

Founding and Working
with a
Learning Centre for Women

Introduction

Having worked with Dr. Jean Houston and Peggy Rubin, of the Foundation for Mind Research, in the late 1980s I was clear that the mind is an open system. Thus, I was keen on having our children exposed to an open system of learning that respected the child.

Our children studied at Mirambika in New Delhi. This learning center was run by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The child was the center of the program. Teachers were encouraged to help children raise questions and discover answers to their questions. The architecture of the learning space was created to support this approach.

Mirambika had a teacher training program that was aligned to their approach to teaching and learning. I witnessed young men and women, mostly from rural areas of India, become skilled in mindsets, thought patterns and skills in encouraging any child to learn. This initially inspired me to dream of having a teacher training program where aspiring teachers would be skilled in methods that respected the child's heart and mind.

Initial Probes

Over the years, as our children were growing up, I hired young women to help with cleaning our home and cooking our meals. I attempted to give these women wider exposure. One such woman was encouraged to finish her class ten studies. A teacher from my neighborhood was enlisted to help her with her studies. After two days with the tutor, the girl's alcoholic father confronted her and told her to stop studying as it was of no use. All she would be doing in life would be to have babies, cook and clean. She stopped her studies right there and right then. Her brother was encouraged to go to the same tutor and was allowed to study and finish his program of studies.

Another lady who worked in the same capacity would attend Karate classes with me. She went on to finish her studies and became certified as a nurse. She got married but to a man who physically abused her. Many years after she had stopped working with us, she turned up at our doorstep with her 1 year old asking for shelter and protection from her husband. Yet, after taking this step, she went back to her husband. The challenge of walking away was far too difficult for her.

These situations troubled me. I witnessed young women's lives being trodden over by parents and husbands. Young women are unaware of their potential.

Study of Eckhart Tolle

In early 2006, I started reading Eckhart Tolle's book **Building the New Earth**. Tolle describes quite clearly the many faces of the ego, describes the pain body and provides simple ways of breaking free. When one lives out of the understanding that Eckhart recommends, one discovers quite easily one's life goal. At the very end of this book Tolle talks about the three modalities of awakened doing. These are acceptance, enjoyment and enthusiasm. Suddenly you know what your outer purpose is. You become clear about what you wish to do. Things then fall into place. So, I say, "I wandered into the choice of creating the Aditi Learning Centre Foundation."

The intent is to reach out to women to be educated to more fully address the situations of their lives through education and awareness. The foundation for this is awakened consciousness.

Purchasing Land and Aditi Learning Centre

During this time, as a form of investment, our family bought 11 acres of land 45 kilo meters from our home in Pune. This then became the space for Aditi Learning Center.

The program started on April 1, 2009, by renting 2 rooms in Khusgaon village and another shed in Naigaon village. The first building came up in 4 months with three classrooms. The students of the two centres were brought to this one space.

Students are responsible for their travel costs. All other costs for this program have been borne by our family. In addition, we have received short term funding from two families that we have known over the years.

This program is designed to give women the skills to participate shoulder to shoulder with men in addressing problems within the family and in the community. We have about thirty-five to forty learners every year. The age range is wide. The youngest is about ten and the oldest is about thirty-five. Most are between the ages of thirteen to eighteen years of age. We allow any girl/woman who wishes to learn to participate in the program

Their needs are also quite varied. Some have been to school for eight years but are unfamiliar with basic reading, writing and mathematics. A few have been successful in the schooling system and are hungry to finish their studies and find a way out of the predetermined patterns of an arranged marriage. A few are married and seek to complete the unfinished business of their lives. They are clear that the roles they play at home as a mother and wife do not fulfil their life's aspirations.

While basic instruction is around the curriculum that is required by the government, we are different. We expose learners to resources and experiences that widen their learning skills. The most common educational pattern in India is to learn things by rote and not understand the data. Thus, when you ask a learner "So your science textbook says that we evolved from monkeys, is that true?" "Ah, not really!" is the usual response.

At the Aditi Center, we try to fill in the blanks. We present documentary videos on the birth of the universe, on evolution, on what happens in the body when a woman has a period. We encourage our women to understand their bodies. We encourage discussions. We encourage and require every learner to participate in dance and drama. We encourage people to read, to write, and to learn skills such as mind mapping. We have outside guests interact with our learners. Occasionally, we have specialists visit with the students on subjects as diverse as Marathi Grammar and on the building of dams.

The center has an open space culture. We do not take attendance, we have no bells to mark time, students are free to wear what they wish. We expect them to take responsibility for their learning. They are encouraged to raise questions in the classroom or outside. We have classrooms with tables and chairs, textbooks, stationary, play spaces, play material, some lab equipment and a library.

Examination Results of 2020

The results of this year, April 2020, generally reflect our results every year. Three women who were married and had young children between the ages of five and twelve years joined our program in August of 2019. By March of 2020 they were ready to take the examinations set by the state government of Maharashtra

Gauri found out about the center from a student who had discontinued her studies as the economic situation of her home required her to work. Gauri was breaking an established pattern at her home of what was expected from her. She lived in a joint family situation. There was reluctance to permit her participation in the program. She had to appeal to her grandmother who lived with her parents to persuade her husband's family to allow her to study. Her intent was to complete her Class Ten examinations. She had failed in three subjects at the time of her wedding. After being in the program for 8 months she appeared for the State government examinations in March of 2020. Her scores published in July 2020 are Marathi 68, Mathematics 60 and Social Science 57. She shed tears of joy when she spoke to her parents about her results. When I spoke to her, she had not disclosed the news to her parents-in-law. She plans to complete Class Twelve examinations which would prepare her to enter a degree course.

Vaishali is a neighbor of Gauri's. She came because she wanted to discover the depth and breadth of who she is. Her daily routine was to start household work at four in the morning and finish at eleven pm. Her primary responsibility was to cook and feed all the members of her joint family (her parents-in-law, her husband's two brothers and their families). In the beginning no one other than her husband knew she was spending time at the center. When visitors to the centre asked her why she had returned to studying she would weep and not say anything. It was difficult for her to even articulate what was happening in her life. She just scrapped through in English with 35 percent. She scored 54 percent in Mathematics which she thought was her greater challenge. In the future, Vaishali plans to work with her husband who

is a businessman and help with the accounts. Right now, she seeks to complete her Class Twelve standard examination and then follow it up with a degree in Commerce.

Tai is a third woman. The subjects she needed to complete were English and Mathematics. Again, within a period of eight months she appeared for the public examination set by the government. She scored 53 percent in English and 47 percent in Mathematics. These are not great scores, but they give her the opportunity to take the larger stride to complete her Class Twelve examination and play a larger role in the community. Tai has been elected to serve as a member of the village governing body. My hope is that she returns to study with us and can begin to exert her role on the village governing body such that she is empowered to bring about evolutionary change in the lives of the people in her community.

For these three women there seemed to be a deep desire is to amplify their role and participation in life. This completion of Class Ten is an intermediate step.

We also had six young women appear for Class Twelve examinations this year. They are all in the fifteen to nineteen age range. All have passed. 35 percent is the passing score. The aggregate of highest scorers was: Trupti with 71 percent and Nilima with 67 percent. Trupti studied at the center for only seven months. Nilima had been a regular student for two academic years. Both women were open to learning and eagerly absorbed the new learning tools offered to them. They are eager to continue their studies. With the pandemic raging across the world all patterns are on hold.

Teaching Staff and Administration

Our teachers are extraordinary people. Our longest serving teachers are Lahu Ghogaje who teaches Mathematics and Science and Milind Khandare who teaches English and History. Nandini Bhosale teaches Economics and Marathi. All hold degrees in teaching. Namrata Khandare, who does not have a degree in teaching, teaches a variety of subjects and is primarily responsible for assisting students with basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics.

This year we hope to hire Poonam Chopde, a student from our very first batch who finished her Class Ten and Class Twelve with Aditi Learning Centre. She has since then completed her bachelor's and master's degrees in Commerce as a student who is not in a regular University program but studies on her own with the assistance of local tutors.

There are no roles at the Center other than a teacher-learner and learner-teacher. The librarian, Karuna Rokhade, is the only one who has a personal desk and personal space. Teachers have cupboards to store materials they need. Each member on the staff has responsibilities. We have regular meetings to plan, review and /or sort out problems.

I am there on every workday. I arrive before the classes start at 11:30 am and leave around 2:00 pm. Classes end at 3:30 pm

My role is probably best described as head of the program. I attempt to ensure everything is working well...toilets are clean, classes are ready and set. I interact with whoever is present - students and staff. We have a short assembly in the morning. I have taken responsibility for encouraging a dialogue on a quotation that one of the learners puts up on the board. I assist teachers in learning new skills of both learning and teaching. Our teachers and I interact with parents and government representatives. All the modules that are not a part of the curriculum are created and conducted by a team. I provide leadership in designing the module. We use a large number of documentary videos. If there are issues (theft, attendance, difficulties with parents) I help find a solution with the teacher most closely involved with the student.

Nayan Kulkarni has been a close associate and an adviser from the very initial stages. Students and staff interact with her regularly as a sounding board on issues and concerns that need to be addressed with sensitivity. She has catalyzed the creation of a group of well-wishers from Pune who regularly interact with the learners.

Things that give us great delight ...

- When a learner creates a play or writes a poem.
- When an average student is able to make good grades and is able to change her self-image.
- When learners start using dictionaries.
- When our two male teachers learnt embroidery with our learners.
- After a module on composting, it thrilled me no end to see some use composting in their homes.
- Learners who have started kitchen gardens.
- When learners read books that are not directly related to studies.
- When they dance their hearts out.
- When friendship is created beyond religious and caste boundaries.
- When teachers acquire a new skill and use it within the learning space.

In Conclusion

On September 14, 2020, a 19-year-old village girl from a lower caste was allegedly raped by four upper caste men. These men, in the age range of nineteen to mid-twenties, lived in the same village in Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh. The girl's tongue had been slashed and her spine broken in two places, leaving her four limbs paralyzed. She died in a hospital in New Delhi on September 29. The police cremated the body without consent from the family at 2:30 am. There are many levels to this tragedy, including the cover up strategies by the police and the state government. This happened almost a month ago and my body and mind are still numb.

I ponder: Is there any connection between the rape in Hathras district and the woman who was told not to study? Are our unexamined, preconditioned perceptions as a society of an individual woman or of women in general at the root of these issues?