, and so also the response to our experimental methods. It will thus be seen how this pre-supposes the need for suitable changes in the syllabus and practice lessons prescribed for training colleges.

I feel that this small brochure can serve as a sign-post, as a hand pointing in the direction in which earnest reformers, desirous of remoulding child-education in backward areas, may proceed with profit. Considering the magnitude of our sub-continent, this is a gigantic task, beyond the power of one person or institution. Several clear thinkers and devoted workers must come together and join forces. Educationists, both in voluntary service and government employment must cooperate whole-heartedly. And last but not least, adequate funds must be made available for these experiments and surveys in the different parts of the country. Our own experiments and findings are, at the most, tentative first steps in that direction. They are published here with the hope that more competent brains and powerful engines may come to be yoked to this car of rural education which is too heavy for the half-starved country bullocks struggling with it today. I shall be satisfied if I succeed in drawing the attention of the right persons to the urgency of this problem. If this booklet reaches the hands of those facing similar situations in other parts of the country, and brings them together for intellectual cooperation, the great cause which I hold dear will be fully served.

I have faith in right education which alone can help children to grow to their full stature as harmonised human beings and good citizens of a reborn country. I, therefore, feel strongly that educational programmes must be given equal importance with other welfare schemes, and that the scheduled and backward areas must find a prominent place in the benefits of national projects.

I must make grateful mention here of the assistance I received for the Vikaswadi Project at Kosbad, District Thana, from the Ministry of Education, Government of India, under their scheme to assist voluntary agencies in the Second Five Year Plan. I am also deeply indebted to philanthropists and personal friends for the generous assistance received from them. But for this assistance, it would not have been possible for me to work out my ideas and try the bold experiments described in the following pages. Much remains to be done, and I hope to get further facilities from some source or the other for that purpose.

I must also make a frank admission that, at this age and in my present state of health, I am not able to go through much physical activity. I have to depend almost entirely on my colleagues who do most of the field work and make me aware of the true state of things. It is the "headmistress" and the "teacher" (who are very often the same person) and others who look after the creche and the Balwadi, who carry out our workshop programme, who run the night-shifts, and who conduct games and scouting, it is they who are the real workers. Without them, it would have been impossible for me to achieve anything personally.

I must also mention the valuable collaboration of the Evaluation Committee of the Vikaswadi Project which consists of renowned educationists. Lastly, I also acknowledge the ready help of an old friend who has rendered this brochure, which was originally written in Marathi, into English.

Tarabai Modak.

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I

THE MEADOW SCHOOL IS BORN

Bordi is a sea-side place, some 80 miles from Bombay, in the Thana District. We went there mainly to organise a Balwadi (Nursery School) and our ambition was to enrol all the children of the age-group 2-6 living in the village. In spite of all our efforts and persuasion, however, we could enrol only the children of the middle class. The children of the backward classes, particularly of the Adivasis, kept out. To win them over, we decided to go to their locality and to hold classes in the vicinity of their huts and in the open air, either in the shade of trees or under the sky. This move succeeded very well and was an eye-opener in many ways. It was these open-air schools, or 'Angan* Balwadis' as we called them, that brought us in direct contact with life and problems of the Adivasis.

These Angan Balwadis drew children of all ages, from 2 to 14 years. In spite of this wide difference in ages and contrary to the traditional view, we kept this heterogeneous group together. It had several social, administrative and even pedagogic advantages. It was the elder children who brought the little ones to the Balwadi, carrying them on the hip or leading them by the hand. We wanted to see if this bond of affection could not be utilised further in the educational process. It may also be incidentally mentioned that wherever we tried to group them age-wise, we always encountered difficulties. We also discovered that the grown-up children could not attend the school because they had to look after their younger brothers and sisters at home and to do the household duties, while the elders of the family went out to earn a living. This experiment of heterogeneous grouping offered a way out. The grown-up children could come to this school, take part in all Balwadi activities and look after their little wards who refused to be parted from them. We also found that this unorthodox arrangement was of great assistance in the Balwadi routine. For instance, the older children helped in the daily toilet of their little brothers and sisters, washed them, combed their hair, trimmed their nails and so forth. Gradually and with tact, we could separate the older ones for a time and teach them alphabet and numbers. When we had first envisaged this Angan Balwadi programme, we had not bargained for a combination of a creche, Balwadi and a primary school, all in one, as it turned out to be.

*The word 'Angan' in Marathi means a yard of the house.

Our Angan Balwadis were soon very popular. Even the parents of the children began to take interest, listened to their stories or watched their games. The presence of the parents made it quite a merry gathering and implied an approval of the programme which added to the children's sense of security.

At this stage, the State launched its programme of introducing free and compulsory primary education. It brought schools within easy reach of even these back-waters of rural population. After investigating the proposed facilities of this scheme, however, we were driven to the unhappy conclusion that the network of conventional schools had a very poor chance of success in this area. Such schools did not fit into the peculiar pattern of life and mental equipment of Adivasi children. We felt that a lasting solution of the problem would have to be evolved through experiments and through the adjustment of the routine and methods of the school to suit the habits and needs of the children of this pastoral community. In 1953, therefore, we launched our first experiment in this direction and called it "Vikaswadi" which really meant a composite unit of a creche, a Balwadi and a primary school and which was always established in the close vicinity of the Adivasi localities. We have already seen how inseparable these different aspects are and how they help in keeping the life of the tribal people undisturbed. As stated earlier, this experiment made it possible to dovetail the processes of education into the basic pattern of their life.

Naturally, the Vikaswadi was totally different from a traditional primary school. Our policy was two-fold : (1) to have a share in the life of those whom we aspired to enrol as our pupils and (2) to induce them to have a share in ours. We were thus aiming to establish a comradeship and there were many novel features and interesting activities in their corporate life. We would, for instance, take all the children to the adjacent brook to bathe and wash. We had put up a small kitchen where the boys and girls would take turns and cook *dal* or vegetable to supplement the rice or *rotala* which each one brought from home. The simple lunch thus provided was very enjoyable. Contacts established during a splash in the stream or a picnic under a tree created friendly bonds which were very valuable even from the educational point of view. Another novel and happy feature of our school was that it attracted girls as well, though they were conspicuously absent in the traditional primary schools.

After a season of popularity, we noticed a sudden ebb in the school attendance. Most of the girls were present with their tiny wards, but the older boys were not to be seen. On enquiries, the reason was found to be very simple : the lads were widely in demand as cowherds. The cultivated fields were turning green with new crops and attracted cattle.

The farmers impounded them and exacted heavy damages from their owners. The latter were, therefore, obliged to engage some one to prevent the cattle from trespassing and it was here that the bigger boys found employment. They were already beginning to chafe at the lessons and flew away at the first chance of basking in the sunshine and running about with the cattle. As this light employment brought a little money also, the guardians were all on their side and against what they felt to be the "luxury of schooling". The neighbouring schools too had a similar drop in the boys' attendance. But our unconventional approach gave us a slight advantage over them. As the cowherds and their quadruped charges were usually back for a mid-day break between 12 a.m. and 2 p.m., we could persuade them to join us at least for that interval.

As we looked deeper into the problem, we realised that not only had we to attach a creche and a Balwadi to the primary school, but we had also to tackle the economic difficulty facing our boys. The idea of "earning while learning" was already in the air and later on, we devoted further thought to translate it into practice.

Five years ago when we came to Kosbad, a tribal village near Bordi, we were struck by the beauty of its natural setting. The village was surrounded by green hillocks and fertile farms filled with singing birds and traversed by sparkling stream. Warm rays of the sun enwrapped everything with affection and vitality. The surrounding fields were dotted with cattle and little cowherds and sheperdesses. The pastoral beauty and charm of the scene brought to our mind the image of Shrikrishna and his happy playmates of ancient times. It was the beginning of the monsoon and the whole earth looked verdant and colourful with new sprouts and flowers. Even the old trees were looking young and bright, and the activities of insects, butterflies and birds added a note of joy to the whole landscape. To ask the children to leave this fairy-land, this festival of nature, and come to the gloomy school huts with damp floors was indeed absurd. To persuade them to turn away from the sweet smells, vital touches and thrilling sights they were enjoying and to ask them to mug up "A.B.C." or "11, 12, 13" was not sense. As this truth dawned upon us, we were assailed by grave doubts as to whether we were doing the right thing in weaning these children of Nature from their loving Mother. Were we not getting fossilised ?

In spite of this heart-searching and these inner doubts, we kept on pressing the children to attend our school. We gathered the parents together and tried to impress upon them the vital importance of education in bettering the lot of their children. We tried to wake them

to the hardships which their children would have to face if they remained illiterate and ignorant. We were much encouraged by the parents' attitude towards our advice, but we soon realised that the children and their parents were wiser than us. The children attended our school only occasionally and during the frequent periods of truancy, they went back to Mother Nature, sought out her other children, squirrels and birds, fruit-laden trees and laughing brooks, and forgot the dull and imprisoned world in which people like us lived and tried to entrap others as well.

II

FIRST VISITS AND CONCLUSIONS

As the attendance of children in our school was unusually poor, we went round one day to their huts to investigate. We discovered that here too they were engaged in looking after the cattle of the adjacent suburbs on small wages. The fields were green with new crops and cattle were their great menace.

The principal and the headmistress of Vikaswadi walked up one day to these meadows to see for themselves how their children fared in their occupation. They set out early in the morning and, after a short hike, came within sight of a delightful scene. There were the cow-boys and girls, in the scantiest of clothing, but joyous and lively, darting hither and thither after the wayward cattle. Most of them carried green twigs as sticks and some had a flute tucked under the arm or hung round the hip. In their friskiness and agility, they were hardly distinguishable from the calves committed to their charge.

The principal and the headmistress sat on a boulder, smiled and beckoned their little friends; but they retreated further and stared at them in surprise, wondering probably what their game was. What could these white-clothed persons want in the open meadows? The principal then took out his whistle and blew different calls. The children seemed interested now and the bolder ones approached gingerly and tried the whistle. Very soon, fear and suspicion seemed to have melted away and being encouraged thereby, they proposed some games. This appeared so ludicrous to the children that they burst out laughing and withdrew further. Then the principal picked up a stone and threw it a long distance. The children did the same, and soon it developed into a competition. Not to be left out, the headmistress too had a fling; but it was such a flop that all the children laughed outright! They had a right to do so, for many of them were experts at it and could even produce a whirring sound, as of a missile, with their stones. Thus the barrier of shyness and fear soon vanished. They parted as playmates and the children promised cheerfully to join them at the same time and spot on the next day.

As they retraced their steps, they experienced a new kind of joy, a sense of a new achievement. It struck them that they had stumbled upon the answer to their great problem. The 'meadow school' was the new inspiration. Why not tackle these children, through the meadow-way, as this encounter suggested?

Soon they put the idea into practice and launched their first meadow school. Instead of the children coming to them, it was they who joined the children on the meadow where they were tending their cattle. The scheme worked very well. The children were happy and eagerly awaited the arrival of these elders. They would often run about, hide behind shrubs and climb trees, and the visitors found it hard to keep pace with their energy.

With the intention of teaching marching and drill as a preliminary step in organised games, the visitors asked the children to bring staffs on their next visit. This delighted the children and they came out with stout branches cut from trees or bamboo groves. The principal showed them how to fall in line and march in step, calling aloud "one, two"! The children did this for a while, but soon started a new game of their own. They would whirl their staffs, jump about, choose an adversary and start a sham fight. They would utter war-cries, strike sticks with one another, make sword thrusts and parries, change opponents, all the while moving swiftly, laughing hilariously and imitating the buffoonery of their folk-clown. The visitors were held spell-bound by their agility, vigour and joy. They had come to teach; but instead they had to learn something of the children's skill and art.

Thus they went often to the meadow and gathered the children around them for games and sham fights, and such other merriment as they could improvise on the spur of the moment. Having established friendly relations, they persuaded the children to see what sort of a place their school was, and assured them that they would have a lot of fun there also. They agreed and began to spend their mid-day interval between 12 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the school, among the other regular children. They were not yoked straightaway to the task of reading and writing, but were allowed to move about where their curiosity led them. The staff also took care to see that they had scope to show off their physical accomplishments and that they were not awed by the bookish learning of the other pupils.

Side by side, the staff continued their visits to the meadow and their attempts to fraternise with the pastoral youngsters. One day, however, the children were missing at the usual rendezvous. Learning that they had gone to the stream nearby, they followed and found them engrossed in catching fish and unaware of everything else. Most of them were knee-deep in water. Their bodies were smeared with mud and they were busy trapping the fish. As the visitors approached nearer, one of them noticed them and raised an alarm. "Teacher"! "Teacher"! went round the cry. "Run! Run!" warned somebody and they scrambled to the bank. Evidently they had misunderstood their motive. To reassure them, the principal jumped into the stream and declared that he too would like to catch fish. He attempted to suit

his action to his words, but no fish would get trapped in his hands. His failure and bewilderment greatly amused the children, who were then emboldened to re-enter the water and to initiate the principal in the right method of fishing. Thus the children once more showed the visitors that all wisdom was not the monopoly of the professional teacher, and that the crude-looking tribal children themselves could teach them something of the jungle craft, if they were not too snobbish to learn.

The fishing operation proved so interesting that time passed quickly. At last they made a move. The children floundered out of the stream to bid them a good-bye. They seemed to have enjoyed their company and looked very happy. The visitors too felt joyful as they realised that the distance between them was narrowing and that they were beginning to be accepted by the children as friends.

Thus on account of the frequent visits of the principal of the training college and the headmistress of the primary school, we felt that we had made a good beginning. Our recent experience raised high hopes. We felt confident of carrying out our experiments further. We sent our teacher to the meadow, with this object, every monsoon.

In the beginning, our main object in conducting the meadow school was to come into closer contact with the children, to know them by their names, to acquire an insight into their ways of life and to break down the barriers of fear and suspicion. In short, we wanted to prove that we were their friends and well-wishers. Our programme used to include games and talks and such subjects as arose naturally. Our persistent attempt was to induce them to come to our Balwadi and primary school. We described in glowing colours how learning in schools made people wise, clever and successful. We built up their self-confidence by dwelling on the aptitudes they undoubtedly had, and held out prospects of similar achievement in the field of school studies also, if they applied their mind that way.

The response to our persuasion was encouraging. There were some 40 to 50 names on the roll of our primary school, as against 25 or so of the previous year. These boys and girls also brought their little brothers and sisters to Balwadi and crèche. We regarded the meadow school as an extra-curricular activity to make the primary school attractive to the children.

Reviewing our work at the end of two years, however we had to admit that we had not gone much ahead. We had cultivated the children's acquaintance and had even won their friendship. They came to us of their own accord and mixed freely with us. If we planned some

jobs that offered them wages they came running and attended school. But it was plain that they had no real attraction for school-work and that, in spite of all our efforts, they were not interested in study or learning.

One more year passed and yet we failed to awaken in them a desire to learn. We tried several aids such as pictures and models, songs and games, stories and excursions. Whatever interest was evoked was only transitory. There was no inner desire to acquire knowledge, no joy of learning. Beyond friendly relations with us as individuals, there was no affinity for the school.

We pondered over the situation deeply and long. We wanted the school to be active and to have good attendance, as it was a practising field for our basic training college. The poor attendance of the children, sometimes barely 12 per cent of the enrolment, was a serious handicap to the college. We, therefore, opened a hostel for Adivasi children and gathered some 40 inmates from neighbouring towns. This ensured the necessary practising 'materials' for the college. It was also our hope that the presence of other children of their own type would be an additional attraction for the local boys and girls to attend regularly.

The experiment, however, belied our hopes. Instead of more of our local children coming in, even the few who used to attend, however, spasmodically, now began to drop out. It became apparent that they did not take kindly to the hostel children. The latter were being provided with free food and clothing and so looked healthier and smarter. This must have roused the envy of the local group and created a sense of inferiority. We had to admit failure in our educational programme for the Adivasi children of Kosbad.

This disappointment made us examine the issue further. Were free hostels the only solution for the education of these children? We were, from the start, against picking up children below 12 or 14 years of age from their homes and bringing them up in an artificial and institutional atmosphere. They would have, it is true, enough of food, clothing and school equipment, even before they felt the need for it. But, though rich in material things under this arrangement, they would be deprived of the god-given blessing of family ties. The natural urge to be up and doing, to be alert and resourceful, would also be weakened. At home, unless they went out on a job and earned a pittance, they would have to go hungry. This hardship gave them a grit which was an asset in after life.

For these reasons we intended that the Kosbad children should not be parted from their homes. On the contrary, we should regard the school as an extension of the home. We thought that their parents

and guardians would come to look upon the school as a benevolent activity of their own village, if we took interest in their lives, offered them help and guidance and treated their children with affection. Once their hearts were won over, we were confident of making the school popular with the help of modern methods and equipment.

But our careful analysis led us again and again to the conclusion that the real difficulty and the core of the problem was not economic. It was the sheer lack of interest of the Adivasi children in the school subjects that was our main drawback. This led us to think again and find out the subjects which interested them. There must be some things about which their curiosity was keen. Our contact with the children in the meadow gave us a partial glimpse into their psychology. But we realised now that there was much that we had yet to learn. Our social contact had proved valuable and we decided to continue it. But our search hereafter was to be after subjects or happenings or skills that fascinated the children. We could do this best through our meadow gathering and we lost no time in drawing up a broad outline of a tentative programme of the meadow school scheme, the subjects to be aimed at, and the policy to be followed.

The curriculum we drew up at the outset only indicated the general direction along which the teachers in the meadow school were expected to proceed. It was not meant to be followed to the letter, nor was there a time limit imposed. It was realised that the actual programme must develop on the spot and hence the teacher's hands were left completely free and much was expected of her own initiative. Broadly speaking, the curriculum was somewhat like this:—

(1) In the meadow school, the highest priority should be given to physical activity. The agility and alertness of the children must be encouraged. With this object, games like running, jumping, climbing trees, must be regularly practised. Suitable phases of scouting must also find a place and so also drill and marching. We gave physical fitness such over-riding importance because we realised how vital such stamina and ability to toil are in their life and what decisive assets they make in their struggle for existence. We wanted to guard against their turning soft and sedentary like the city children.

(2) During studies, the utmost use was to be made of the rich equipment Nature has provided free. The vegetable and the animal world, the geography, astronomy, and geology that surrounded the children must be utilised in their lessons. As parts of their life, these touch them at every step and awake their natural interest. At the same time, these observations and explanations should not take the mechanical and unimaginative form that "Nature Study" and allied subjects assume in the ordinary schools. Our teachers were warned against dunning into the children's heads a lot of dry information. They were

expected to encourage a spirit of observation and inquiry in the children. The children should gather their own specimens and piece together their own facts. The teachers were only to help the pupils, as and where necessary.

(3) The next important subject is the development of language. As a rule, these children hear very little spoken language. Being engaged in physical work, the members of the family have little time and energy for speaking among themselves or with the children. This gives the children a poor and restricted vocabulary. In the meadow school, therefore, they should be given opportunities of hearing language. This can be done through informal talks in which, conversation, story-telling, reading aloud from simple books, songs and dramatics should have prominence.

During these lessons, the dialect of the children should not be neglected. Whenever explanations are necessary, the teachers should give them in their dialect, and the pupils should be allowed to answer similarly. The words in the dialect for flowers, fruits, birds, insects, etc., should be specially noted down. Ordinarily, however, the teacher should speak in the pure language of the region. To make a fetish of the dialect will do harm to the child in the long run by depriving him of the advantage of the cultured language and the literature of the region.

Another warning we had given to our teacher was that he should not introduce or induce the children to read and write unless they felt like doing it and asked for it. Much stress should be laid on their expressing thoughts and observations orally. Picture books which would require them to observe minutely, express adequately, and learn new words in the process should be used freely. The teacher should not load the children's minds with knowledge and theories beyond what they desired to know. Once the urge to know more is kindled, they will themselves ask for more knowledge.

(4) The Adivasis, as a rule, have no conception of time or space. Their children are, therefore, handicapped in learning subjects like arithmetic. The best way to teach such subjects to them is by counting objects, measuring distances, heights and breadths and also liquids. They have to be helped to grasp the idea of time by counting hours, days, months and years.

(5) There is one more subject on which we laid great stress and that is cleanliness. The purpose and meaning of cleanliness must be explained and its practice regularly inspected. The teacher must plan systematic programmes such as bathing, cleaning the teeth, washing the face, nose, eyes and ears, combing the hair and washing clothes. The children should be taken to the brook and these operations should be demonstrated and the children encouraged to practise mutual help.

Rough sand-stones should be used for scrubbing the feet. Special measures have to be adopted to rid the girls' hair of lice and to give a haircut to the boys. Inspection of all these phases of cleanliness may occasionally be delegated by turns to the more grown-up children so as to keep up the general interest.

Cleanliness of clothes is even a greater problem. These children of Nature enjoy rolling on the lap of Mother Earth and will transform a snow-white apparel into a muddy rag within fifteen minutes. Soap and energy spent in washing are thus rendered practically meaningless. We were driven by experience to decide that 'whiteness' should not be the only sign of cleanliness and that clothes washed daily in the brook and dried in the sun should be accepted as clean. Even this test will have to be relaxed in winter and during rains as the children have no change to wear while the clothes they wash dry in the sun.

As regards providing them with a spare set of clothes, there is a peculiar difficulty. When we tried the experiment, we found that the children were reluctant to exchange their apparel, ragged and muddy though it was, with the set we offered. When pressed a good deal, they consented to wear them, but only over their own soiled things, keeping the buttons of the new dress ostentatiously open, so as to exhibit their own dear property. The motive behind may be self-respect or a possessive attachment to their own belongings. We had ultimately to abandon the idea and be content with seeing that their clothes were duly washed and mended.

III

SOME GLIMPSES OF THE MEADOW SCHOOL

1

It is now more than a fortnight since our regular 'meadow school' has begun. The teacher is planning activities on the lines of the syllabus we have drawn up. It will take some time before the new work is rooted properly. Our headmistress is taking a guest round the meadow school today and is giving a vivid picture of the natural setting in which our juveniles work and of their all-round reactions to our approach. Here is the little hamlet from which we draw our pupils. Those small huts with bamboo walls, plastered with mud and covered with straw roofs, are their dwellings. There are no windows and the bamboo doors have no latches.

It is early morning and the visitor sees the men of the village having a wash outside the huts! The women are sweeping the front yards. The lad Vanasha is taking out goats from his hut. A couple of cows with their calves are also trailing after him. The headmistress tells the visitor that all these animals are housed at night inside the villager's living huts for fear of wild beasts like tigers.

Manglya too is bringing out his cattle from the other side, and so are the other boys and girls—Vanashi, Sonya, Shinvarya, from different huts. Of course they don't own these cattle. They belong to landlords from neighbouring towns, who engage these cow-herds when the cattle are not wanted on the farms. The calves and the dry cows are thus put out to graze and the village children take them out to the hills and meadows within reach of a stream. Vanasha is shouting to Rama to hurry up and not to be left behind, as all the others are well on their way. The guest asks the ages of the children and is informed that they range from 6 to 12 and perhaps a bit above.

The children are dressed very scantily. The girls have a piece of loin cloth and a short blouse, while the boys have ragged shirt and a *Langoti**. Utterly unconscious of their semi-nudity or bedraggled clothes, they carry their crude staffs jauntily and walk with perfect confidence, or run after their cattle merrily and seem thoroughly happy and playful. After a while they halt near the bank of the brook, leaving the cattle to graze contentedly.

*A short narrow strip loin cloth.

The young lady among these primitive-looking lads and lasses of the meadow school, is the teacher who is called *Tai* or sister. She has gathered the children around her and made them all squat in a circle. What they are singing now is a simple prayer. How eagerly they break from the circle and throw themselves into different games like Kho-Kho, 'Atya-patya',* cat-chasing-rat, all of which need no equipment except sturdy legs and a gay heart! The teacher too takes part as one of them.

Seeing them making a sudden dash to tamarind tree, the guest is puzzled and is told that they are measuring the shadow of the tree. It is 88 steps from the trunk now, a little shorter than the measure they took on arrival. One can see the two different pegs driven in the ground to mark the change. This, in fact, is our sun-dial to regulate our open-air routine.

The children return to their games and throw themselves again with zest into the exertion and fun of the play. But one of them notices that the goats are about to trespass into the farm and raises an alarm. This sets them all on the run and Mathi, Manglya, Ramya and a few others form into strategic groups and succeed in leading off the wayward animals into the open meadow again. One or two of the children stand by and control the animals. The others continue the game.

Before long there comes another interruption. A cry of "Snake! Snake!" is heard from the bank of the stream. Once more the players drop their game and race to the bank. They spot a big serpent swimming fast in the water. One or two want to jump in and catch it, while some others want to stone it to death.

Thinking of the danger, the teacher grows nervous over the safety of the children and manages to hold them in check and divert them back to the shade of the tamarind. There, they sit and chat about lots of things. Their gossip reveals that most of them remember with thrill their journey to some village or town within five miles. One or two lucky ones have even been to the fair of Mahalaxmi and had bullock cart rides. But not one of them has ever entered a railway carriage. When the talk begins to drag, some one gets up and measures the tamarind shadow. It has now shrunk to 42 steps, and another peg is driven in to mark the change.

Once more there is an excited shout. "It is killed! It is finished!", cries some one from the stream. Instantly, on learning this, they make a bee-line for the bank, yelling and laughing as they speed on. It seems that Vanasha had stayed behind unnoticed when all others had gone back to the tamarind. Being a crack shot with his sling, his object was

* A common team-game in rural areas of Maharashtra.

to bag the snake, which he has done. The flowing water is tinged red with the blood of the wounded reptile. Some four or five of the bigger boys jump into the stream and catch hold of it with the help of their shepherd staffs, and land it on the bank. One of them cuts a strip of bark from a tree and, tying the tail of the snake with it, hangs the maimed victim on a low branch. The creature is practically dead but its body still makes convulsive movements which fascinate the children, gazing at it in a ring. It is a big snake, some six feet long and nearly as thick as a man's wrist. The yelling and laughter of the children has subsided. They are hushed with awe at this uncanny sight, and so is their teacher, though she puts on a brave smile.

After a while, the tamarind shadow shrinks still further to within fifteen or twenty steps, proclaiming the closing hour. The boys and girls round up their cattle and turn homewards. The teacher proposes to add the snake to the other specimens in the school museum. "Come on", she says, "Let us compare our latest find with the pictures and dead specimens there. Let us see to what variety it belongs and what its peculiarities are. Vanasha who has got the snake on his staff, will bring it to the school for me". So most of the children branch off towards their huts with their cattle and Vanasha, accompanied by a couple of his chums, marches triumphantly besides the teacher, proud of the dead trophy dangling from his stick.

The guest appears surprised as well as delighted with what he has seen.

2

Our experiences in the Meadow School were very encouraging and filled us with hope. The interest and enthusiasm of the children in the school talks and activities was quite the opposite of what happened in the primary school which lacked spontaneity, zeal and joy. Here, on the meadow, the children were ever eager, playful and joyous.

This had its reflection on the mood of the teacher who found a new pleasure in the day's routine which otherwise tends to be monotonous and dry. The description of a morning at the meadow school given above will bear witness to this important aspect. When the children talk to each other in their own dialect, how sweet it sounds! They express themselves in such a lively manner and feel thoroughly at home and natural. Their meagre clothing is no hindrance to their activities or self-assurance. To watch them against that forest background, chasing frisky calves, flourishing their sticks with natural grace, singing and laughing with a care-free heart, is to watch an idyllic vision!

The Adivasi children and even their elders are very primitive in many ways. For instance, they have only the vaguest concept of time. We have already seen how the teacher improvised a sun-dial to overcome this ignorance. She linked this contrivance with the time-piece she brought later on and helped the children to mark the changing shadow and to note its relation to the hour hand of the time-piece. The movement of the hour hand in the time-piece and the shifting of the tamarind shadow as marked by the wooden pegs gives the children a concrete proof of the passage of time. It takes them long to absorb the abstract idea but ultimately they grasp it bit by bit, the idea of measuring time by hours. When they gather to sing the morning prayer under the tree, they drive the first peg and mark that it is "8 O'clock" in the time-piece, and when they break up for lunch, they observe that it is "11 O'clock".

The idea of numbers thus introduced leads gradually to other concepts. A girl will raise a few fingers and ask another how many they are. So the game spreads and playful acquaintance is made with the dreaded science of arithmetic. Their eyes sparkle with joy as they discover the relation of numbers with their fingers and toes. Soon they play at counting their cattle and trees. This hour, though informal, certainly helped these children to have clearer ideas in numbers.

The episode of the snake too was instructive to us. We realised how an occasional adventure like this could be utilised to introduce the children to science. It also gives us a peep into their character. Brought up in the lap of Nature and under the influence of elders who have a healthy contempt for fear, these children were not scared at every step like city children or deterred by anything that seemed likely to hurt. A quick eye, a remarkable agility and an acquired proficiency with primitive weapons like a sling or a bow or a staff gave them great confidence in themselves.

When the children gathered in the school museum round the snake and the snake charts, they were bursting with curiosity. They wanted to know to what variety their snake belonged, whether it was poisonous, what it was made of, why some had spots or stripes, whether they had any bones and so on. The teacher proposed that they could find out by burying their specimen for some days. After some weeks when they removed the earth, they were surprised to find the chain of bones. Later, when they killed another snake, they hung it on a tree to dry and afterwards, picked its bones. They compared the two specimens with each other and with the charts. They followed the same method of observation and comparison when another snake, a poisonous one, was killed. They seemed quite thrilled at what they regarded as a privileged glimpse into nature's mystery. They were quite fearless and quite impersonal. It is the teacher's heart that fluttered in nervous

anxiety for the safety of the children. As the snake is beginning to acquire a sinister character among the children, the teacher has to tone down the stigma and present the reptile as the agriculturist's friend, who destroys their arch enemy, the rat. She also points out that only a very small percentage of the species is poisonous and that the large majority is harmless. She also explains, with the help of the charts, how to distinguish the dangerous variety.

As an immediate outcome of such earnest nature-study, we were soon to find a tame snake on our lands, green and not thicker than one's finger. Having diagnosed it as harmless, the children insisted on housing it comfortably and feeding it with milk by a pipette.

The children are keenly interested in studying anything they come across in the meadow, whether it is an insect, a reptile or a bird. They retain the information gathered from us or from pictures, not missing even the fine details, and bombard the teacher with questions. We discover at last the things that really hold their interest and could, therefore, be taken up as basic subjects for their studies.

3

The teacher is just starting and the headmistress accompanies her on her weekly visit to the meadow. She is pleased to meet her old friends—Vansha, Ramya, Shinwarya, Mathi, Mangli and others—gathered on the bank of the stream.

The teacher starts with her usual programme of measuring the shadow of the tamarind tree and pitching a peg to mark it. She has also brought her time-piece and Mathi and Vanshi sit gazing at it intently. The others have begun their games: Hide-and-seek, catch-the-thief and the like. There is that tiny Shinwarya running like a wild deer! And the teacher too is as swift as the children. Now they take up another sport and compete in jumping. Some of them clear nearly eight feet, which is quite good for their age.

But jumping on level ground soon proved too tame for them and there was a clamour of "Let's jump across the brook". Away runs the whole party to the bank and the headmistress follows them just in time to see so many of them leap clear over the stream which was more than ten feet wide. Excited by their success, the children press the teacher to take her turn. But diffident of her powers, she begs to be excused; so the boys turn to the girls and dare them to do the feat. Mathi instantly accepts the challenge and clears the stream. Not to be left behind, Navshi too takes a leap, but alas! tumbles in the water and sets the whole assembly laughing heartily. The brook is not deep and she is soon fished out and joins the general merriment.

Later when Vansha, Ramya and Manglya bring their cows to the brook, the boys are still full of frolic and cornering one of the cows adroitly, they forced her to jump over the stream. Delighted at this feat, they clap their hands wildly, feeling as proud as any ring-master of a circus.

The teacher now gathers the children under the tree and reading the light of fun and triumph in their eyes, talks about the jumps and praises their achievements. To her question, "How wide did they jump", they can only reply "Very wide". They have yet to grasp the science of measuring distance. The teacher utilises the occasion. She marks a line and makes a boy take a leap from it. As soon as his feet touch the ground she marks that spot also and measures the distance between the two, by counting her steps. Then the width of the brook is noted by laying a bamboo across it, and the bamboo measured again with steps.

The children are much intrigued with this new idea of measurement and start measuring distances between any two land-marks, between tree and tree, between tree and cottage, between cottage and brook.

After a while the teacher produces a foot-rule from her bag and explains how it is useful as a constant handy measurement for all practical purposes. She tells them that it is called a foot-rule and that a foot is only another name for a step. The children soon grasp the advantage of such a simple contrivance and begin guessing distances in terms of "foot".

Although they are engrossed in this new idea of measurement, the children have been taking turns to keep an eye on the cattle in their charge and they are quick to head the animals off from the adjoining farms. As this is a frequent and unwelcome interruption in their "lessons", they suggest a new location for the meadow-school, on the nearby hill, away from cultivation.

4

The Headmistress set out early next morning to reach the new site. It is indeed a picturesque spot and being on a hillock, commands a lovely view. There are big tamarind trees, forming a circle and providing a thick, shady and cool shelter. There would be an excellent play-ground also and the cattle would have plenty of grazing. Soon the children have all arrived with their cattle and the teacher is there with the time-piece in her hand.

And what is it that Mathi is holding in her arms? Look! it is actually a spotted kid which she is carrying as tenderly as if it is her own new-born sister! Because of this loving duty, she forgets her games and sits by the time-piece, with the kid in her lap.

A new game has been started today by the children—mostly boys. They all carry slings and are aiming their stones at the top of a distant tree. It is a competition and each boy has ten chances. They have to pick their own stones and fall in a line. Vansha scores five hits, Ramya seven and Manglya scores all the ten! Little Shinwarya hits the target only twice. Then some of the girls too have a try and hit the mark a few times.

When the game is over, the cattle are found to have strayed all over the hillock and have to be shepherded back under the shade of a tree. The teacher now joins Mathi mothering her little kid and is allowed as a special favour to hold the kid herself. Then there is a talk of naming the kid and all the children back the idea heartily. It is decided to have the ceremony here and now. The teacher is requested to propose a name and she passes on the privilege to Mathi. But Mathi, though pleased, is too embarrassed and everyone laughs happily at the situation. At last the teacher proposes that the kid be called "Kabri" (which means "of mixed colour") and everybody approves lustily.

Here the teacher suggests that the ceremony be ratified by offering a few tender leaves to the lucky kid. Mathi, quick to notice the teacher's innocence, bursts out laughing and points out that "Kabri" will take only her mother's milk for the next few days. When asked "For how many days?", neither she nor any other child can answer, as they are unable to count the passage of time. When asked about their own age, they are equally ignorant. A calendar of days, weeks and years does not exist in their world!

To round off the naming ceremony, the children sing and dance round the kid, the teacher holding it in her lap. Not to be out-done by Mathi, Shinwarya, the youngest lad, begs the teacher to bestow a name upon his kid although already several days old. There was again the excitement about the choice of a name; but "Papadi", proposed by someone was a hot favourite. Asked exactly what it meant, the proposer explains that the kid's ears are soft like the broad-beans. As this kid is old enough, the children feed it with fresh leaves and give another performance of song and dance in its honour.

All together, it proves a happy and memorial day when the function ends.

Now the teacher takes out a small box from her bag and drops a pebble into it, saying that she would add one more every day, so that they could count the age of Kabri as it grows. That would also enable them to know for how many days a kid lives on its mother's milk only, and from what day it begins to nibble leaves and grass. In approval of this clever device there is a loud praise and louder clapping. The time-piece then reminds them of the hour, and they disperse in an atmosphere of fulfilment and joy.

5

The programme followed during the last two days at the meadow school presented features that were novel and entertaining. What happened there fascinated and strengthened our interest in the children. Their achievements in long jump were remarkable for their age and would surpass those of the city children.

We notice two or three significant things which promise well for their future. One is their physical stamina and agility. We have to be careful to see that they keep this up and do not develop distaste for physical activity as they progress in their academic studies.

The other significant thing is the introduction of the children to the concept of measuring distances. The teacher was careful to avoid the use of arbitrary standards, such as the foot or the yard. She led them on by the simple process of counting foot-steps, hand-lengths and the like. This method may sound primitive, but it follows the course of natural evolution. Even higher mathematics is born out of counting the fingers of the hands. Had the teacher begun by making the children mug up the table of feet and inches, she would have bored them soon, and they would have lost the pleasure of intelligent discovery. They would, moreover, have associated her with the teacher of the schools whom they feared. She, who had been their companion and playmate all these days, would have stood unmasked.

The third episode to which special attention must be drawn, happened on the second day. It was about the new-born kid, and the naming ceremony that followed. It was very heart-warming to see Mathi's tender concern over her goat's new kid, and her foregoing the pleasure of games in order to be with the new little creature. It was an entirely unprompted and spontaneous response, and credit to the warm affection looked up within the breast of a mere five year old tribal girl. The sight of little Mathi hugging the kid to her heart and of her expression of exquisite tenderness has a rich lesson for all of us. The mother's love, the protective instinct is among these emotions that make the whole world akin to the rich and the poor, the backward and the refined. We were glad to know that our teacher turned the episode to the best purpose.

An experienced teacher will appreciate the vital importance of naturalness in educating the young. Real education is "Jeevan Shiksha" and follows the course of day-to-day activities, as exemplified in our meadow school. Here one sees "basic education" in practice.

It will be remembered how the children in the meadow school were led to grasp the conception of space and of time, regarding both of which they were utterly ignorant. This ignorance is largely shared by their elders also. In the village, parents have the vaguest idea of the age of their off-spring. Recently, the census enumerators were bewildered to find all village children, whether of five or twelve, described by their guardians as ten-year olds. Such ignorance is not confined to the tribal population, but prevails over most of the rural India. The meadow teacher had adopted an ingenious measure to remedy this, as has already been noted. Adding a pebble per day, the children could now count the ages of their kids and calves by totalling up the collection. Soon they will start talking in terms of time measures—days and months, hours and minutes. Learning the tables by heart will fail to drive home the basic idea of the phenomena of time and of space. It is not surprising that mathematics becomes such a terror to those who have gained no first-hand convictions in this respect. The concepts of time and space which are going to dominate their future life have got to be assimilated thoroughly.

The lives of these children are closely intermingled with those of their domestic animals. We have seen how they egged on a cow and cheered her lustily when she cleared the bed of the brook. Their interest could not have been keener had the feat been accomplished by a close comrade of theirs. We have also seen their excitement over newborn kids and their naming, which was a sort of formal admission of the new arrivals in their pastoral community. This bond, used intelligently, could form the basis of their introduction to animal husbandry a knowledge of which will enrich their life.

We have noted their proficiency with the sling. They have inherited a quick eye and a firm hand, so essential to the race in its struggle for survival. Under the current social re-adjustments, killing for self-protection or hunting for food may not be vitally necessary. The children are, therefore, now being dissuaded from wanton killing. But they are, at the same time, encouraged to preserve their skill at the sling for the fine coordination it develops.

On the whole, it can be said that, in our meadow school, the children are enjoying life and are at the same time learning to live. Our aims, and much more, our methods, are frankly unorthodox. That we are not going astray in this is indicated by the enthusiasm and happiness that prevail among our children. Their playfulness and joy are so overflowing that our visitors too are often infected.

The incidents which are utilised to explain concepts or to guide conduct, happen spontaneously. They are neither pre-planned nor dragged in artificially. Our teacher is not tied down by curriculum or timetable and can afford to let topics arise naturally. This is one of the secrets of holding the children's attention and of drawing them out. They are thus spared from boredom and the teacher is saved from the artificiality which would make her a ridiculous caricature of herself. A visit to a school like ours, throbbing with life and joy, would speak better than volumes about its soundness and achievements.

6

The headmistress went to the tamarind grove one morning but was surprised to find it deserted. She wondered if they were all taking a holiday, but dismissed the idea at once as she knew that the children were always on the meadow. So she tried the adjacent hill and was rewarded to see the whole school in full session there.

They were engaged in a new game and had made a ring round the teacher, who was giving the word of command, which was "Bhur-rrr!" (meaning 'fly'). The teacher was to name a bird or a quadruped or any other animal before the word bhurr-rrr, for example, a parrot bhurr-rrr, a cat bhurr-rrr etc. The children were to make the flying action with their hands spread out if the animal named was a bird. If it was a non-flying animal, they were to stand still. As the calls came in quick succession of one another, quickness as well as correct imitation was essential. Suddenly a boy took over the function of the starter and fired off his commands so rapidly that many children were stumped, and the team soon became hilarious at the ensuing confusion. The teacher herself failed several times, owing to her wrong interpretation of the words, as the same word meant one thing in Marathi and a different thing in their dialect. This drew much friendly chaffing and ridicule upon herself.

When the game was at the peak of excitement, a bunch of children from another colony turned up and stood watching from a distance. Wishing to be friendly and hospitable, the teacher approached them with a smile and invited them to join, but they just giggled and scampered, but drew near again, fascinated in spite of themselves. Again the invitation was repeated and again they flew away like a flock of coy birds. With a flash of intuition, the teacher realised what lay at the root of this hesitant attraction. It was in fact the traditional chariness to fraternise with the other clans, even if circumstances forced them to live in close proximity. The teacher met the situation with brilliant diplomacy. She formed a separate team of the new-comers, and played alternately with each group to their great delight.

When the visitors withdrew at the end of the game, the children squatted down round the teacher for their talk. The different tribal colonies and their mutual relations were naturally the main topics. It was discovered that many of our children had relatives residing in the visitors' clan, a maternal uncle or an aunt. Somebody inquired about the distance to that place and somebody, conscious of his newly-acquired knowledge, wanted to have the distance actually measured by foot-steps. Then there was the problem of the direction to follow for reaching the place. The only directions they understood were "rising" meaning East and "setting" meaning West. The teacher introduced the remaining two—North and South. This lesson in geography was concluded by an interesting marching game, which required simultaneous group movements in the direction called out.

The marching game was interrupted towards the end, by Manglya's sensational entry with a dead bird in his hand. To the volley of questions fired at him from all sides, he was pleased to answer briefly and to the point. The gist of the information he conveyed was that the little winged thing was killed for eating, that it would first have to be roasted and that he would share the delicacy with all his school mates. On this, Ramya and a couple of his pals collected dry grass and thrust the bird inside and Vanshya set fire to it. Soon Manglya declared the roasting to be complete and gave a shout, "Come along, let's eat". Never was so brief a call answered with such tremendous enthusiasm.

The teacher seemed for once unprepared for such an emergency and decided to be just a neutral observer. When the girls collected fresh leaves as plates for the feast, she offered them a napkin for wiping the leaves clean and also for the children to clean their hands. By the time the children sat down in a ring, with the leaves in front, Manglya had taken out the meat and served everyone a wee bit, hardly as much as a pea. After saying a hurried grace, they all swallowed their scrap of the wonderful delicacy, and dispersed as happy as if it was a grand picnic.

7

The children were paying a visit to the museum in the primary school. The teacher had vetted their curiosity by mentioning the snake Vanshya had killed and buried in the ground some days ago. Among the exhibits at the museum were a few snakes brought by the primary school children and bottled in formalin.

Other exhibits that interested the little visitors were displayed in two glass-top cases, and consisted of butterflies, moths and grass-hoppers, pinned and spread-out for study. The teacher explained how these were preserved, and how the collection grew up from day to day. The children were also attracted by the several picture books and picture

charts arranged for reference and study. They could not repress their triumph and pleasure whenever they identified any illustration. They were also shown the reports written on the black-board about the observation of the growth of a larva that was found in the garden. They listened enthralled to the life history of the larva, its transformation into a cocoon and the birth of a moth. The account fascinated them like a fairy tale.

The fish pond in the corner, the ant-hill nearby, strange shells, feathers and horns, dry mushrooms, and unusual varieties of grasses, all these excited their curiosity and admiration. They determined on the spot to start collecting for a museum of their own, under the guidance of the teacher.

The experimental garden also proved a great attraction, with the small beds raised by the pupils themselves. Among the crops coming up were wheat, gram, mung, etc. There were germinating tamarind seeds and a child had even planted a stone in order to see if it grows. This led to a hot discussion among the visiting party, about the relative prospects of the stone, the tamarind seed and other objects.

After seeing the museum to their heart's content, the children agreed to turn back, and seeking a shady tree, decided to rest under it for a while. Soon they were clamouring for a story by the teacher who narrated an episode in a trip she had made with the primary school children last year. They were trudging leisurely, covering field after field, and had crossed a hillock or two when the teacher noticed that the group was getting scattered. Soon it was completely lost to view. Intending to overtake them, she quickened her pace and still she saw no sign of her wards. This alarmed her about their safety and she blew several calls on her whistle to check their rambling. Quickening her strides further, she began to call aloud to the children by their names at the pitch of her voice. Just as she was getting really panicky there were loud shouts from all sides, and out dashed the children with shrieks of laughter, from behind the shrubs and hedges where they had been hiding. They had meant this as a playful surprise, but realising how worried she had been for their sake and how much exhausted, they were really sorry and made amends by showering affection upon her in different ways. Some pressed upon her the ripe berries they had hoarded for themselves, some offered her their stout sticks to lean upon. Many of them just gazed upon her with new affection. Ultimately they reached their goal which was known as "Moon Slab". It was in fact a gigantic boulder on a rising and had two torch-like stones stuck in its crevice. Legend said that the torches were lit every night by fairies who worshipped the moon from the beginning of the world.

The children were so thrilled by the mystery of the moon slab as well as by the teacher's adventure just narrated, that they made her promise to make the same trip with them. They even discussed what their packet of food would contain for that day's adventure.

8

We have described some four or five incidents at the meadow school. They presented a new and interesting feature each time. The game of "Bhurr" may be called a "Nature Game", as it requires observation of the prominent habits of common animals and creatures. The children had to decide quickly in their mind whether the one named could fly or not, before imitating it. They had thus to go through a rapid mental process before acting physically, which is a good training to sharpen responses.

The boy taking over from the teacher as a starter of the game was also a significant development. He had evidently understood the process as well as the purpose of the game and showed it by naming animals and birds with accelerating speed and raising the tempo of the excitement. He knew the words for birds and animals in the children's dialect, and therein he had an advantage over the teacher, which he thoroughly enjoyed.

Children everywhere have a sub-conscious grievance against the elders for the latter's patronising attitude and air of perfect wisdom. How often is a child asked 'not to be silly' or 'to wait till it is old enough', and so forth. Children are always being brought up on the assumption of the elders' infallibility. So it becomes a great treat to them to see these great ones tripping. When the teacher misunderstood the word for a bird or animal and gave a wrong imitation, she set all her young-wards laughing! It was a good-humoured laugh no doubt, but it exploded the myth that the elders were never wrong. The teacher of course took her failure in a sporting spirit, and submitted to the penalty of being sent out. Technically she may not have been quite wrong, for the word used by the boy meant one creature in the tribal dialect and another in the teacher's language, according to which she was right. But she very wisely refrained from such quibbling and cheerfully paid the penalty. This endeared her greatly to the children.

The visit of the children from another colony was an event which taught us something of tribal codes and of the hazards of their own nomadic life. The reluctance of the visitors to mix with our children had no doubt its origin in inter-tribal bans which, in their turn, were a relic of the ancient struggle for survival when every stranger was a

potential enemy. Such racial traditions and memories die hard and the incident spotlights our responsibility for dispelling such out-dated suspicions and hostilities. The best places from which to start such efforts are places like the meadow schools.

The picnic of that day revealed what born pagans these children were and how instinctively they fell into primitive life. It was like an echo of their racial past when one or two gallants went after the chase and provided meat for the family. As their descendants, the children showed their capacity to organise and cooperate, and managed the repast without fuss or quarrel. Here again the teacher acted thoughtfully and did not intrude with redundant help or officious advice. Her suggestion to use the napkin was of far more practical value than would have been a sermon on the ethics of 'Ahimsa' or a discourse on the benefits of vegetarianism.

The visit to the primary school museum was somewhat on a didactic plane, but it was far from being boring. It must be noted that all the exhibits were collected by the children themselves during their rambles. Though preserved and displayed under the teacher's guidance, the observation on the growth or changes was made by the children themselves. What fascinated the visiting children most was the transformation of larva in its various phases. Similarly the little experimental garden with its miniature fields, of gram, mung, etc. was of the primary school children's own creation. Here, in our primary school, they are not forced to take up a passive role of learning by heart the facts told by the teacher, but to take an active part in observing minute details and collecting specimens. There are no 'Do Not Touch' notices in this museum. There are no set examinations, the fear of which drives away all the genuine urge to study the mysteries of nature. No wonder these children react so differently from those of other average schools. One has to see for oneself the happy smiles and shining eyes of these little pupils to accept this statement.

In the earlier stages of our attempts to 'educate' the tribal children, we were assailed by frequent doubts as to whether they had any real interest at all in the school subjects. We had a vague feeling that there must be some matters about which they must be naturally curious. We could not accept the apparent conclusion that they were utterly devoid of the urge to know. We thought that, being brought up in the lap of nature, they must be having a desire to know at least about her ways and phenomena. Being farmers' children and living mainly on nature's mercy, how could they be indifferent to the meaning of her favour and of her wrath? It was up to us or up to some event to touch the right spring and awaken that hunger for knowledge.

And that right spring did happen to be touched and it was the visit to the primary school museum that did the trick. At least it set the miracle in motion. It happened this way.

At the primary school museum, the meadow school children were fascinated by the pictures of birds and insects, of trees and flowers, but the writing at the bottom meant nothing to them. On the other hand, the primary school children read and discussed what was written. Neither the meadow school children nor anybody in their colony had seen a printed sheet or even a sign-board. No wonder they could hardly believe that the queer lines and curves below the pictures could actually talk in human tongue! But they did seem to talk so to the primary school children. Evidently, being literate gave them a greater power denied to illiterates like themselves. This hurt them like a whip. No wonder, the next day there was a sudden demand from most of the children for slates and pencils. The advantage of the literate children over them went home in their hearts that morning, as they returned from the museum. They reconciled themselves at last to the tables and charts with big letters and decided to grasp the mystery which they unlocked. They realised that once such a key was secured, a rich new world would be thrown open to them.

Thus the hidden spring was touched and the day for which their teacher was waiting with so much faith and hope had at last dawned!

IV TAKING STOCK

1

We may ponder here a little and take stock of what was achieved.

The average attendance for the period the meadow school was conducted was; Dalvipada 34·1, Ghatalpada 24·9, Vavpada 9·1. At Dalvipada, 23 boys and 10 girls were very regular. Five boys out of them came to our primary school; four of them are now reading in the 4th standard and one in the 3rd standard. At Ghatalpada, 10 boys and 10 girls were very regular. None came to school. At Vavpada, 3 boys and 7 girls were regular. None attended school.

Although the period of experiment of the meadow school was rather short,—being only one year—we can say definitely that meadow schools are absolutely necessary—

- (1) to initiate the children of the Adivasi and other backward areas into studies of school subjects through informal and oral teaching;
- (2) to drive away their fear and prejudices against the school and the school master;
- (3) to enable the teacher to come into closer contact with the children and their parents, to know their likes and dislikes, their aptitudes and skills, their trend of thoughts and inclinations, and to be accepted by the community as a friend and guide; and
- (4) to prepare them to fit in the school atmosphere by introducing them slowly to the language of the educated and that of books and also by helping them to have a grasp of other subjects like mathematics, geography, natural sciences, etc. All this must be done in an informal way by kindling an interest and an urge for knowledge from within.

2

Some Characteristics of the Tribal Children

On account of our coming in close contact with these children, we have come across some very good points in them which must be preserved and developed. They may be enumerated as follows :—

- (1) Self-reliance and healthy and buoyant attitude towards life.
- (2) Facing difficulties without grumbling.

- (3) Accepting adverse circumstances in a sporting spirit and being happy in spite of them.
- (4) Not showing their helplessness or difficulties to others with a view to creating a feeling of pity for themselves.
- (5) Readiness for manual work.
- (6) Sharp senses and quickness and alertness to discern small changes.
- (7) Quickness in their physical movements and in acquiring skills, and also a great enduring capacity against heat, cold and rains.
- (8) Interest in handling machinery and the capacity to grasp the technique in no time.
- (9) Fondness for decorating themselves with flowers and leaves, and skill at painting, dancing and dramatising and a good voice for music.
- (10) Ability to laugh heartily at anything amusing.

There happen to be some weak points also. They may be enumerated as follows:—

- (1) The boys and girls are often found playing card games with money stakes.
- (2) These children, especially the boys, are fond of smoking. Once when a magnifying glass was shown to them, they observed that the sun's rays passing through the glass could burn a piece of paper. They were often found to take the glass away, and the teacher thought that they were observing different objects with it. Later on she learnt that the boys used the magnifying glass to light their home-made bidies!
- (3) Almost all of them have no qualms in stealing fruits from trees. Those, living near railway stations, would even sell at the stations, some of the stolen garden products, chikus, papayas, vegetables and flowers. Their elders encourage them to do so. As a rule, they do not steal money or other things, but they are very quick in taking eatables. As domestic servants, they would take away tea and sugar also. Many of the social workers in these parts feel that they should not be regarded as thieves. It is the state of half-starvation they are continuously in, that prompts them to do so. In other dealings, they are quite honest and reliable.

Tribal Habits of Cleanliness

These people keep their huts and the surrounding open space very neat and clean. Each one has a fencing around the cottage and the whole place looks like a well-planned suburban colony. If water is available, they like to have baths and to put on clean and new clothes. Besides, they are very fond of wearing flowers in their hair and on their ears. The womenfolk look quite smart when they dress themselves to attend marriage ceremonies and festivals, or even when going to adjacent towns. The main difficulty they have to face is dearth of water and dearth of money.

The clothes of the children and adult men and women are very dirty and full of lice. The womenfolk do not know sewing, mending or patching and do not take to it, even if taught. Hence they go on wearing torn rags. They can buy only one set of clothes and so once worn, the clothes are not washed for months.

One very unhygienic habit which is almost a principle with them is not to use latrines. They think it extremely dirty to go to the same place again and again, (and that too a closed place) and think that it is much cleaner to go in the open to answer nature's calls. Besides, they do not use water for cleaning. Washing also is considered by them to be very unclean. It is very difficult—next to impossible—to convince them that their ways are unhygienic and conducive to spread of diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery, worms and other more serious diseases.

They like hair-dressing but do not get the facilities and time; so it is difficult to get rid of hair lice.

These children are used to clean their teeth with green twigs of trees. Their teeth are clean and white.

Subjects Tackled in the Meadow School

The following is the list of subjects tackled in the meadow school :—

- (1) *Physical Fitness*.—(a) Different games that they are used to are kept up and new ones are also introduced.
- (b) Running, walking, tree-climbing, load-carrying, high-jump, broad-jump, etc. Sometimes competitions are held in these activities.
- (c) Drill and Marching.
- (d) Shooting stones with slings.

(e) Fishing.

(f) Excursions.

(2) *Language Development*.—Stories, songs, nursery rhymes, talks, picture talks and dramatising.

(3) *Nature Study*.—Collecting specimens and studying vegetable, animal and insect life and other natural phenomena; rearing fish and preserving specimens in formalin and by other methods.

(4) *Mathematics and Other Subjects*.—Counting, measuring, clock-reading, and using mathematical instruments such as a foot-rule, T-square, set-squares etc. Introduction to scientific apparatus like a magnifying glass and a binocular; geographical talks.

Subjects on Which Daily Talks Were Conducted

(1) Names of the parts of the human body, such as eye-lashes, eyebrows, etc; right and left hands, eyes, ears, etc.

(2) Cleanliness with actual washing, combing, nail-cutting.

(3) Different diseases—their spread and prevention.

(4) Their clothes—names, care, cleaning, buttoning and tying laces.

(5) Dress to be worn for festivals and ceremonies, etc.

(6) Migratory birds, animals, birds and insects as helpers to farming and as destroyers of garden fruits and grains, earth-worms, moths, locusts, serpents and other insects, fish, etc. Grasses and other vegetable growth. Tree planting and other natural phenomena.

(7) Their social life, festivals, neighbours and neighbourly behaviour, relations, their work at home, helping their parents.

(8) Good manners and polite behaviour. Helping each other, taking leave, etc.

V

THE BHONAR SCHOOL—ANOTHER EXPERIMENT

One day at the close of the rainy season, there were no children to be found on the meadow and we had to think of another plan. Close to where we lived, there was a big colony called Bhonar, where the children neither went to school nor worked in factories. They only went out to the nearby hills in the morning to collect dry wood and dung and idled away the rest of the day. Here then was a fine opportunity to shift our meadow school operations to Bhonar, with its tamarind groves and open spaces. Around the trunk of a giant tamarind tree was a mud platform which the teacher decided to appropriate as her seat and her shelf. Here the elder boys and girls brought with them their little brothers and sisters, to relieve their busy mothers at home. The teacher entered the names of the new pupils, and also of the infants that came as their charges, in her roll and marked their daily attendance.

After teaching them to sing the prayer together, the teacher conducted them to the open ground and encouraged them to play games. The boys drew lines for 'Atya-patya' with their feet and were engrossed in the game. They had refused to let the girls join them. But in the next round, the teacher offered herself as a player and was welcomed. She also managed to persuade the boys to allow a few of the more grown-up girls to join. Thus did the Bhonar meadow school play its first mixed game. The girls acquitted themselves quite well and everybody enjoyed the play.

Then they retired to the shade of the tamarind tree and the teacher talked to them about themselves, the infants in their care and the mixed game. She also proposed to bring a measuring tape the next day to mark the lines of the play-field accurately.

After this came their toilet. As the nearest well was quarter of a mile away, they had to use water very sparingly and had to be content with wiping their faces and limbs with a piece of wet cloth. Lastly everyone did his or her hair with a separate comb and was ready to learn the alphabet with the help of slates, pencils and charts. This regular equipment or lesson was not allowed to mar the general informality of the meadow idea.

The new slates and pencils were wonderful objects to the children. Everyone picked them up and tried their use. Some could only scribble, while others tried to copy the bold letters on the black-board. Some wrote numbers and some drew pictures. They were at it for about half an hour, and being unused to concentration, would get up and roam about a little every now and then, and return to work again.

When they seemed to have had enough of this kind of reading and writing, the teacher suggested to some of them to count the trees in the nearest clump. This relieved the monotony and soon everyone was engaged in this new game. Having counted enough trees, some of them thought of counting their own fingers and toes, and each others' eyes and ears, and later their interest shifted to other parts of the body and they learnt words like eye-brows, eye-lashes, elbows, shoulders, wrists, etc. which were all new to them.

In the middle of this talk there happened a small mishap. Damya, one of the boys, began to bleed through the nose. The sight of blood and of their afflicted companion frightened them all. "Ghost! Ghost!" went round the cry. The teacher promptly rendered first aid and tried to calm the terrified children. The bleeding was checked and Damya sat up, though still somewhat dazed.

The teacher realised that more harmful than the bleeding itself was the superstition about ghosts associated with it, and felt it her duty to remove such ignorance. Several children reported fantastic and confused stories about evil spirits which they had heard with implicit faith. Most of them admitted that they had never seen a phantom themselves, though some asserted that they had. The teacher tried conscientiously to present the rational side of this complex problem. But it did not surprise us that her audience was sceptical and clung to their fear. In this failure, she stands in good company with the reformers of all ages.

In the Bhonar colony, the tamarind grove provided a spacious playground. On the following day, the teacher brought a surveyor's tape to mark the "Atya-Patya" field. The children were eager to help. Two of them handled the tape and a third one chalked the lines. The teacher fixed the correct measurements, lengthwise and across and made sure of the right angles with the help of the T-square. The children observed with interest and helped with the chalk. The working of the spring tape itself was great fun and each child had his or her share of the new toy. Then they had a good game of 'Atya-patya.' Thus an hour was over before they realised it. When they gathered round the tamarind platform before dispersing, the teacher was satisfied that the children had enjoyed the project, but if she expected them to marvel at the scientific accuracy of the new field and extol its superiority over their old

rough and ready arrangement, she was disappointed. One of the elderly boys, in fact, said that the chalk lines were a waste of labour and were made because the teacher could not see the lines marked by them. Later on, when they learn to play the games correctly, they will of course, realise the importance of exact markings.

On another day, after the routine toilet, the children began their slate work. They were provided with new foot-rules for drawing straight lines to guide their letters. They wrote numbers or letters or words, but would again take up the foot-rule and try to measure sizes and distances with them. Suspecting their need for active movements, the teacher suggested some more objects for measuring. Ultimately they began measuring distances between trees, between trees and cottages and so forth. They announced the great discovery that Manglya's cottage was "Two twenties and three feet" from the tamarind platform. The teacher taught them how to measure in tens instead of in twenties, and to write the result on the slate. Thus, Manglya's cottage would be 4 tens and 3 feet, or as demonstrated by her on the black-board, 43 feet. These mathematical calculations were quite like a game to the more grown-up children who went on all over the place, plying their foot-rules like budding surveyors.

The children are no longer required to tend cattle, once the fields are harvested. This only drives them to seek other work to supplement their parents' meagre earnings. They gather faggot and fire-wood. They collect wild berries to sell to the town people and find dried leaves to thatch their own huts. They scour the jungle for dry dung and droppings, for thorns and brambles, for anything that can be burnt as fuel or used as manure for the next crop. Attending school from 11 to 5 is a luxury which they cannot afford. Their meal is scanty enough, but to provide even that is too much for the parents, unless the children themselves contribute towards it by hours of labour.

When we study their life habits for the whole year, we realise that these children have no time to spare for school. If they withdraw from their community routine for hours at a stretch, the life economy of that community is vitally upset and the community is faced with great economic problems.

Moreover, apart from contributing a little towards their own livelihood, their present activities are the best training for the strenuous life that lies in store for them. At present they acquire physical stamina, alertness, a sense of responsibility and self-reliance, without which they will fail miserably in their struggle for existence. They have to roam about in the sun, rain and cold for hours together. They have to carry loads for long distances. Carrying out these tasks, they acquire hardihood so essential for their future life.

We are, therefore, forced to admit that their parents are justified in not pressing them to attend school. Now that we have come into closer contact with these people, and have won their confidence to some extent, they frankly express these doubts and difficulties to us. It must be admitted that the average school of the present day does not fit into their way of life. On the contrary it harms their interest. If the nation wants to educate these children, it must first provide for their food and clothing. Then only can there be compulsory education in the backward areas. And even when this is provided, the school curriculum will have to be suitably modified, so that the children do not get soft by sitting in the classrooms for hours together. It will have to be seen that they retain the physical hardihood and alertness which they acquire through open-air life and household responsibilities.

There is one more important point which we have not considered so far. What are the prospects for these children when they complete schooling? What will they do next? Those who have learnt a bit of reading and writing can rarely have an occasion to use this accomplishment, and soon manage to forget it. The knowledge and the art they are supposed to have acquired are thus soon effaced from their minds.

There are the exceptional cases of those who are able to get jobs, but these too fare poorly in the long run. If they become teachers or policemen or forest guards, they fail to reach the selection grade, because of competition by candidates from the more advanced classes. Thus they get stuck at the bottom of the services. The elders among the tribal people and even the youths are sharp enough to notice the tragedy. They prefer to keep to their cottages and farms where they are masters of their own. They have seen through the glamour of service and of city-life, and have had the shrewdness to see the ultimate advantages of their life of labour and pastoral surroundings.

The whole question of educating the backward classes, of finding employment for them and of preserving the stability of their social life has to be tackled with great care, foresight and deep understanding. This much is certain that the conventional type of the present-day school is totally inadequate to solve the problem. A new type of institution will have to be devised that will harmonise with the basic needs and ways of their life, and would still open a brighter world before them.

What we are carrying on at present in the Bhonar tamarind grove is not exactly a meadow school, but something along its lines. Being located in their own colony, and not having to look after the cattle, the children attend it regularly and without interruption. We meet in the open in the tamarind grove, but have introduced the use of slates, pencils and black-board. The children seem to pick up reading and

writing fairly well. Though an attempt is made here to introduce something like formal teaching, care is exercised to avoid rigidity and compulsion. Neither do we lay emphasis on the three R's. In these respects it is different from the conventional schools. Similarly, it is free from the shackles of time-tables and the tyranny of syllabus which imposes a deadline. Above all, it is free from the bugbear of examinations with their accompanying evils of drilling and mugging.

We can imagine a time when these children will want to appear at an examination in certain subjects and will learn certain things by heart of their own accord. But we feel that, at this stage, the most vital thing is to nurse their spontaneous interest in the mysteries of nature and to help them to master that which stimulates their curiosity.

Thus it will be seen that the Bhonar School is working on the same principles as the meadow school. The only difference is that of environment.

The tenacity with which these children cling to superstitious beliefs has been referred to earlier. The primitive man worshipped manifestations of nature. Those that furthered his well-being were gods and those that obstructed it were demons. These supernatural powers are also feared. Such beliefs are not confined to primitive man or tribal groups alone. There are many others who see ghosts in the rustling of leaves and read omens in the movements of cats. The use of talismans and charms or propitiation of deities for averting evil is practised by many who are counted among the educated and civilised.

The use of the measuring tape and of equipment like T-square and setsquares has lured the children into the province of mathematics. As noticed before, the teacher taught them to count in tens without difficulty, and they can be easily familiarised with large numbers like 100 or 1,000. Madam Montessori's apparatus of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division is very simple. If properly manipulated, it gives a clear idea of these four processes. Further progress will be easy on this foundation.

On parting from the lovely setting of the meadow, the headmistress felt that conducting a school in other surroundings would be a dry and uninteresting task. But the new open-air school in the tamarind grove soon belied her misgiving. Since the method followed here was the same as before, the results too were equally encouraging. She found no difficulty in holding the interest of the children.

VI FURTHER PROGRESS

1

The children are on a visit to the Vikaswadi farm today. Work is going on there in full swing. An engine pump is set up near the well and as the water gushes forth, it is led into proper channels and is regulated by the farmer. Our children like to help in their interesting process. There, for instance, is Damya, guiding the stream into flowerbeds. Vanshi is trying to divert it to her favourite rosebush. The children find this work very fascinating.

Let us see what the teacher is doing at the other end. She has branched the little stream in two directions, and has joined the branches again, thus creating a small island in the middle. The children tried to do likewise by dumping mud in the middle of the channel and producing islands of different sizes and shapes. Using this play as an aid to the study of geography, the teacher spoke of the big islands and continents that make the world. By scooping some mud from one of her islands, and filling the depression with water, she demonstrated a lake. As some of the children had actually seen ponds and had plucked lotuses growing in them, there was a general clamour for a trip to a real lotus-lake and to a real island.

Now they have started sweeping the dry leaves on the ground, removing stones lying as obstacles here and there, weeding the grass and channelising the water towards the flowering trees. Soon the garden looks neater and fresher owing to this service.

In the meantime, the teacher has gathered a variety of flowers for decoration, and sitting in the shade of a tree, she asked the children to identify as many varieties as they could. They were familiar with most of them, but the names they gave were naturally from their own dialect.

The teacher then tried to draw their attention to the different parts of a flower held in her hand. It was an elementary lesson in botany and simple words were used for the parts and an idea was given of the function of each. Soon the children picked the flowers for themselves and were engrossed in identifying their anatomy. The grasses confused them a bit, as no flowers could be detected on them.

The teacher then took out a magnifying glass from her bag and did quite a minor miracle. It was a revelation to the children to see minute things enlarged to giant sizes as if by magic. Soon they were trying this fairy's wand on all sorts of things: skin, hair, cloth, insects,

to say nothing of various flowers. The teacher gave them a rough idea of the principle of refraction of light and of the part played by the lenses. The function of spectacles used by aged people and others with weak eyesight, was easier to follow after this.

Among the objects on which they tried the magnifying glass was a garden snail that happened to be trailing along. Its shell and its antennae proved very interesting to watch, being new features. In addition, there was the astonishing trick of the snail to retreat into the cavity of its shell at the slightest touch from the outside world. The slowness of its pace was another wonder.

That day they had planned a picnic in the garden, and the children divided the work among themselves. Some put up three stones for 'chula' (a fire-place) and others gathered dry wood and lighted the fire. As the main dish was to be boiled gram, some cleaned it and washed it ready for the *dekchi*, which was soon set to simmer on the 'chula'. Some kept an eye on the fire and tested the cooking, leaving their game for a while for that purpose. When the 'Chana' (gram) was finally ready and the children had washed their hands, leaves were laid as plates and the delicacy was served and heartily relished. The smiling eyes and happy faces of the children bore testimony to the joy they derived from that day's programme carried out by their own initiative and labour.

2

A few weeks later, the headmistress conducted a distinguished guest round the open-air school. The children felt very elated and important on the occasion, as they were dressed in scout uniforms and were to form a sort of guard of honour and give a salute. As part of the drill, they enjoyed beating the drum lustily and marching in smart formation.

There was also an exhibition of their drawings which were hung by strings around tree-trunks. Some of the pictures were quite creditable. There were sketches of cottages and bullocks, and of trees and kites in the sky. Some had drawn lines and curves which were supposed to represent hills and farms.

The guests, who stayed hardly for ten minutes, asked a few simple questions to the children, who answered briefly and boldly. When the visitors departed, the children gave vent to their excitement and curiosity. They asked who the guests were, where they came from and sought information on many similar points. They noticed the guest's car and

wondered at its working. This led to their recalling their own journeys in tongas, bullock-carts, motor buses and railway trains. Then they talked about boats and steamers and also about aeroplanes which they used to see daily flying high over their heads, but had never entered.

This talk about vehicles led the teacher to suggest a new game. The teacher was to be the general and the children were to be the soldiers. When she ordered them to march to some place, they were to ask "how?". The general would then name a vehicle, and the children had to move in a rough imitation of it. If she said "bullock-cart", two children became yoked bullocks and the third became a cartman, and away they went lumbering happily like the familiar quadrupeds, while the cartman shouted and gesticulated and cracked an imaginary whip in the air. When they were asked to go on foot, they all marched in a single file. When the order was "train", one became the engine and the rest became the carriages. The engine driver would whistle now and then, and everybody would move his arms horizontally like pistons and make the familiar 'zuk-zuk' sound. If it was to be a motor car, the chief feature was the "honk" of the horn. The game proved enjoyable as well as instructive, as it was based on enacting the outstanding characteristics of the conveyance named. Sketches were attempted on slates and black-board of the vehicles they had seen, and the teacher wrote the names on the black-board and also showed the relevant illustrations.

What was promised at first as a "Guest Day", ended as a "Vehicle Day"!

3

Since our school had shifted to the grove in the colony, the children had not to run after the cattle, nor was there a brook or a meadow which had formed the main feature of our school in the previous experiment. The new arrangement was taking on something of the form of a conventional school.

Reviewing the trip to the farm and the garden described in a previous article, we notice the new turns the teacher gave to her instruction for utilising the new environment. Channelising water to irrigate a desired plot, weeding grass, or picking out dry leaves, was nothing to these children. What was new was to do this as a team, under the direction of the teacher and according to a given assignment. They enjoyed the new experience. Making isles and lakes with the help of the flowing water gave the teacher a fine opportunity to explain physical geography.

Similarly, the flowers in the garden led the teacher to introduce the elements of botany. Her magnifying glass proved to be a very useful and attractive scientific instrument to the children, which urged them

to investigate many things about the flowers. After admiring the colours, shapes and fragrance of the flowers, they learnt something about the vital parts of the flowers, their seeds and their birth. This was the result of the teacher being alert to lead the young minds effortlessly on the tide of their natural curiosity, to new knowledge. The teacher did well to coin simpler words for difficult scientific terms. She mixed freely with the children and created an atmosphere of a pleasure trip rather than of a forced lesson. The difficult scientific terms could be better learnt later when they go deeper into the subject.

There is a difference between the city children and those with whom we are dealing here in the matter of assimilating new words. The city children constantly hear good many words that are difficult to pronounce, and they take pleasure in repeating them even without grasping their meaning. The tribal children, on the other hand, are at a great disadvantage. Their dialect has very few words and their elders talk little. Thus they have hardly any opportunity to articulate new and difficult words and much less to enrich their vocabulary.

The method adopted by our teacher in introducing science is worthy of adoption by our primary training colleges, because most of the teachers under training have to run schools in rural backward areas some time or other.

Our children had picked up marching, quickly and without much effort. They made good progress and could perform the "snail" march later, in imitation of a snail they had first watched in the garden.

Scouting too has been introduced in this school. The children roam about in the jungle either for pleasure or for work, and are very agile in their movements. Their senses of hearing and sight are keen. They take to the wood craft of the scouts as a duck takes to water. Scouting will help them to acquire physical fitness and proficiency in several activities. It will also develop in the lads a sense of duty, of responsibility and of patriotism. It will inculcate civic sense, moral sense and a love of social service. They looked quite smart and self-confident that day, in their new scout uniforms. As hardly anyone from among them is likely to go in for higher studies, their curriculum must include only such subjects as will equip them for their normal future. Purely academic subjects should have very little place, and that too as optional subjects in their training, while *physical culture and scout-craft will stand them in good stead throughout life.*

An important element in basic education is the technique of correlation. A very good illustration of this was given by our teacher after the distinguished guests had left, the other day. In chatting about them, the teacher drew attention to the car that had brought them. Then

she asked the children about different vehicles they had themselves driven in, till then. She wrote down the names of these as the children recalled them, and encouraged them to draw pictures of the same. Thus she developed the topic of transport with great tact, utilising the occasion and the mood of the children.

We feel, on the whole, that the type of school we are evolving through our experience so far, stands a good chance of suiting the tribal children's temperament and needs, moulded as they are by their peculiar environment. Now we can venture to say today that we have found what we were looking for, the new type of school benefitting the tribal, or we may say the backward areas.

VII

SOME BROAD CONCLUSIONS

We have described the activities of the new type of school we are trying to develop. We have also evaluated them from the educational point of view.

This, we know, is not the last word. It is only the beginning of the new type which is our ideal. Though our activities have been very fruitful, they must be regarded chiefly as sign-posts leading to our goal.

We have written at length about all we do in the meadow school because that was our main activity built on frequent experimental orientation. But it is, after all, only one aspect of the Vikaswadi Project, pointing the lines along which a school for backward area should be run. We must, however, introduce two or three innovations to improve this scheme further.

In the first place, we must contrive to make attendance at our open air meadow school economically possible for these children. They play a vital part in the economic structure of their home, which we have so far left untouched, while offering them the facilities of our school. But we have found that this state of things will not last long or take us far. It is vitally necessary to have a workshop which will develop the children's natural aptitudes and skills, and bring them at the same time, some money, badly needed to supplement their family income. In addition, this will gain them admission, later, to some productive cottage industry, so essential as a subsidiary occupation for an agrarian class.

To achieve this object, we have at present tried two types of occupation. One is a class in lacquer work leading to carpentry conducted by the Director of Cottage Industries, Maharashtra State. The other is a small workshop for turning out straw covers as packings for bottles, so much in demand by pharmaceutical factories.

Of these, we find the first one better suited in many ways and offering more educational advantages. It is, however, yet to be seen how far the lacquer work and carpentry scheme will be able to stand on its own legs and what difficulties it may have to face when State aid is withdrawn.

The other work, that of grass covers, has the advantage of bringing in ready cash, if sufficient orders are secured. With proper organisation and personal canvassing, this can yield substantial profits, enough to cover payment to the juvenile workers and the other overhead expenses.

Its main drawback, however, is that it neither teaches skill nor scientific knowledge. It is more or less a mechanical job, but may have to be adopted, as it gives employment to large numbers of very young children. This industry should, in our opinion, be reserved as a monopoly of such schools, particularly in paddy-growing regions.

Besides these two types, we have also tried some less other petty industries, like collecting leaves and stitching leafdishes (known as 'Pattal' in Hindi) and gathering seeds during certain seasons. But these had to be ruled out because, apart from their being purely mechanical, they take many hours of the day, leaving no time or energy for the children to do school work.

As to agricultural work and spinning on Ambar Charkha, we have not yet been able to give a sufficient trial. The difficulty regarding agricultural work is that the children do not get regular employment in all the seasons. The work also lacks the benefit of manipulative skill. Yet we recognise that those who become experts in agriculture can earn good wages and that the occupation can be instructive and can add to their knowledge. The direct connection of agriculture with food and physical sustenance and with Mother Nature are its special attractions to the Adivasi children.

Regarding the Ambar Charkha, we do not find it suitable for children in its present form. We find the ordinary charkha very unremunerative, bringing hardly two annas per head per day.

It is only fair to state that there may be other occupations suitable for school-going children of the scheduled areas. But we cannot assess their value, not having given them a fair trial.

An urgent reform needed in these schools for the tribal areas is to lower the stress on the three R's and to introduce workshops throughout. It has been found that the tribal children run eagerly to the nearest workshop, where they can earn five to six annas per day. The children as well as their parents fail to see why the former should waste time in scribbling on slates instead of earning good wages. Apart from wages, the children have a genuine attraction for manual work and an inborn distaste for reading and writing. It is a pleasure to them to use their hands and master new skills. In doing this they do not feel bored, and do not run away from their task as they do from the school. Our experience is that they get attached to whatever work with hands is introduced—whether charkha, carpentry or grass-covers.

There is even a stronger argument in favour of putting these children to work at an early age. It is the experience of all craftsmen like potters, shoe-makers, black-smiths etc.; that their children are able to master the hereditary craft better if they begin it early. The neighbouring craftsmen have often told us that, as their children went to school,

they were unable to take to their craft later. Also from the point of view of developing intelligence the skilful use of hands is very essential. In the case of people in the backward areas intelligence comes very little into play when they carry on purely mechanical toil, like carrying loads, pushing carts or digging pits. On the other hand, those who do carding, spinning or carpentry, have to call the brain into active functioning every moment to guide their fingers and help other co-ordinations. The mental development of the child, as well as the physical, is thus helped if a school is turned downright into a workshop.

When there are 40 or 50 children in the school, attracted by the craft class, the teacher can introduce suitable activities of the community life, such as sweeping the school, bathing, common prayer and meal, team games, etc. All the main features of basic education can thus be easily introduced.

The difference between the present day basic schools with basic crafts, and the type of school we are advocating is that in the basic school the craft is there only as a medium of education and not as a means of earning. The economic problem of the tribal children is thus not touched. The school we are developing will, on the other hand, use the craft to tackle this need also and help the children to earn a little—five annas or so per day towards their own up-keep while they learn. At the same time, they will get the benefits of correlation of the knowledge they gain with the crafts throughout their life.

Our views on the introduction of mid-day meals for school children may also be stated here. No one questions the truth that starved and half-starved children cannot be taught. It is cruel to try filling their heads when their stomachs are empty. The motive behind the idea of providing free meals to them is of course laudable. Donations for this purpose, in cash or kind, from philanthropic persons and associations and from corporations and states, do credit to our social conscience. And yet we feel it is better to enable the children to earn their meals rather than have it as charity. If a proper sense of self-respect is fostered at this age, it will help in raising an upright community whose value to the nation at large cannot be over-rated.

Thus, if we want the Adivasi children to take advantage of a primary school, we have to provide them with some light job which will bring them a little money towards their own maintenance. Another necessity is the provision of a Balwadi and a Creche, attached to the primary school. The creche will relieve the children, especially the girls, of even five and six years of age, from the duty of minding their younger brothers and sisters who are left in their charge, when the elders leave home for their wage-earning.

As mentioned before, we had started this innovation in our Vikaswadi Project, and had expected it to solve all difficulties. This did not happen and we still had to contend with several difficulties. Yet this arrangement did prove beneficial in many ways. For instance, when the boys and girls brought their infant brothers and sisters to the Balwadi, they were able to watch how we handled children and how we looked after the babies in the creche. Gradually we took their help in these activities, thus giving them valuable training to take care of the little ones at home in future. Our attempt was to coach the girls in the primary stages of mother-craft in addition to making them literate. We hoped to coach them further if they stayed with us for some years. Unfortunately, they could stay for a year or so, till they attained the age of 10 or 11 years. Their economic circumstances forced them early to seek domestic or farm work, even though they were eager to learn further about tending babies. This would have been possible if we had taken them in our own school establishment, which we could not afford, especially as the problem would not end with the first batch. We were very sorry to lose the girls year after year.

We strongly feel that such girls should be paid stipends for being trained in mother-craft, literacy and general knowledge. There is a great need for such trained personnel. The girls could even be trained as simple Balwadi attendants, so badly required in rural welfare work. Boys working in cottage industries classes do receive such monetary support. There seems no reason why similar help should not be made available to girls also, for such training as we have indicated.

We have already dwelt upon the spirit of discipline, smartness, concentration and team-work which the children acquire in the Balwadi, as their limbs pick up better co-ordination and alertness. They rapidly acquire a fuller vocabulary and are not shy to speak, though their elders at home know few words and rarely converse. Even from the creche age, this stimulating and unfolding influence begins to work. From creche to Balwadi, and from Balwadi to primary school, these are the natural steps.

We have noticed the marked difference that exists between the children promoted to the first standard from our Balwadi, and those who are admitted directly from the village, without initiation in the intellectual or craft activities or manual skill. We have, therefore, come to the conclusion that to make the rural primary education effective, we must not neglect the pre-primary stage. Children under 6 too must get opportunities of unfoldment that are provided in a Balwadi, through open-air activities and happy association with the teacher.

A new branch of our programme is the addition of a night shift for those primary school age boys who go out on full-time jobs during the day. Children above 10 are usually employed in this way and get half the adult wage. Since the whole of their day is given to this labour, their attending school on a whole-time basis is out of question. To save these young children from illiteracy and ignorance, we opened these night classes as extension of our primary school. Thus we have about 20 children studying from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. and being trained in standards 1 to 4. They appear for annual examinations, along with the day-school pupils.

To surmount the risk of walking back home from night school, we encouraged the children to sleep in the school house. They had had their supper before coming to the class, and we provided only the night lodging. Not having much room in their cottages the parents welcomed this arrangement. Thus the boys came under the healthy influence of an informal hostel and learnt casually something of right behaviour and discipline from sympathetic teachers, who, on holidays and festivals, kept them engaged in games, sports and cultural entertainments. All these advantages were available to the boys, without adding to the economic burden of their parents.

The practice of employing children for full-time jobs needs to be examined seriously and from several points. The law forbids the employment of children under 14 as labourers. The idea behind this prohibition is to save children from letting their physical and mental development being arrested by the hardships of labour.

Our view is rather different. This seems rather a daring assertion to make. The legislation was first initiated in the West, with the backing of medical evidence and was considered as a triumph for the champions of child welfare and other humanitarians. While admitting that such harm does result in the case of child labour in mines and factories, we have found that other employments, particularly those in the domestic sphere, do not produce such evil effects. On the contrary, the children concerned seem to make good progress, both in body and mind. They get two meals regularly, acquire a sense of responsibility and reach a status of an earning member in the family, in spite of their tender age. In our opinion, before coming to a positive conclusion on this question, careful and elaborate research will have to be made, regarding children enjoying a longer carefree childhood and those who begin to shoulder responsibilities from an early age. For the present at least, our view is not to upset the family economy of these people by preventing their children from taking a hand in the maintenance of the household and from acquiring thereby a toughness through working for some hours at this pliant age.

As the national plans for economic development materialise in the tribal areas, the pattern of the Adivasi life is bound to be revolutionised. But till that happens, it would be better, in our view, to legalise some type of child employment that prevails widely anyhow through connivance of the law. No doubt there should be some checks or supervision. The best way would be to provide work and payment through school workshops. The school can even act as an agency to provide the child workers to farms and to flower, fruit or vegetable gardens. In short, a way must be found to let the children reap all the benefits of work, without being harmed by too much strain or remaining away from schools.

To sum up, we feel that schools conducted on the lines of our Meadow School, with a creche, Balwadi and workshop attached and a night shift opened where necessary, will best suit the peculiar needs of backward areas.