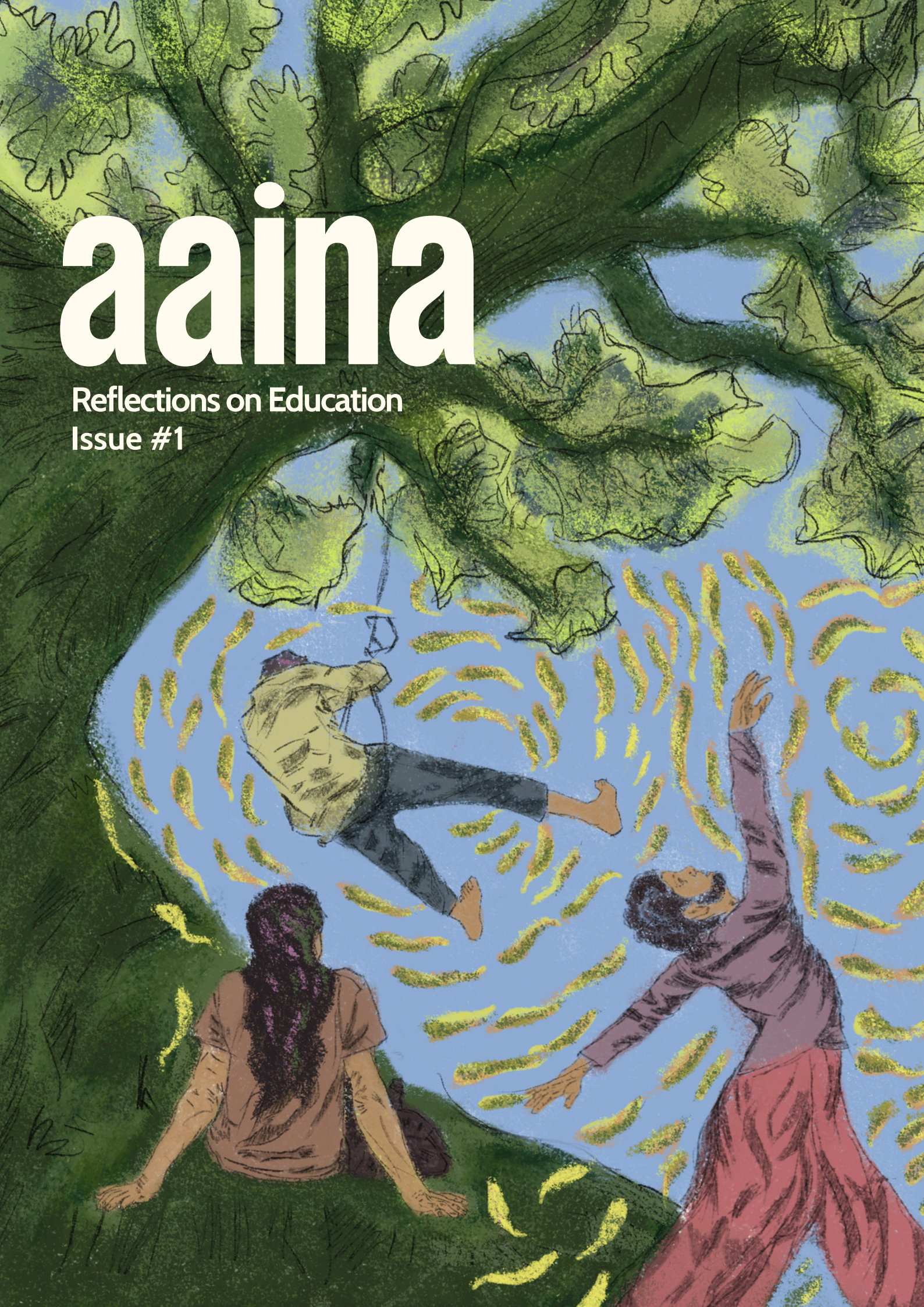


aaina

Reflections on Education
Issue #1



AAINA ISSUE #1, AUGUST 2026

Aaina is an initiative to help encourage critical reflection on educational experience among students, educators, and anyone engaged with the question of education.

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EDITORS' NOTE

What can pausing at a moment—in the classroom, in corridors and hostel rooms, in staffrooms and admin offices—reveal about education? What are some cracks and openings in the everyday lives of students, teachers, staff, that call for thoughtful, sustained attention? What patterns can we notice, gather, describe, and analyse from stories in education?

For a few years now, Aaina has taken as its premise these questions, to generate critical inquiry into educational experience and structures, and to imagine alternatives to the norms and powers that be. We have created visual stories, comics, and podcasts, and conducted workshops with teachers and students, situating these questions in different experiences, contexts, and problems. A large part of our engagement has been with questions around inequality—to identify, document, and call out the ways in which inequality plays out in education, in both micro-spaces and macro-structures. We have tried to do this work in an accessible manner, avoiding jargon but retaining complexity and nuance.

We are delighted to announce a new platform—the Aaina magazine—to carry forward this work. Our focus remains the same—expressions that hold reflective, detail-oriented, and evocative storytelling at its heart, and that raise fundamental questions around educational experience. We believe the form of the magazine allows us to invite many perspectives and voices, and diverse forms of expression too, ranging from personal essays, poetry, interviews, and fiction, among others. We envision this publication as a site of dialogue, play, imagination, and reflection, and as a hopeful yearning for equal, just, liberatory futures.

In our first issue, our aim has been to platform reflective deliberations and conversations around questions of learning, power, ability, hope, embodiment, identity, relationships, and knowledge. Taken together, the pieces share a few common desires—the desire to unsettle dominant assumptions about learning and learners, the desire to reimagine the spaces and practices of learning, and the desire for dialogic, processual inquiry over neat, rushed resolutions. Very importantly, the pieces, while penned by individual authors, are all shaped through dialogue, within community spaces of learning, being, and doing.

We hope you enjoy reading the pieces. We invite you to critically dialogue with them, with ideas that may provoke and comfort, that you may wish to corroborate or refute.

As this magazine begins its journey, we feel held by the support of many friends and comrades, and we wish to take this space to share our heartfelt gratitude with them. To Chanchal, for the moving, thoughtful illustrations. Also, to Teesta, for the initial set of illustrations created for our social media pages, some of which we have reproduced here. To Fizza, for the sparkly, vibrant layout. To all our authors and collaborators for the first issue—Sabeena, Srikanth, Ragini, Tanushree, Vivek, Arjun, Isha, Harshit. To the rest of the Aaina team—Sruthi, Viral, Sakshi. And to numerous educational movements, practitioners, teachers, students, and workers—thank you for continuing to dream and strive for liberatory possibilities in education.

Nidhi, Sayan, Vrinda

ILLUSTRATOR'S NOTE

Education, for me, is a practice of reflection, joy, acceptance and care. It is much more than textbooks and conventional methods of teaching and learning. It is a practice that includes many distinct experiences, and ways of knowing and learning. It is a practice of questioning and transforming existing inequalities in education, and building solidarity and agency through collective dialogue.

Working with Aaina has given me a safe space which I keep coming back to. Working on our magazine I learned some things about education and life from our team members, the authors of the pieces, the experiences and voices in these pieces. As I read through the writings, poetry, illustrations, and dialogues, I sat with questions and voices that they raised. I paused and reflected on experiences and conversations, on what is being seen and heard, and how I perceive them.

I continue to sit with many questions. Whose education is considered as education? How do power relations determine and shape education? Is it possible to imagine forms of education that nurture solidarity, hope, community, and agency? Can we create safe spaces for ourselves? Is there a possibility for collective dialogue, inclusion, and trust among ourselves? And how can we transform existing education systems that continue to reproduce existing power structures and hierarchies?

These are some of the questions I continue to reflect on. Each artwork became an attempt to think through these questions, along with the writings—to hold their emotions, tensions, and possibilities through visual form.

Chanchal

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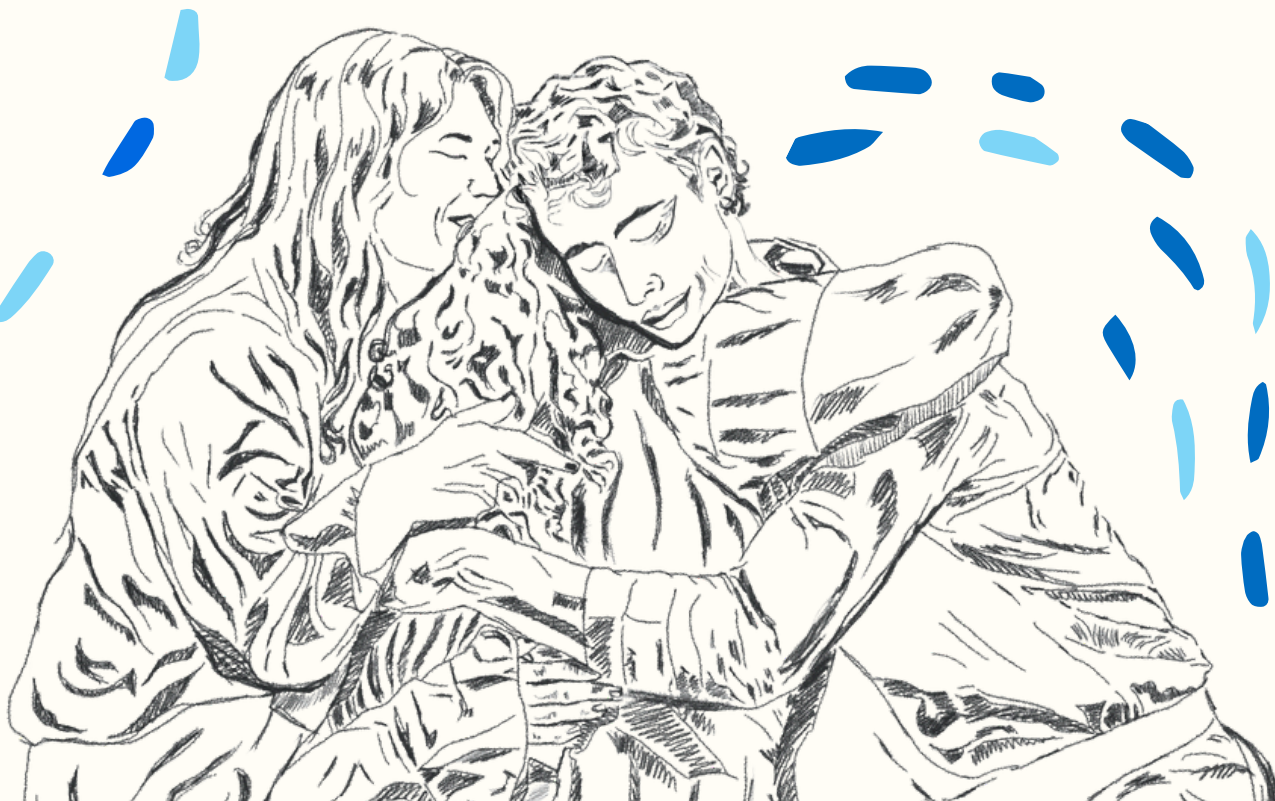
*Illustration
by Teesta*

{Ragini has been working in schools for the past few years and loves exploring ideas using music, children's literature, and writing with her students. Presently she is pursuing a PhD from Ambedkar University Delhi.}

HOPE IN THE CLASSROOM

What may we hope for? Or why hope in the first place? These are questions I often find myself thinking about as a teacher. The pervasive hopelessness of the historical moment we find ourselves in—surviving in an unpredictable world that is terribly violent, divisive, and caught in crises of compounding natures—makes the question of cultivating hope more urgent. Hope itself is a site of struggle in our current moment. In the past few years, I have been part of teaching-learning spaces where students and teachers are collectively involved in analysing and learning to question the nature and history of oppression, structures and cultures of power. In doing so, I have struggled with and wondered—how do we move past the grief, denial, rage, discomfort, resentment or guilt that examining injustices brings up? Is it possible to imagine that our condition might be improved, that the world as we live in it and know it, is not here to stay the same forever?

I have been working as a teacher with Adivasi and Vimukta children and youth in an alternative school in a city for the past few years. The school's work is laced with the recognition that teaching is a political and transformative act, and in the everyday practices of the school, one finds a deep commitment towards centering and enacting critical, meaningful and community-owned educational ideals and aims. Many of the members of the classrooms are working children earning through various informal skills and labours, living in bastis (informal urban settlements) and among the first generation to negotiate with formal schooling systems within their communities. Sometime back, while discussing with some of my former students about their plans after Class XII, I was taken aback when one of them resignedly said, "But even if we go to college, what good will come of it. We won't understand anything there."



Many others, too, echoed a deep-seated sense of hopelessness and confusion regarding what the future could hold. Despite the complex and resilient ways in which the members of this group often sharply asserted their space within their social worlds and became part of various movements for a more just and equitable world, the struggle to find signs of a future for themselves within the present troubled me for many weeks after. I wondered, how is it that critically analysing, recognising and explaining injustice is working towards affirming fatalism rather than inspiring hope? How is it that possibilities of greater freedom and learning for oneself are being seen as far-flung or 'unrealistic'?

I began to realise that paying closer attention to the emotions associated with our beliefs and values as they play out in critical efforts in education is crucial; it's not enough to focus on cognition, rationality and reason. As teachers part of such learning communities, we must ask: How do we develop affective, embodied, relational practices through which we are moved to act upon the world, to believe in liberatory possibilities for oneself and others? It also became clear to me that as a Savarna teacher working with communities on the margins of various intersections, I need to listen closely to the varied meanings hope holds for us, as we live and learn together.

Hopefulness is often talked about in parallel with grit and perseverance, especially for children and youth from historically marginalized and minoritized communities. For instance, by highlighting the determination of individual exceptions who made 'no excuses' and 'pulled themselves up by their bootstraps' despite barriers and thus 'achieved' something. While celebrated as examples to learn from and emulate, these stories work to maintain the status quo by hiding structural and systemic exploitation and suppressing questions of equity and structural redressal. Such hopefulness is similar to the metaphor of 'rose-tinted glasses'—one that projects equality in terms of equal expectation rather than equal facilitation. It overlooks any need to critique the present social and political arrangements.

It is furthered by false narratives of equal opportunity erasing the political and historical exclusions which make such equality unfeasible, through rhetorics such as '*acche din aayenge*' or '*yes, we can*'. On the contrary, critical hope would have us recognize that we live within systems of inequality and requires us to think about how to work towards a collective and better future. The restlessness, the discomfort, the pain and longing this inevitably brings up are fundamental parts of the journey to continue to search for alternative and collective futures.

**Never think that your life
and your voice *was* alone,
we stand *with* you, for you
and *we* will fight and end
this discrimination.**

”



I distinctly remember one day in February 2023, when we were reading and discussing the news in our Class XII classroom as a group, as was our morning routine. In our class, many of us were deeply troubled by the death of Darshan [a first-generation Dalit student of IIT Bombay who died by suicide after facing humiliation and discrimination from his batchmates]. Too many of the students in this classroom have lost family members and close friends to suicides and untimely deaths, and have seen up close the debilitating pain that makes one feel that this is the only way out. Darshan, though a stranger to us, felt like one of our own who had made it to a 'big' college, and yet couldn't live out his dream. Raja*, an 18-year-old member of this class, journalled a letter afterwards in his mother tongue, Pardhi, and he titled it, '*If I could, what I would tell Darshan*'. An excerpt of his letter (in translation) is as follows:

Dear Darshan,

... I wish you had known that if you feel alone, stressed and anxious, then you have to find your friends and tell them everything...If only you would have fought for yourself a little bit more, we all would have become your voice and stood with you. Never think that your life and your voice was alone, we stand with you, for you and we will fight and end this discrimination.

When Raja shared this letter with all of us in the classroom, it ostensibly didn't change anything concrete within the material world, but it opened a small door for all of us to sit with grief and anger together. It also reaffirmed a sense of mutuality and responsibility towards each other, that our individual actions have consequences beyond our own life, and hope becomes possible sometimes. Not for me, as an individual, but rather for us—in community. In my own practice, I often find that hope is cultivated within spaces (however small) aiming to imagine alternatives, and moving beyond mere critique to re-envision and re-script new pathways.

Sometimes, it is in nurturing an emotional willingness to exist in ambiguity and uncertainty as we inquire into our own lives and actions, which might bring us pain and discomfort. I glimpsed this when one of my students, Maya* (aged 24) decided to write a small letter to her past self, after fulfilling a long-held dream of appearing for Class 12 exams. She chose to address it to the point of time in her life when she had discontinued schooling after Class 8 for a few years.

Hello dear Maya,

Do you know I have given Class 10 exams and even Class 12 exams. And I have passed Class 10th exams. The studies that I always kept running away from, Maya, today the same studies are giving me courage, love, identity and existence. Many personal changes have also happened till today and the journey is still ongoing.



Several critical, feminist pedagogues have written about how any thinking around hope also needs recognition of its limits. Hope alone will not transform the world, but to do without hope, or to assume that our struggles for a just, democratic and compassionate world could be sustained through calculated acts alone, is also an illusion. In the past, I have often asked fellow-teachers and community-leaders how they think about building hope into their practice and within the communities they work in. I realise after years of shadowing such teachers that there are no easy or quick answers to these questions, but their actions and presence in the spaces of their work often reveals something to me. I find such visionary teachers persistently standing with and dreaming for their people and communities, for worlds that are yet to be created.

Such teachers assume roles of being public intellectuals and social activists, who see the ambit of education as extending beyond school spaces or academic content areas. They become mediators with state functionaries, assisting communities in navigating the police, legal systems and government bureaucracies, and to stand for the rights guaranteed to all by the Constitution. They become 'co-conspirators' who reflect on their own educational journeys and networks of privilege and resources in relation to the issues their students and their communities face, and also key figures who are able to work with insight to connect everyday life within classrooms to what's happening in the community, city, state, nation and in the wider precincts of democracy.

The 'work' of such teachers is rooted in mutuality, humility and accountability, and the foundation for any such outward-facing work rests on necessary and continuous internal reflection on one's own educational journeys and entanglements with networks of power and privilege. It also necessarily involves the task of acknowledging the shadows of hope—the hardening of despair and disappointment when things seem to get worse instead of better, or when we come together but nothing happens as a result of our efforts. Such teaching in the service of nurturing critical hope reminds us that the act of struggling for justice, freedom and fraternity are already worth living for, whether it results in agreeable or dismal outcomes.

Critical hope can make it possible for us to sit with loss and destruction, restlessness and longing, rather than be convinced by the inertness of despair. I find that Raymond Williams, a cultural theorist and key figure of the New Left, put it well when he wrote, "the more qualified outlines of practicable futures cannot begin to flow until we have faced, at the necessary depth, the divisions and contradictions which now inhibit them." As teachers and students, our everyday in the classroom entails facing these 'divisions and contradictions' and cultivating critical hope in a pedagogic and curricular sense might enable our classrooms to become sites of collectively moving through, with, and beyond despair.

**Names have been changed to protect the identity of the students*

{Tanushree Sarkar likes to read, write, make friends with cats (okay, also dogs) and tiny humans, and try her hands at different ways of making art. She teaches at the University of Missouri. Vivek Vellanki likes to look at photographs, make photographs, and think about how photographs shape our understanding of the world and each other. He teaches at Indiana University, Bloomington.}

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU'RE SMART?



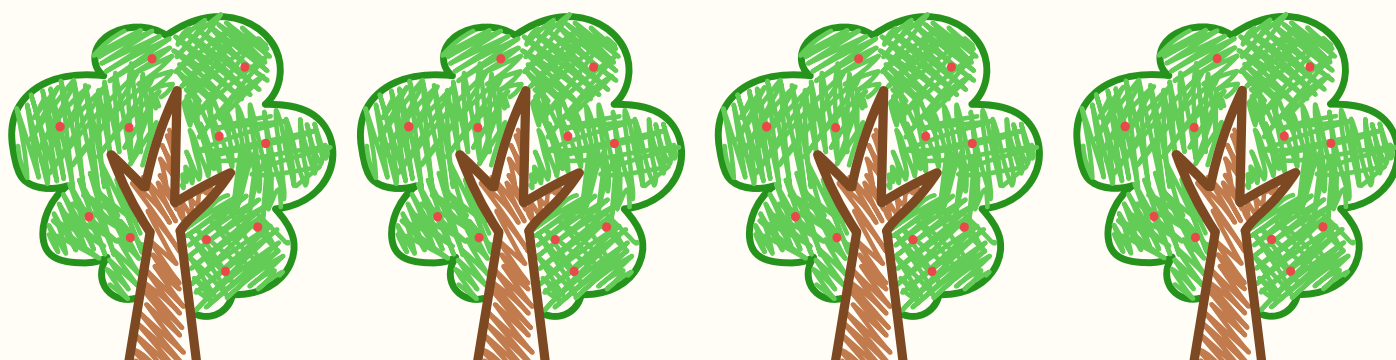
lessons from children's drawings

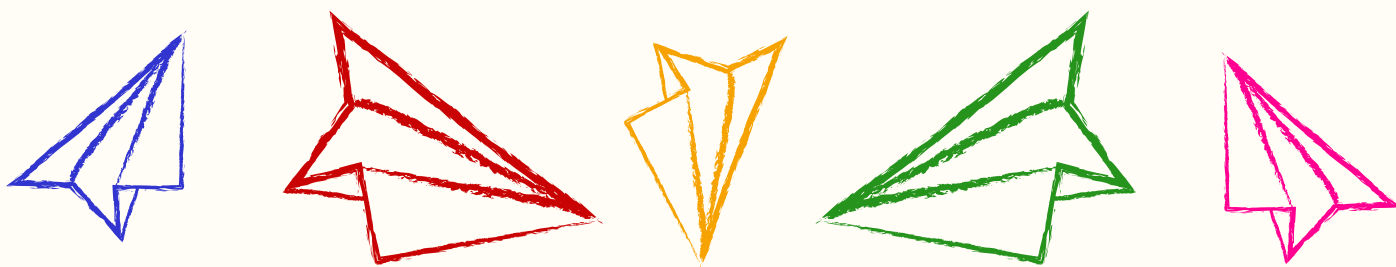
How do children think about their own abilities? How do they learn whether they are smart or ordinary? According to children, what makes someone intelligent? My (Tanushree) interest in these questions comes from a curiosity about children's understandings of the social world and from a theoretical debate within developmental social psychology. There is a tension in the field about how to conceptualize children's notions of intelligence. Put another way, this is a tension about how adults conceptualize children and children's relationship to society.

One set of scholars believes that children's ideas about intelligence are about development. That is, as children grow older, their ideas about intelligence evolve to become more sophisticated and closer to those of adults. In this view, children are always adults-in-the-making. A second set of scholars is interested in how beliefs about intelligence affect academic performance. This is what is popularised as growth mindset theory—the idea that children (and adults) who believe that intelligence is malleable are more resilient and more likely to have better academic performance than those who believe intelligence is a fixed trait. In this school of thought, adult interventions can put children on the path to success, and children are largely passive recipients of the adult world.

My academic training was split between these two theoretical camps. As I spent more time interviewing children, I realized that they are not simply future adults or passive receptacles for adult ideas. Instead, they actively construct, resist, shape, and reshape the adult world. I found another set of scholars who believe that children have their own cultures, beliefs, and ideas that are worth engaging with for what they are. In 2015, as part of a broader project, I asked 107 seventh-grade students across two private schools in New Delhi, India, to share their ideas of intelligence through drawings. I had them divide a piece of paper in half. On one side, they drew an intelligent student and on the other, an ordinary student. I then asked them to write about their drawings.

Given my training, my initial interest in these drawings was to count: how many children drew particular hairstyles, spectacles, clothing, or location? What was the gender distribution and difference in the drawings? I did the calculations, compared the means, and computed the statistical tests, but something was missing. There was something that children were trying to show me that I wasn't ready to look at. It took me almost a decade to see what it was. This is when I invited Vivek to look at these drawings with me.





When Tanushree and I (Vivek) started looking closely at the children's drawings, we noticed some recurring themes. The children were drawing distinctions between the smart child and the ordinary child using gestures and objects. There was a nod to how one spent their time, whether one was being productive or not. We noticed how hairstyles, clothes, and food showed up as markers of intelligence. The children's drawings made us reflect on our own schooling experiences. We saw ourselves making paper planes in the classroom, studying while our friends were playing, or dreaming of ice cream and video games while inside the classroom.

We thought back to instances when we were labelled as the smart child or the ordinary child. We wondered how we came to adopt these labels. What started as a curiosity about children's worlds led us back to our own childhoods. The drawings were not simply portrayals of what the children thought about the idea of smartness. They were more like mirrors, a reflection on how notions of intelligence are constructed and reproduced within our schools and society. Through our conversations, we realized that the labels and experiences from our time in school continue to linger, haunt, and mark our lives as adults.

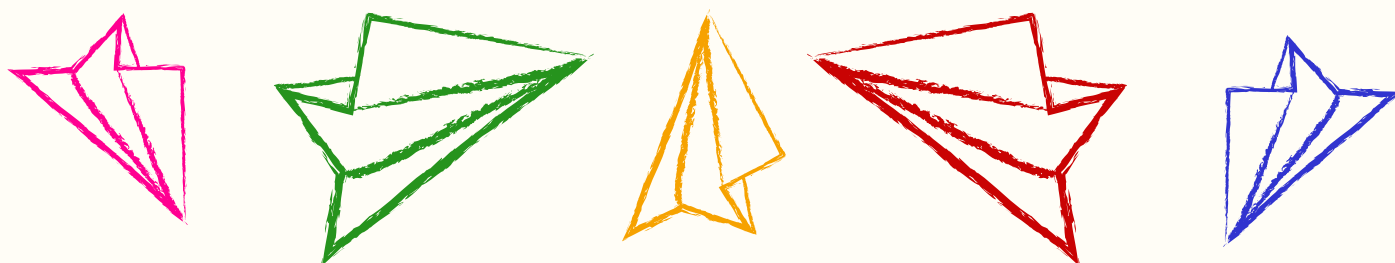
We decided to interview other adults and to listen to their stories about intelligence. We reached out to teachers, students, and artists. We asked them to reflect on their ideas of intelligence from when they were 12 years old, the same age as the students who made the drawings. Our conversations led us to some soft and vulnerable spaces.

First, smartness was a category that was conferred on you by an authority figure. Our adult participants shared that the first time they thought of themselves as smart or ordinary as a child was because an adult (most often a teacher) labelled them as such. Second, the label of smartness/ordinariness continues to haunt and linger in people's lives. The label would resurface when hanging out with friends and family, comparing grades. Sometimes, in the middle of completing a task, the memory would surface unexpectedly.

What would begin as nostalgia often resurfaced the same apprehensions they experienced as middle-schoolers: Did I get good grades? Am I smart enough? Do others think I am intelligent? Third, smartness was seen as a rare commodity. It was not about having certain qualities, dispositions, or abilities. It was relational. If some people are smart, then other people *have* to be ordinary.

We realized that we need spaces for adults to reflect on their ideas about intelligence and society. Perhaps this might be a way to interrupt how we reproduce these labels in our everyday lives, in our conversations with young people around us. We created a book, *a little notebook on smartness**, that brings together the children's drawings, our reflections, and activities created by the adults we interviewed. We hope that this book offers space for reflection and dialogue on this topic.

**This book is forthcoming from Eklavya Foundation.*



As part of this reflection, we invite you to participate in the drawing task.

Take your drawing, find a friend, and make them draw too. As you look at your drawings, share stories about school, how you developed a sense of what intelligence is, and how you think these ideas shaped your experiences. Here are a few questions we asked the adults we interviewed to get you started:

1. Think about yourself at age 12. Did you think of yourself as a “smart” or an “ordinary” student? What made you think of yourself in this way?

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2. What, if at all, did other people say or do to make you feel “smart” or “ordinary”? Can you share some examples?

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3. What, if at all, did you say or do to feel “smart” or “ordinary”? Can you share some examples?

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4. Has there been a change in whether you see yourself as smart or ordinary over the years? If anything has changed, what/who do you attribute this change in perspective to?

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5. If you could meet your twelve-year-old self now, what would you tell them about the concept of intelligence/smartness?

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{Nidhi Kinhal is a New Delhi-based researcher and social sector professional. Her work is at the intersection of gender, education and adolescence. She is also deeply interested in what the process of learning can teach us about ourselves, our histories and the world.}

STAYING IN THE WATER



In my adult life, learning has been about building a practice. Not as a mounting pressure to be perfectly something—which I often felt growing up—but as participating in a process of returning to something and enjoying it. Three years ago, I enrolled in swimming, and last year, I started classes in Hindustani music to sing, wondering, will I stick around this time? Will I learn something?

I have discovered a strange and strong affinity between swimming and singing. When I sit down to sing, I begin with long, sustained notes, working my way across the scale to warm up. Sometimes, for a second, I see myself in the swimming pool, pushing off the shallower end when I let my voice go, and looking at the other end of the pool as I breathe my voice out. I am somewhere in the water now. I feel drawn to share what the water around me feels like in this moment. Even if I use all the wrong and clumsy words, I want to investigate how learning is changing me.

In the water, it becomes amply clear all the ways in which I do not help myself. I crouch, clench muscles and make my feet heavy. Sureshot way to sink. Learning has meant figuring out how to help myself. To be in the water without rushing to reach the distant wall. To do counterintuitive things that challenge the panicky brain. To become light, long, slow, and buoyant so I can move through the blue and bubbling water confidently, as it grows deeper under me.

It is challenging to learn the language of the body. Accustomed to academic social science classrooms, I had been experiencing learning as cerebral and conscious. But now, my intuition had to be affected, not just understanding. Repetition became a way to be alert to my body—the new neural pathways and muscle memory it opened up. As I practised, my back muscles felt fragile; I was constantly interrupted by burps, my breath tripped up.

When my body leads the way, I feel new kinds of confusion and clarity. When I sing, for instance, I am visited by *deja vu*, out-of-body experiences, illusory sensations, not trusting what I have sung, losing my mind-body coordination... But also, succeeding at little things I could not do yesterday. I practise today, and the very next day, my body feels more confident. At the same time, being guided by less conscious parts of me is scary. The smallest bits of improvisation or immersion in a song cause me to clam up. The moment to start singing keeps slipping away. I hold my thighs tight and my notes tighter, never really relaxing into what I have learned. If I have to exert myself to sing 'right', did I really learn anything? Once again, I forget to stay light, to stay in the water, to allow myself to do counterintuitive things.

When I had first tried to learn swimming, in school, the coach would line us up and insist that we jump in. No matter how much I saw other people do it unhurt and told myself to let go, I could not. I would stand at the edge, imagining how I could jump in the next three seconds, contemplating its easy straightforward steps, but never being able to do it. Unsurprisingly, I didn't learn a thing in that summer camp.

When you freeze in a space you are supposed to stay open and moving, how do you help yourself? Usually, you need someone else—teachers, friends—to offer practical and analytical training wheels, to listen, to insist, to reflect with you, to explain how they do it, to interrupt your default ways, to create safe frames in which to try, or to let you panic and escape till you feel ready to try again.

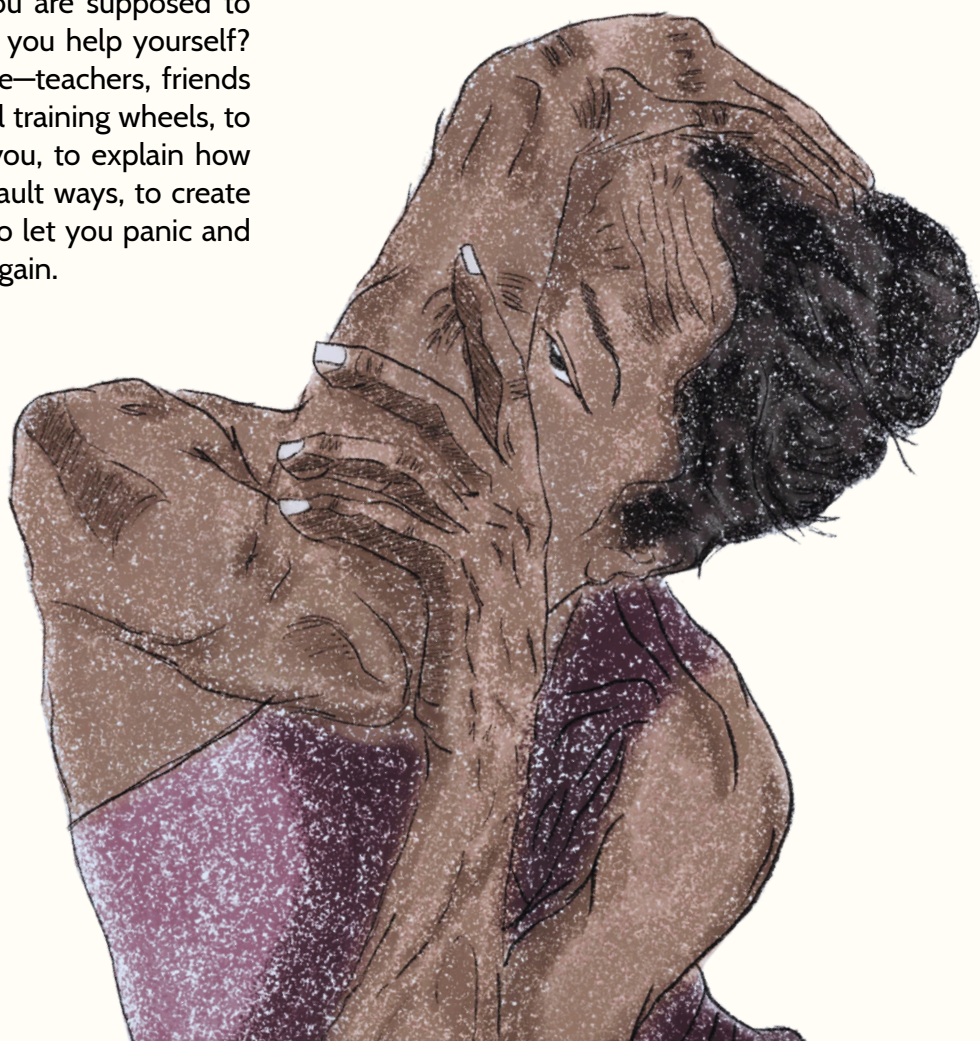
Last summer, my friend taught me how to float on my back. Till I went swimming with her, I thought of it like an exercise regimen. You go, you swim lap after lap till your time is up. But she saw it like play. She paused for long durations, just jumping in and out of the water, turning herself into a cannonball, wiping her face after coming back up. The thought of dropping my back into the water was alarming. I worried about not being able to see the water or worse, having the water crawl up my face and into my mouth and nose. I'll hold you, here, she said, let's try this, as I quietly screamed. By the end of the hour, we had figured out a way.

This kind of teaching and learning environment is not familiar to me. In the classrooms I have been in, participation has been about presentation, not practice. You do the work, and then you present in class. Most of the struggling happens outside of the classroom. The performance has to be seamless and beautiful and already worked out.

But in the water I am sometimes flailing—there is no way to work it out outside the water. Applying the same principle, letting myself sound glitchy is the only way out of a musical difficulty. I need to see the classroom as a space where we find ways for the learning to sink into intuition.



I need to see the classroom as a space where we find ways for the learning to sink into intuition.



Moments of freezing are revealing something important about my journey with learning. What fails in that moment that causes me to quit trying? Am I missing certain skills that are required? Or does it interrupt the performance of power, effortless competence and superiority that my caste-enabled cultural capital has afforded me and required me to keep up?

Growing up, I witnessed the culture of impressing an authority figure in music learning. In classical music circles I had seen, they were often old, traditional, male brahmin teachers who had led generations of students. Their staunch evaluation of a student's performance would decide their worth, and their relationship with singing. The anxiety in the room was always palpable: I learned that singing meant worrying and proving. And listening to other people as if they had something to prove.

When I sang in school, I worried, tried to impress my peers, noticed my flaws or was made to notice them. I got compliments but I was stressed about keeping them. Singing was like an *Indian Idol*-esque display of individual skill, which had led me to conclude that I was incurably mediocre. My voice was never enough. It had to be closely measured and policed, filtering out the beautiful parts from the ugly.

It is no coincidence that teaching-learning systems that draw on brahminical values and traditions breed a joyless culture—one that makes students feel incompetent or superior, one that insists on pure ways of performing, or excludes them entirely from participating in it.

But I want to float and glide in my voice. In the absence of easily accessible radical pedagogies or alternative musical traditions to be guided by, are there ways to engage with diverse musical forms, including 'classical' music, and make them feel joyous, free and expansive?

Practice needs to be guided by values that disrupt sharp distinctions between ugly, pretty, skilled, unskilled, deserving, undeserving, talented, untalented, good music, bad music, good bodies, bad bodies. Returning to singing and swimming have taught me many things. The importance of being in the water, that is, constantly keeping yourself interested and trying. The indispensability of critical and reflective learning. The necessity of creative practice to life.

It's telling that only some of us are able to access the tiniest pockets of time and space to learn safely and vulnerably, reframe ourselves, and find new pleasures. Structured by hierarchies of class, caste, gender, disability and location, access to semi- or non-institutionalised settings, disposable income and free time is impossible for most people.

For those of us who have experienced transformative learning and leisure, there is work to do. Not only in demanding that such experiences become possible for everyone at all ages, but also in making classrooms and educational institutions that allow everybody to freeze, struggle, be messy, and practise together. To figure out how best to reject unequal histories and reframe social values of various practices—in singing, swimming, formal academic disciplines or anything else. What practices of teaching, learning, listening, speaking, fighting, dismantling, creating can make this happen?



{**Sayan Chaudhuri** and **Gulgoth Srikanth** were part of the same classroom, as teacher and student respectively, at the Young India Fellowship, Ashoka University. Both are interested in critical pedagogy and social justice in higher education.}



POWER IN THE CLASSROOM;

a dialogue between
Sayan & **Srikanth**

Sayan: Hi Srikanth! We've both been in the same classroom, but in different capacities...as teacher and student. And of course, we carry other identities and experiences too. For this conversation, I thought we could explore how we experience and understand power in the classroom. Let's start with a definitional question: What is power in the classroom?

Srikanth: I think power is a combination of things. In higher education, especially in liberal arts universities where I've studied, it shows up in everything: how you speak, what you say, what references you carry. If you speak sophisticated English, or cite the right people, you carry power. You also assert it through the capital you've gathered over time...through your class context, schooling, and so on.

Srikanth: Power can also be understood through contradictions we experience. You can say everyone has the power and agency to speak in the classroom, but still they feel they can't...we see how power is working in that contradiction.

Sayan: Yeah. Talking about contradictions...you know as a teacher, I'm aware that even before class begins, there's a setup: I'm standing, students are sitting. There's distance...and an assumption that I control the space; there's power being granted by the students. But I also constantly feel like I'm losing control of students' attention. Still, since I hold structural power, I can make demands. Students often can't make those demands on me. So power functions through that asymmetry.

But also...I see the classroom as a constant negotiation of power. And you know it's strange...as a teacher it's like I have to exercise power to redistribute it. I'm trying to decenter my own authority, to create dialogue, to invite students who don't speak confidently, to make sure those with more power listen more and take up less space. So there's this double move—using power to disturb its own logic.

Srikanth: I got reminded of something when you talked about being granted power. You know I've felt in these elite liberal arts universities, the institution grants certain faculty enormous prestige based on their academic credentials...they're treated like celebrities almost...I feel that can make students more passive. It's like this person has read so much, written so much, so whatever they say must be right. The question is who gets this power granted to them, and from where?

Sayan: Yeah, and the contradiction is that these spaces may encourage you to call professors by their first name, speak informally with them, express yourself more openly and casually. But does that informality mean students hold more power? Also can all students access that informality? Which brings me to what I want to hear from you. As a student, how did you actually feel power being negotiated in these spaces?

Srikanth: Hmm...when I first joined my master's program, it felt bodily. I just felt it before I could even articulate it. Classroom participation was expected in a certain form...and I didn't have that performance. So rather than questioning the structure, I questioned myself. Why can't I speak the way others do? What's wrong with me?

**“The question is:
who gets this power granted
to them, and from where?”**



*Illustration
by Teesta*

Fortunately, most of my teachers in my master's program believed in democratic learning. They didn't make us feel like participation had a fixed shape, and that helped. But with peers, it was harder. The classroom was diverse. People came with different experiences, different languages. And some of that difference played out in whose voice carried weight.

I remember one specific moment....we were in an online class, doing a debate, and I was cut off mid-presentation. Someone wrote in the chat immediately, something like, "you've already used enough time." They might have meant it as a joke. But from where I was sitting, it landed very differently. Was it because I wasn't presenting well? Because I didn't have a strong enough argument? In a diverse classroom, people don't always know how their words land and those moments pile up. They make you pull back.

Teachers were conscious of these contradictions... but the moment you walked out of the classroom, you walked back into the same social circles. What felt like progress in the classroom didn't always move beyond it.

Sayan: You raise two things I want to stay with. The first: how does someone *know* that a certain performance is expected, when no one has told them explicitly?

Srikanth: Take something simple: two students arguing the same point. One speaks in Hindi, drawing on lived experience from a rural context. The other speaks in English with theoretical references. Without anyone saying anything, the room responds differently. Students listen differently. Even if the teachers are equally attentive, the way peers receive the two arguments is different.

That gap directs how you start reading the room. Language is one signal...identity is another. And there's something strange about what happens when a person from a marginalized background speaks well in English. It's like they become a *surprise*. Whereas the same thing from a privileged background is just expected...that's how it should be.

Sayan: And that 'surprise' needs to be questioned too...for the bias it presents.

Also...what you're describing is very non-verbal. It's in the energy of the room. Who are people's eyes moving toward? Whose presentation makes bodies curious or disinterested? Who draws immediate, almost involuntary attention and who doesn't? Which brings me to the second thing: when a student starts feeling that power isn't being granted to them, what happens to them...and what happens to the classroom as a whole?

Srikanth: The first problem is that the student becomes the problem. You hear things like "They're not participating...they're passive." Nobody asks *why* that passivity was produced, or what conditions created it. The person gets pathologized...and once you're seen that way, even if you contribute, you are not received as an agent...

Sayan: I also think that as a teacher I may not fully feel the intensity at which someone experiences exclusion. I can be kind and well-intentioned, and still not know what's required to make someone feel recognised.

Illustration
by Teesta



And this is why we need to *describe* the experience of power clearly enough that another person can sense it, feel it. For both teachers and students. Sometimes in class I've felt students are not thinking about their peers. But creating that space requires active effort: noticing your own biases and patterns of participation, disrupting and changing your own performance, creating space for others, listening critically...

I had one more question...one we may feel clear about, but it would be good to clarify: why do we *want* to change the power dynamic in the classroom? What's the desire driving that?

Srikanth: What I'm really after is collective transformation...where contradictions are worked through together. Where we break the reproduction of social hierarchies. Where we seek and build friendships across social borders, and relationships that wouldn't have formed otherwise. A classroom that actually produces something new...not just the same perspectives validated again and again.

Sayan: I strongly, strongly agree! Also what I want is for the classroom to transform the knowledge it creates. That depends on who speaks up, whose experience and knowledge is considered crucial, how dialogue is shaped. Someone coming from a position of intersectional disadvantage already has critical insights to unsettle power. The classroom should be a place where those insights get developed and shape collective practice, where that person becomes an agent of transformation, not get fixed as a subject of study and control.

Srikanth: And for that to work, the classroom itself has to actually be diverse—not perform diversity, but be it. Our classrooms right now are often sanitized...We talk about democratic learning, but we're doing it within a bubble...basically privileged groups having dialogues among themselves. That's not democratic learning.

A democratic discussion and learning has to unsettle hegemonic power. If it's not doing that, we've gone wrong somewhere. What's the point of holding different opinions if no opinion is ever transformed by another?

Building on these conversations, we designed an advanced version of Gender in Classroom, a space to explore desired expressions of gender and to imagine innovative, inclusive classroom practices.

We recently completed the pilot edition of the advanced version of Gender in Classroom workshop in February, and in this article, I will be drawing from the experiences of the same. The five-day residential format, which provided space for participants' personal reflections, is rooted in a belief about not placing our knowledge at the centre as facilitators. Instead, we centre everyone's lived experiences—to create a space where learning emerges from experience and knowledge (on how we understand gender) is built together. For example, during an activity in which participants were invited to share something that they already know with the group, one participant taught how to cook chicken. She later realised that this recipe comes from her community and has been passed down over time, yet such knowledge is rarely seen as “valid” knowledge.

Another approach was asking small questions to explore bigger ones. Through storybooks, films, folk songs, games, and group work, participants reflected and experimented. For instance, we discussed how librarians can challenge stereotypes and initiate dialogue in the classroom through books.

prescribed vs desired performances

One of the most significant explorations in the advanced workshop was journeying from prescribed (taught by society) to desired (imagined by an individual) performances of gender. There was no separate session on defining gender or decoding theory. Instead, the design foregrounded personal experiences. Participants were invited to imagine gender as something present in the room as a concrete thing—to notice how it appears across spaces, the techniques it uses to shape behaviour, and how it feels to live within these instructed grounds. Within this prescribed terrain, cracks emerged in the form of desire, pointing towards preferred ways of performing gender. Much time was spent sitting with these cracks, and the spaces that they create.

Rather than speaking about gender, the workshop worked with it through an externalisation activity, drawing from the idea that “the person is not the problem; the problem is the problem.” In this, the invitation for the participants in pairs was to ask each other questions that would create a space for them to actually catch it.

questions like:

Think about the places Gullu (a name assigned for gender) has been present. It could be your home, workspace, or any other public space you go to.

Does Gullu affect your day-to-day functioning? If yes, in what ways?

This process was emotionally intense, as the participants accessed memories in the body that often don't get the space to come out.

Gender was explored as performance between a dominant, forceful prescribed performance and also desired ways of performance.



One participant introduced **Chullu**, a character representing prescribed gender in her life—small in size but heavy in impact, playful yet vicious, capable of pulling her into loops of overthinking.



Another participant created **Tintu**, a non-human, otherworldly being with multicoloured hair and a tail, travelling through space. Tintu symbolised freedom, fluidity, and existence beyond binaries and labels, reflecting an identity not confined by gender, culture, or physical norms. Through Tintu, the participant reflected on identity as evolving and plural, and how difference should be seen as a strength rather than 'otherness'.

gender as felt in the body

In the workshop, we also created space to understand the emotions and experiences of gender that we carry in our bodies. Participants shared that the daily pressure to fit into expectations of gender, caste, religion, and other identities can manifest in several ways—headaches, stomach pain, self-doubt, low confidence, stress, lost appetite and mental health struggles.

These pressures also affect our choices—like who we become friends with, which school or college we choose, and who we love. Participants connected this to the classroom as well, seeing it as a small part of society where children with different identities come together and learn to “perform”. This raises an important question: how does this pressure to perform affect their learning in the classroom?

corners of invitation

While thinking about inclusive classrooms, we felt it was important to create different corners that encourage students to reflect, see different perspectives, and ask their own questions. Here are some corners that we created in the class.

One such space we made was the **Wall of Remembering**, where we shared stories and histories that are often ignored or forgotten. During the session on History and Gender, we discussed how power shapes what we remember. Remembering people and struggles for equality, education, and dignity became a way of resisting silence and highlighting those who challenged gender norms.

We also created an exhibition of common words like patriarchy, inclusion, privilege, gender, sex, social location, and LGBTQIA, drawing from existing definitions but reworking them through our own understandings.

Along with this, we displayed inclusive storybooks that act like a mirror (where children see themselves), a window (to learn about others), and a sliding door (to step into and connect with different experiences).



The pilot of the advanced workshop created a space to understand gender through lived experiences and to collectively reflect on our desired ways of performing gender. We feel that it is important to talk about gender in preferred/desired ways too—how we would like to perform our gender—in what clothes, what responsibilities and actions and in front of whom? Only when these conversations of desired ways grow, can the cracks in what is prescribed be more noticeable.

Note: I want to acknowledge all the inspiring participants and my amazing team—this reflection has taken shape because of them. The questions explored in the exercises are drawn from the workshop processes and consent has been taken to share images from the participants.

{The New Learning Centre is an educational space committed to equity and social justice located in Raipur, Chhattisgarh. The following piece has been designed by students at the centre, as part of their 2026 calendar themed around reimagining education. The text is by **Shaheen** and **Safak**, Class 9 (with inputs from all students at the centre) and the accompanying artwork on the left is by **Kamdev** (Class 8) and **Kavita** (Class 9).}

PARENTS' SCHOOL

जब हमने क्लास में शिक्षा कैसी होनी चाहिए पर बात करना शुरू की तो बहुत सारी बातें आयीं - जगह से लेकर पढ़ाई के तरीकों पर बहस और चर्चा हुई। कुछ बातों पर सबकी सहमति बनी कि जहाँ भी हो, समुन्दर किनारे या पहाड़ों व जंगलों के बीच, हमारा स्कूल एक शांत जगह में हो। और वो ऐसी जगह हो जहाँ हम अपने इंटरेस्ट की चीज़ों को कर सकें, कि सिर्फ टेक्स्टबुक से पढ़ाई न हो, और कि हम दुनिया को जानने के लिए पढ़ाई करें, एग्जाम के लिए नहीं...

जब ये सब बातें आयीं तो मन में सवाल आया कि ऐसे पढ़ाई करने की या नयी चीज़ों को सीखने की कोई उम्र होती है क्या? और क्या स्कूल फिर केवल बच्चों के लिए होना चाहिए?

हमको लगने लगा की हमारे पेरेंट्स के लिए भी ऐसा स्कूल होना चाहिए - जहाँ वो निडर होकर अपनी इंटरेस्ट की चीज़ें कर पाएँ। अगर ऐसा होता तो शायद उनकी लाइफ में कई बदलाव आते -

- उनके और हमारे बीच के रिश्ते मज़बूत होते
- शायद वह हमें रोक-टोक करना बंद करते
- शायद उनको नयी-नयी चीज़ों को जानने और करने में दिलचस्पी आती और शायद इससे वो जान पाते कि डिफिकल्ट सिचुएशन को हैंडल कैसे करें
- और सबसे बड़ी बात हमारे पेरेंट्स वो सारी चीज़ें experience कर पाते, जो उन्होंने बचपन में नहीं की थीं।

काश हम एक ऐसा स्कूल अपने पेरेंट्स के लिए भी बना पाते।

A lot of points came up when we started talking about *how education should be*: we discussed and argued about issues, from space to pedagogic practices. Everyone was on the same page about some issues. No matter where the school is—on a riverside or in the mountains or in a forest, our school should be in a serene place. And that should be a place where we can do what we're interested in, we shouldn't study only from textbooks, and that we should learn to understand the world, not for giving exams.

When these ideas came up, then another thought struck: is there an age limit to studying or learning about the world? And should school be only for children?

We felt that there should be a school like this for our parents also, where they can fearlessly pursue what they're interested in. If this happened, there would have been quite a few changes in their life:

- The relationships between them and us would be stronger.
- Maybe they would have stopped nagging us.
- Maybe they would have gotten curious about learning new things, and maybe this would have helped them learn how to handle difficult situations.
- Most importantly, parents would be able to experience all those things that they couldn't when they were young.

Wish we could make a school like this for our parents!





{The following piece is also designed by students of the New Learning Centre, as part of their 2026 calendar on the theme, 'reimagining education'. The text is by Samma (Class 9) and artwork on the accompanying page is by Umesh (Class 8)}

हमें नीचा मत दिखाओ DON'T PUT US DOWN

कक्षा के बीचों-बीच खड़ा वो एक बच्चा,

One child stands in the middle of the classroom,

जैसे सबकी नज़र और उनकी उँगलियाँ उसी पे टिक गई हों

With everyone's gaze and fingers pointing at him, fixed.

सारी गलतियों का बोझ और डर उसी की छोटी-सी जेब में रह जाता है।

The burden of all mistakes and fear resides in his tiny pocket.

बस वह सर झुकाए अपनी जगह पर खड़ा रहता है।

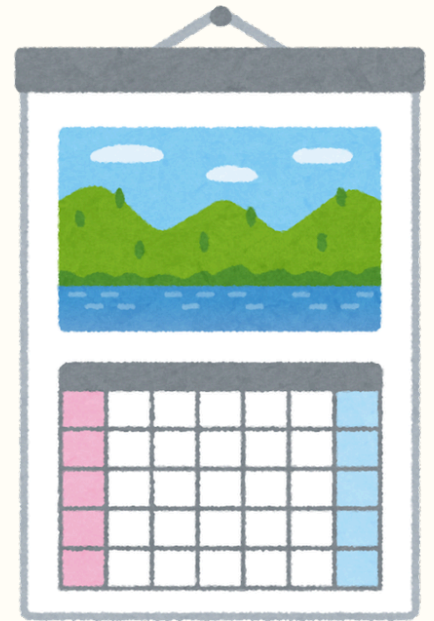
His head hangs low, and he keeps standing still.

कभी कोई कहता, ये तो हमेशा गलत करता रहता है।

Someone comments "he keeps messing up".

तो कोई हँसकर कहता, इससे कुछ नहीं होने वाला कभी।

Someone else laughs, "nothing good will come out of him ever".



तुम इसी के लायक हो।

"This is what you deserve".

और वो बच्चा बस चुप खड़ा रहा।

And that child stood in silence,

जवाब देने का हक़ भी जैसे छीन लिया गया हो।

As if the right to speak back was also snatched from him.

अगर मुझे स्कूल में एक चीज़ बदलनी होती,

If I had to change one thing in school,

मैं बच्चों को नीचा दिखाने पर रोक लगाती।

I would have banned humiliating students.

ये थप्पड़ खाने से भी ज़्यादा चोट पहुँचाता है।

This causes wounds deeper than being slapped.



{Arjun is a final year PhD scholar at Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, JNU. His research focuses on structural and symbolic violence in the city. He is also interested in questions of caste and psychoanalysis.}

भूख, परीक्षा और सपने

चौथा दिन, दूसरा एग्जाम
जगह? शिक्षा संस्थान,
मेस बंद, खाना बंद,
परीक्षाओं के बीच में बंद
क्यों बंद? उनकी मर्जी...
अब सुबह उठकर सोचो
कि भूख को कैसे शांत करें?
भाड़ में गई परीक्षा पहले भूख...
अरे नहीं फ़ेल हो जाओगे, इसलिए पहले परीक्षा...
यार कोई कहता क्यों नहीं, इस मेहमान नवाज़ी के बारे में?
क्योंकि इसको अगले साल हॉस्टल चाहिए...
उसको भी अगले साल हॉस्टल चाहिए...
और मुझको भी तो अगले साल हॉस्टल चाहिए
मुझे तो पी. एच्. डी. में एडमिशन भी चाहिए
लेकिन मुझे रोटी भी चाहिए, सबसे पहले चाहिए,
भूख तो सबको तोड़ देती है, मुझको भी,
सबसे ज्यादा भूख जिसे तोड़ती है वो हैं सपने...
सपने और भूख पर्यायवाची नहीं हैं
खैर, संस्थाओं में जब नये लोग आते हैं तो
दिलों में नई उम्मीदें आती हैं
पुरानी उम्मीदें पूरी नहीं होती कि, नये लोग आ जाते हैं
फिर समय बीतता रहता है, लोग आते हैं लेकिन,
उम्मीदें नहीं आती...फिर
सब जगह एक ही जैसी व्यवस्था दिखाई पड़ती है
सब कुछ सत्ताधारी लोगो की सहूलियत की लिए होता है
मेरे तुमरे लिए नहीं...



{**Sabeena** is a journalist from Mysore, Karnataka who documents community life and social issues through writing and photography. She worked as a program associate with **Samvada** until recently, engaging with the youth of Kolar. Established in 1992, **Samvada** has been sensitizing and empowering young people from marginalized communities through its key programmes—Sahayana, Baduku Centre for Livelihoods, Kanaja, and YuWyaan—to build a socially just, inclusive, and sustainable society.}

A JOURNEY WITH YOUNG SOULS

ಆವತ್ತು ಶನಿವಾರ ಸಂಜೆ 6.30. ಊರಿಗೆ ಹೊರಡುವ ಆತುರದಲ್ಲಿದ್ದ ನನಗೆ ಬಾಗಿಲ ಬಳಿ ನಮ್ಮ ಯೂತ್ ಒಬ್ಬರು ಮೌನವಾಗಿ ನಿಂತಿದ್ದು ಕಂಡೆ. ಇಬ್ಬರೂ ಮೌನ. ನಂತರ ಮುಗುಳು ನಕ್ಕು ಒಳಗೆ ಕರೆದೆ. ನೀವು ಹೊರಡಬೇಕಾ ಇವಾಗ ಎಂದು ಕೇಳಿದಳು. ಅವಳ ದನಿ, ಚಹರೆ ಕಂಡು ಏನಾದರೂ ವಿಷಯ ಇರಬಹುದೆಂದು ತಿಳಿಯಿತು. ಇಲ್ಲಲ್ಲ. ನನಗೆ ಇನ್ನು ಕೆಲಸ ಇದೆ. ಹೋಗೋದು ತಡವಾಗುತ್ತೆ. ಏನಾಯಿತು ಎಂದು ಕೇಳಿದೆ. ನಾನು ಸ್ವಲ್ಪ ಹೊತ್ತು ವೈಆರ್ಸಿಯಲ್ಲಿ ಇರಬಹುದಾ ಎಂದಳು. ಧಾರಾಳವಾಗಿ ಇರಬಹುದು ಎಂದೆ. ಆಕೆ ಮೂಲೆಯೊಂದರಲ್ಲಿ ಮೌನವಾಗಿ ಕುಳಿತಿದ್ದಳು. ಸುಮಾರು ಅರ್ಧ ತಾಸು ಬಿಟ್ಟು ನನ್ನ ಎದುರು ಕುಳಿತಳು. ನಾನು ಮೊನಾಲಿಸಾಳ ನಗೆ ಬೀರಿ ಅವಳನ್ನೇ ನೋಡುತ್ತಿದ್ದೆ. ಆಗ ನಿಧಾನವಾಗಿ ಅವಳು ಮಾತನಾಡಲು ಪ್ರಯತ್ನಿಸಿದಳು.

ನನಗೆ ಅನ್ನಿಸುತ್ತಿದೆ ನಿನಗೆ ನನ್ನ ಬಳಿ ಹೇಳಿಕೊಳ್ಳಲು ವಿಚಾರವಿದೆ. ನಿನಗೆ ಏನು ಅನ್ನಿಸಿದರೂ ಹಂಚಿಕೊಳ್ಳಬಹುದು ಎಂದೆ. ಗಳಗಳನೆ ಅಳಲು ಶುರುಮಾಡಿದಳು. ನಿಧಾನವಾಗಿ ಮಾತನಾಡಲು ಶುರುಮಾಡಿದಳು. ಅವಳಿಗೆ ಆತ್ಮವಿಶ್ವಾಸ ನೀಡಿ ಸುಮ್ಮನೆ ಕೇಳಿಸಿಕೊಂಡೆ. ಅವಳ ಶಿಕ್ಷಣ, ಕೌಟುಂಬಿಕ ಸಮಸ್ಯೆ, ಆರ್ಥಿಕ ಸಮಸ್ಯೆ, ಒಂಟಿತನ, ಸ್ನೇಹಿತರ ಕೊರತೆ ಎಲ್ಲವನ್ನೂ ಹಂಚಿಕೊಂಡಳು.

ನಂತರ ಮಾತುಕತೆ ನಡೆಯಿತು. ಸಡನ್ನಾಗಿ ನಗಲು ಶುರು ಮಾಡಿದಳು. ನನಗೆ ಇವಾಗ ನಿರಾಳ ಎನ್ನಿಸುತ್ತಿದೆ. ನೆಮ್ಮದಿ ಹುಡುಕುತ್ತಾ ಕಾಲೇಜಿಗೆ, ಗ್ರಂಥಾಲಯಕ್ಕೆ, ಪಾರ್ಕ್ ಅಂತ ಹೋದೆ. ಎಲ್ಲಿಯೂ ಮನಸ್ಸು ಬಿಚ್ಚಿ ಅಳಲು ಸಮಾಧಾನ ಮಾಡಿಕೊಳ್ಳಲು ಜಾಗ ಇಲ್ಲ. ಅದಕ್ಕೆ ವೈಆರ್ಸಿಗೆ ಬಂದೆ. ತುಂಬ ಸಮಸ್ಯೆಗಳಿದ್ದಾವೆ. ನಾನು ಒಂಟಿ ಆಗಿದ್ದೇನೆ ಎಂದುಕೊಂಡಿದ್ದೆ. ಎಲ್ಲ ಸರಿ ಹೋಗುತ್ತೆ ಎಂದು ನಿರಾಳವಾದಳು. ಒಟ್ಟಿಗೆ ಟೀ ಕುಡಿದು ನಗುತ್ತಾ ತೆರಳಿದೆವು. ಕೇವಲ ಮನಸ್ಸಿನ ಭಾರವನ್ನು ಕೇಳುವವರು, ಮುಕ್ತವಾಗಿ ಅಳಲು ಒಂದು ಸ್ಥಳ ಎಷ್ಟು ಮುಖ್ಯ ಆಗಿದೆ ಎಂದು ಕಾಡಿತು.

It was 6.30 pm on a Saturday. I was in a hurry to leave for my hometown when I noticed one of our youth standing silently near the door. We were both quiet. I smiled and invited her inside. Do you have to leave now? she asked. From her voice and expression, I sensed that something was troubling her. Not really. I still have some work. I'll still be a while. What happened? I asked. Can I sit in the YRC for some time? she asked. Of course, I said. She sat quietly in a corner. After about half an hour, she came and sat in front of me. I kept looking at her, with a Mona Lisa smile. Slowly she began to speak.

It feels like you have something you want to share, I told her gently. You can say whatever you feel. Suddenly, she burst into tears. Slowly, she began to talk. I reassured her and simply listened. She shared all about her education, family problems, financial struggles, loneliness, the lack of friends.

Our conversation continued. Suddenly she began to laugh. I feel lighter now, she said. I went to college, the library, even the park searching for peace. But there was nowhere I could open my heart, cry, and feel comforted. That's why I came to the YRC. I have many problems and I thought I was completely alone. But now I feel things will be okay. We drank tea together, laughing, and went our way. I was struck by how important it is to have someone who simply listens, a place where one can cry freely and release the weight of the heart.



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ವೈಆರ್ಸಿ ಅಂದರೆ ಯೂತ್ ರಿಸೋರ್ಸ್ ಸೆಂಟರ್. ಇದು ಸಂವಾದ ಯುವ ಸಶಕ್ತೀಕರಣ ಸಂಸ್ಥೆ ನಡೆಸುವ ಯುವಜನ ಕೇಂದ್ರಗಳು. ವೈಆರ್ಸಿ ಕೇವಲ ಒಂದು ಭೌತಿಕ ಸ್ಥಳವಲ್ಲ. ಯಾವುದೇ ಮುಂಚಿತ ನೋಂದಣಿ, ಫೀಸ್, ನಿರ್ದಿಷ್ಟ ಕೆಲಸಗಳ ಬೇರಿ ಇಲ್ಲದೆ ಸಮಾಜದ ಕಟ್ಟ ಕಡೆಯ, ದುರ್ಬಲ ಸಾಮಾಜಿಕ, ಆರ್ಥಿಕ, ಶೈಕ್ಷಣಿಕ ಸ್ಥಿತಿ ಎದುರಿಸುತ್ತಿರುವ ಮಾತ್ರವಲ್ಲ ಸಂವಿಧಾನದ ಆಶಯಗಳಂತೆ ಜೀವಿಸಲು ಸೇನಾಡುತ್ತಿರುವ ಎಲ್ಲಾ ಜಾತಿ, ಧರ್ಮ, ಪ್ರಾದೇಶಿಕ, ಲಿಂಗದ ಯುವಜನರು ಯಾವಾಗ ಬೇಕಾದರೂ ಭೇಟಿ ನೀಡಬಹುದಾದ ಒಂದು ಮುಕ್ತ ವ್ಯವಸ್ಥೆ.

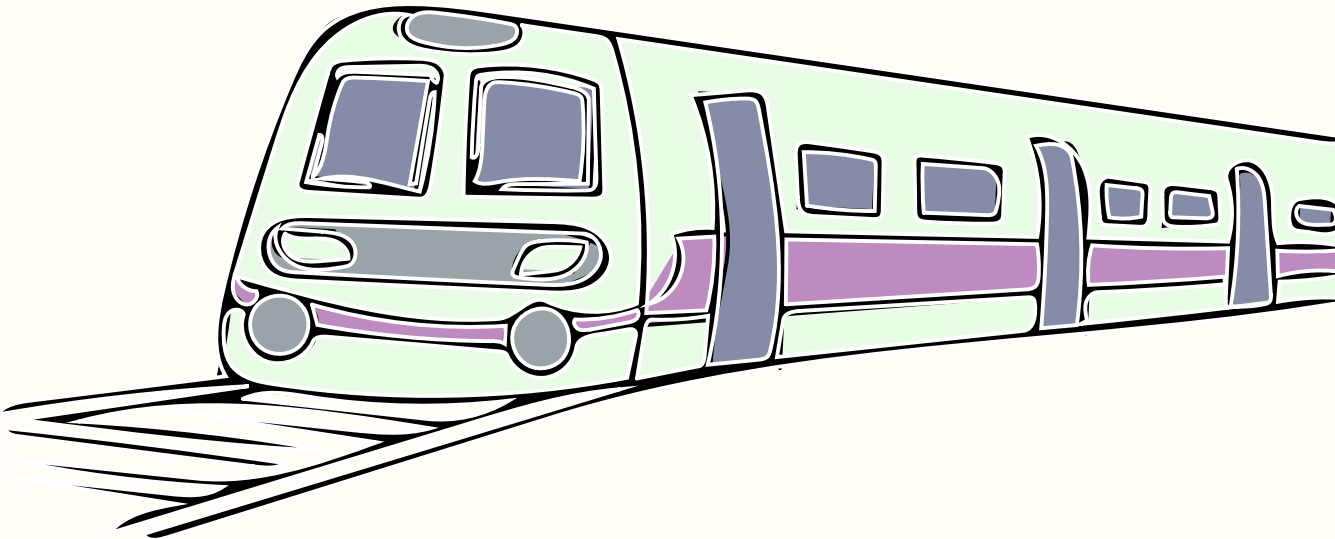
ಯುವಜನರು ತಮ್ಮ ಮನದಾಳದ ಮಾತುಗಳನ್ನು, ಕಷ್ಟ ಸುಖಗಳನ್ನು, ವಿಚಾರ ವಿನಿಮಯವನ್ನು ಮುಕ್ತವಾಗಿ ವ್ಯಕ್ತಪಡಿಸಲು ಬಯಸುವಾಗ ಆಯ್ಕೆ ಮಾಡುವ ಪ್ರಜಾಪ್ರಭುತ್ವ, ತೀರ್ಮಾನಾತ್ಮಕವಲ್ಲದ ಅಭಿವ್ಯಕ್ತಿಯ ಸ್ಥಳ. ಇಲ್ಲಿ ಯುವಜನರು ಜಾಗೃತಿ ಪಡೆಯುತ್ತಾರೆ. ತಾವು ಸ್ವಚ್ಛಂದವಾದ, ಘನತೆಯ, ಸುಸ್ಥಿರ ಬದುಕು ಕಟ್ಟಿಕೊಳ್ಳುವ ಪ್ರಯಾಣ ಮಾಡುತ್ತಾರೆ. ಜತೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಕಲಿತಾರೆ, ಬೆಳೆಯುತ್ತಾರೆ. ತಾವು ಮಾತ್ರವಲ್ಲದೆ ತಮ್ಮಂತಹ ಹಲವು ಯುವಜನರನ್ನು ಸಮತೆಯೆಡೆಗೆ ಮುನ್ನಡೆಸಿಕೊಂಡು ಹೋಗುವ ಮುಂದಾಳತ್ವ ನಿಭಾಯಿಸುತ್ತಾರೆ. ತಮ್ಮ ಕ್ರಿಯಾಶೀಲತೆಗೆ ಬೇಕಾದ ಸಂಪನ್ಮೂಲಗಳನ್ನು ಇಲ್ಲಿ ಪಡೆಯುತ್ತಾರೆ. ಕೌಶಲ ತರಬೇತಿ ಪಡೆದು ತಮ್ಮ ಕಾಲ ಮೇಲೆ ತಾವು ನಿಲ್ಲುವ ಆತ್ಮವಿಶ್ವಾಸ ಹೊಂದುತ್ತಾರೆ.

ಇದು ಮಾತ್ರವಲ್ಲ. ಸಂವಾದ ಎಕ್ಸ್ಪ್ಲೋರೇಗ್ ಹೆಚ್ಚು ಆದ್ಯತೆ ನೀಡುತ್ತದೆ. ನಾವು ಆಯೋಜಿಸುವ ಕಾರ್ಯಾಗಾರದ ರಾತ್ರಿಗಳಲ್ಲಿ ಅದೆಷ್ಟೋ ಯುವಜನರು ತಮ್ಮೊಟ್ಟಿಗೆ ತಾವು ಮೊದಲಬಾರಿಗೆ ಮಾತನಾಡಿಕೊಂಡ ಅನುಭವ ಹಂಚಿಕೊಂಡಿದ್ದಾರೆ. ಆ ರಾತ್ರಿಗಳಲ್ಲಿ ಒಂಟಿತನ ಅನುಭವಿಸುತ್ತಿದ್ದ ಕೆಲವು ಯುವಜನರು ಯಾವುದೇ ಅಡಚಣೆಯಿಲ್ಲದೆ ಆಕಾಶದ ನಕ್ಷತ್ರ ಎಣಿಸಿ ಏಕಾಂತದಲ್ಲಿ ಸಂತೋಷ ಕಂಡಿದ್ದಾರೆ. ಮೊದಲ ಬಾರಿಗೆ ಕನಸು ಕಟ್ಟಿಕೊಂಡಿದ್ದಾರೆ. ಮೊದಲ ಬಾರಿಗೆ ಮೆಟ್ರೋ ಪ್ರಯಾಣ, ಬೆಂಗಳೂರು ನಗರ, ರೈಲು ಪ್ರಯಾಣ, ಬೆಟ್ಟದ ಮೇಲೆ ನಾಟಕ ನೋಡಿದ್ದು, ಮೊದಲ ಬಾರಿಗೆ ವಿಶೇಷ ಊಟ ಸವಿದಿದ್ದು, ಸಮುದ್ರ ನೋಡಿದ್ದು, ಪ್ರತಿಭಟನೆ, ಚಳವಳಿ ಕಂಡಿದ್ದು, ದಲಿತರ ಮನೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಕೂಡಿ ಚಹಾ ಸವಿದಿದ್ದು, ಕಂಪ್ಯೂಟರ್ ಮುಟ್ಟಿದ್ದು, ಇಂಗ್ಲಿಷ್‌ನಲ್ಲಿ ತಮ್ಮ ಪರಿಚಯ ಮಾಡಿಕೊಂಡಿದ್ದು, ಗುಂಪಿನ ಜವಾಬ್ದಾರಿ ಹೊತ್ತಿದ್ದು, ಸಿನಿಮಾ ಥಿಯೇಟರ್‌ನಲ್ಲಿ ಸಿನಿಮಾ ವೀಕ್ಷಿಸಿದ್ದು, ಹಾಡು ಹಾಡಿದ್ದು, ತಮ್ಮ ಕುಟುಂಬದಲ್ಲೇ ಮೊದಲ ಬಾರಿಗೆ ಉನ್ನತ ಶಿಕ್ಷಣದತ್ತ ಹೆಜ್ಜೆ ಇಟ್ಟಿದ್ದು, ಹೀಗೆ ಹೊರಗಿನ ಸಮಾಜಕ್ಕೆ ಸಾಮಾನ್ಯವಾದ ಅದೆಷ್ಟೋ ವಿಚಾರಗಳನ್ನು ಅದೇ ಮೊದಲ ಬಾರಿಗೆ ಮಾಡಿದ ಸಂಭ್ರಮ ಬೆಲೆಕಟ್ಟಲಾರದ್ದು.

YRC stands for Youth Resource Centre. Run by Samvada, a youth empowerment organisation, the YRC is not simply a physical space. It is an open space, where young people from all castes, religions, regions, and genders—especially those facing social, economic, and educational disadvantages and striving to live by the ideals in the Constitution—can come anytime. There is no prior registration, no fees, and no rigid expectations.

It is a democratic, non-judgmental space where youth can express their deepest thoughts, share joys and struggles, and exchange ideas freely. Here they become aware, learn together, grow together, and begin the journey toward building lives with dignity, freedom, and sustainability. They also take leadership in supporting other young people like themselves and gain resources and skills that help them stand confidently on their own feet.

Samvada also gives great importance to exposure. On the nights of our workshops, so many young people have shared with us that they spoke to each other for the first time. Some who often felt lonely have spent those nights simply counting the stars, finding quiet joy in solitude. For the very first time, they begin to dream. They experienced their first metro ride, first visit to Bengaluru, first train journey, watching a play on a hilltop, relishing in a special meal, seeing the sea, witnessing a protest movement, enjoying tea together in a Dalit household, touching a computer, introducing themselves in English, taking responsibility of a group, watching a film in a theatre, singing before others, or becoming the first in their family to pursue higher education. Things that may seem ordinary in wider society become valuable milestones for them.



ತಮ್ಮನ್ನು ಅರ್ಥೈಸಿಕೊಳ್ಳುವವರು ಯಾರೂ ಇಲ್ಲ, ಎಲ್ಲಿಯೂ ಇಲ್ಲ ಎಂದು ಕೊರಗುವ, ಅಪಾಯಕ್ಕೆ ಸಿಲುಕುವ ಸಾಧ್ಯತೆಯಿರುವ, ಬದುಕನ್ನು ಕಠಿಣ ದಾರಿಯತ್ತ ಸಾಗಿಸುತ್ತಿರುವ ಸನ್ನಿವೇಶಗಳಲ್ಲಿ ಮೆಂಟರ್‌ಗಳಾಗಿ ನಾವು ಮತ್ತು ವೈಆರ್‌ಸಿ ಯು ಅಂತಹ ಎಲ್ಲಾ ಯುವ ಸಮೂಹಕ್ಕೆ ಕುಟುಂಬ, ಸ್ನೇಹ ಬಳಗ, ಕಾಲೇಜಿಗೂ ವಿಭಿನ್ನವಾದ ಯುವಜನ ಪೂರಕ ಪಾತ್ರವಹಿಸುತ್ತೇವೆ. ಯುವಜನ ಹಕ್ಕುಗಳನ್ನು ಉಲ್ಲಂಘನೆಯಾಗದಂತೆ ಸದಾ ನೋಡಿಕೊಳ್ಳುತ್ತೇವೆ.

In moments when young people feel no one understands them—when they risk drifting toward difficult paths—YRC mentors become something different from family, friends, or college. We try to stand with them as supportive companions and ensure that their rights as young people are not violated.



ಇಂತಹ ಅನೇಕ ಸಂದರ್ಭಗಳು ಯೂತ್ಸ್ ಆಲೋಚನೆಗಳು, ಬೇಕುಬೇಡಗಳು, ಕ್ರಿಯಾಶೀಲತೆಯ ಬಗ್ಗೆ ತಿಳಿಯಲು ಈ ಜರ್ನಿಯಲ್ಲಿ ಸಿಗುತ್ತದೆ. ಇದರಿಂದ ಯಾವ ಹಿನ್ನೆಲೆಯ ಯೂತ್ಸ್ ಎಂತಹ ಅಗತ್ಯಗಳು ಇರುತ್ತವೆ ಮಾತ್ರವಲ್ಲ, ಯಾವ ಯೂತ್ಸ್‌ಗಳಲ್ಲಿ ಏನೆಲ್ಲಾ ಟ್ಯಾಲೆಂಟ್‌ಗಳು ಹುದುಗಿದ್ದಾವೆ, ಹೊರಹಾಕಲು ವೈಆರ್‌ಸಿ ಮೂಲಕ ಏನೆಲ್ಲಾ ಸರ್ಪೋರ್ಟ್ ಮಾಡಬಹುದು, ನಾವೆಷ್ಟು ತಯಾರಾಗಬೇಕು ಎಂಬುದನ್ನು ಸದಾ ಎಚ್ಚರಿಸುತ್ತದೆ.

ಅಂತಹದ್ದೇ ಒಂದು ಸನ್ನಿವೇಶ ಹೀಗಿದೆ. ಅದೊಂದು ದಿನ ವೈಆರ್‌ಸಿಗೆ ಮೊದಲಬಾರಿ ಕೆಲವು ಯೂತ್ಸ್ ಭೇಟಿ ನೀಡಿದರು. ಹಿರಿಯ ಕೆಲವು ಯುವಜನರೂ ಬಂದಿದ್ದರು. ನನ್ನ ಇಷ್ಟದ ಹಾಡು, ಕಾರಣ, ಆ ಹಾಡುಗಳಲ್ಲಿ ಜೆಂಡರ್ ಅನ್ನು ಬಿಂಬಿಸಿರುವ ರೀತಿಯ ಬಗ್ಗೆ ಸಾಮಾನ್ಯ ಚರ್ಚೆ ಮಾಡುವವರಿದ್ದವು. ಅದಕ್ಕೂ ಮೊದಲು ಕೇಂದ್ರವನ್ನು ಒಟ್ಟಿಗೆ ಸೇರಿ ಸ್ವಚ್ಛಗೊಳಿಸಿ, ಹಾಸಿಗೆಗಳನ್ನು ಹಾಸುವುದಾಗಿ ಹೇಳಿದೆ.

Through such moments we learn about young people's aspirations, dilemmas, and energies. We begin to understand the needs of young people from different backgrounds, the talents that lie hidden among them, and how YRC can support them in bringing those talents out.

One such moment unfolded like this. One day some new youth visited the YRC for the first time, along with a few senior youth. We were discussing our favourite songs, why we like them, and how gender is represented in them. Before that, I suggested we clean the centre together and lay out the mattresses.

ಅದೆಷ್ಟು ಸಹಜವಾಗಿ ಯುವತಿಯರು ಪೊರಕೆ ಹಿಡಿದು ನಿಂತರು, ಯುವಕರು ಹಾಸಿ ಹೊತ್ತು ತರಲು ಮುಂದಾದರು. ನಂತರ ಅದನ್ನು ತಡೆದು ನಗುತ್ತಾ, ನಾವು ಈವಾಗಾಗಲೇ ಮಾತನಾಡಿಕೊಂಡಿದ್ದೇವೆ, ಇಲ್ಲಿ ಸಮಾನತೆ ಕಾಪಾಡಿಕೊಳ್ಳುತ್ತೇವೆ ಅಂತ, ಎಂದೆ. ಯುವತಿಯರು ಪೊರಕೆ ಬಿಟ್ಟು ಹಾಸಿಗೆ ಹತ್ತ ಹೊರಟಿದರು. ಆದರೆ ಯುವಕರು ಪೊರಕೆ ಮುಟ್ಟಲು ಮುಂದಾಗಲಿಲ್ಲ. ಹಿರಿಯ ಯುವಜನರತ್ತ ನೋಡಿದೆ. ಅವರು ತಕ್ಷಣ, ನನಗೆ ಕಸಗೂಡಿಸುವುದಂತೂ ಬಹಳ ಇಷ್ಟ. ನನ್ನಷ್ಟು ಸ್ವಚ್ಛವಾಗಿ ನಮ್ಮ ಮನೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಯಾರೂ ಕಸಗೂಡಿಸುವುದಿಲ್ಲ ಎಂದು ಖುಷಿ, ಖುಷಿಯಲ್ಲಿ ಮುಂದಾದರು. ನಾನು ಜತೆಯಾದೆ. ಅದನ್ನು ತಡೆದು ಹೊಸ ಯುವಕರು ತಾವೇ ಗೂಡಿಸಿದರು.

ಈ ಸನ್ನಿವೇಶವನ್ನು ಚರ್ಚೆ ಮಾಡಿದೆವು. ಇಂತಹ ಮನಸ್ಥಿತಿ ಹೇಗೆ ಹುಟ್ಟಿಕೊಳ್ಳುತ್ತದೆ. ಒಂದೊಂದು ಸಾಮಾನ್ಯ, ಅಗತ್ಯ ಕೌಶಲಗಳನ್ನು ಒಂದು ಜಿಂಟರ್ ಹಂಚಿದ್ದು ಯಾರು, ಹೇಗೆ? ಎಂದು ಸಂವಾದ ನಡೆಯಿತು. ಸಂವಾದ ಮುಗಿದು ಎಲ್ಲರೂ ಟೀ ಮಾಡಲು ತೆರಳಿದೆವು. ಇಲ್ಲಿ ಯುವಕರು ಟೀ ಮಾಡುವುದಾಗಿ, ಯುವತಿಯರು ಅವನ್ನೆಲ್ಲಾ ತೊಳೆದು ಇಡುವುದಾಗಿ ಅಭಿಪ್ರಾಯ ವ್ಯಕ್ತಪಡಿಸಿದರು. ಇದಕ್ಕೆ ಬದಲಾದ ಅಭಿಪ್ರಾಯವೂ. ಕಡೆಗೆ ಇನ್ನುಳಿದ ಕೆಲವರು, ನಾವು ಸಮಾನರು ತಾನೆ ಇಬ್ಬರೂ ಟೀ ಮಾಡುವ, ಇಬ್ಬರೂ ತೊಳೆದು ಇಡುವ ಎಂಬ ನಿರ್ಧಾರಕ್ಕೆ ಬಂದು ನಿಂತಿತು. ಹಾಗೆಯೇ ಮೊದಲ ಬಾರಿಗೆ ಟೀ ಮಾಡಿದ ಯುವಕರ ಪ್ರಯತ್ನವನ್ನು ಶ್ಲಾಘಿಸುತ್ತಾ, ಟೀ ಸವಿದೆವು.

ಮತ್ತೊಬ್ಬ ಯುವಕನ ಮನೆಯ ಪರಿಸ್ಥಿತಿ ಹದಗೆಟ್ಟಿತ್ತು. ಪೊಲೀಸ್, ಕೋರ್ಟ್, ಕಚೇರಿ, ಆರ್ಥಿಕ ಸಮಸ್ಯೆ, ಕುಟುಂಬದೊಳಗೆ ನೆಮ್ಮದಿ ಇಲ್ಲದೆ ಅದು ಅವನ ಮೇಲೆ ಪರಿಣಾಮ ಬೀರಿದ್ದವು. ಬಹಳ ಆಕ್ಟಿವ್ ಇರುತ್ತಿದ್ದ. ಆದರೆ ಅದೊಂದು ದಿನ ಅವನಿಗೆ ಏಕಾಂತ ಬೇಕಿತ್ತು. ಅದಕ್ಕೊಂದೇ ಕಾಲೇಜು ಇಲ್ಲದಿದ್ದರೂ ಕಾಲೇಜಿನಲ್ಲಿ, ಗ್ರಂಥಾಲಯದಲ್ಲಿ, ಬಸ್ ನಿಲ್ದಾಣದಲ್ಲಿ ಕಾಲ ಕಳೆಯುತ್ತಿದ್ದ. ಇದೆಲ್ಲವೂ ಗಮನಕ್ಕೆ ಬಂತು. ಆತನಿಗೆ ವೈಆರ್ಸಿಗೆ ಕರೆಸಿ ಮಾತನಾಡಿದೆ. ಎಲ್ಲಾ ಹೇಳಿಕೊಂಡ. ಆ ಸಮಯಕ್ಕೆ ಶಿಕ್ಷಣ ನಿಲ್ಲಬಾರದೆಂದು ಫೀ ಸರ್ಪೋರ್ಟ್ ಮಾಡಲಾಯಿತು.

ಮನೆಯ ಪರಿಸ್ಥಿತಿ ಬಿಗಡಾಯಿಸುತ್ತಲೇ ಇತ್ತು. ಆತ ನಮ್ಮಿಂದ ದೂರ ಹೋಗುತ್ತಲಿದ್ದ. ಇದೆಲ್ಲ ಮರೆಸಲು ರಾತ್ರಿಯ ಸಾಂಸ್ಕೃತಿಕ ಕಾರ್ಯಕ್ರಮಕ್ಕೆ ಆಹ್ವಾನಿಸಿದೆವು. ಅಂದು ಆತ ಕುಡಿದು ಬಂದಿದ್ದ. ಬಸ್ ಹತ್ತಿದ ಮೇಲೆ ಅವನಲ್ಲಾದ ಬದಲಾವಣೆ ಕಂಡಾಗಷ್ಟೇ ಗೊತ್ತಾಗಿದ್ದು. ಅವನಿಂದ ನಿಯಂತ್ರಣವೂ ಸಾಧ್ಯವಾಗದೆ ಬಸ್ಸಲ್ಲಿ ಬಹುತೇಕರು ಹೀಯಾಳಿಸಲು ಶುರುಮಾಡಿದರು. ನಾವೂ ತೀರಾ ಮುಜುಗರಕ್ಕೆ ಒಳಗಾದೆವು. ಬೆಟ್ಟದ ಮೇಲೆ ತಲುಪಿದ್ದೇ, ಆತ ಪೂರ್ತಿ ನಿತ್ರಾನನಾಗಿದ್ದ. ಹಿಂತಿರುಗಲು ವಾಹನ ಇಲ್ಲ. ಆತನಿಂದ ನಿಲ್ಲಲೂ ಸಾಧ್ಯವಾಗುತ್ತಿಲ್ಲ. ಈ ವಿಚಾರ ಕಾರ್ಯಕ್ರಮ ಸಂಘಟರಿಗೂ ತಲುಪಿತು. ನಮ್ಮ ಬಗ್ಗೆ ಚೆನ್ನಾಗಿ ತಿಳಿದಿದ್ದ ಗೌರವ ಇದ್ದ ಅವರಲ್ಲಿ ಮನವಿ ಮಾಡಿ ಉಳಿಯಲು ವ್ಯವಸ್ಥೆ ಮಾಡಿದೆವು. ಮಾರನೆ ದಿನ ಇದನ್ನೆಲ್ಲಾ ಜತೆಗಾರರು ಅವನಿಗೆ ಹೇಳಿದರು.

So spontaneously the young women picked up the brooms, while the young men volunteered to carry the mattresses. I stopped them with a smile. But we just talked about protecting equality here, didn't we? I said. The young women put down the brooms and moved toward the bedding, but still, the young men hesitated to touch the broom. I looked at the senior youth. One of them immediately stepped forward cheerfully: I actually love sweeping. At home nobody cleans as neatly as I do. I joined him. Seeing this, the new boys stopped us and began sweeping themselves.

Later we discussed the moment: How do such attitudes form? Who assigns basic everyday skills to one gender or another? The conversation continued over tea. At first some suggested they would make the tea while the girls washed the utensils. Others disagreed. Eventually some said, If we are equals, then both of us should make the tea and both should wash up. So that's what we did. We slurped, celebrating the boys' first attempt at tea-making.

Another young man was going through a severe crisis at home—police, court visits, financial problems. Not a moment of peace in the family. It all took a toll on him. He had once been very active, but now he wanted solitude. Even when he had no classes, he spent time in the college, library, or bus stand. We noticed this. We invited him to the YRC, and spoke to him. He opened up about everything. To make sure he didn't have to stop studying during this period, we supported his education fees.

But the situation at home continued to worsen and he was drifting away from us. To help him distract himself from these problems, we invited him to a cultural program at night. That evening he arrived drunk. We only realized the change in his behaviour after boarding the bus. He could not control himself, and some people on the bus started mocking him. We became deeply embarrassed. By the time we reached the hill for the program, he was completely exhausted. There was no vehicle to return. He couldn't even stand. The organizers heard about the situation. Since they knew us well and respected our work, we made a request, and arranged a place to stay. The next day his fellow-travelers told him everything.

ಆತನ ಸ್ಥಿತಿಗೆ ಕಾರಣ ಏನೆಂದು ನಮಗೆ ಗೊತ್ತಿತ್ತು ಮತ್ತು ಎಲ್ಲರೂ ಹೀಯಾಳಿಸುವವರೇ ಆಗಿದ್ದು, ಯುವಜನರನ್ನು ಅರ್ಥ ಮಾಡಿಕೊಳ್ಳುವವರು ಯಾರಿದ್ದಾರೆ ಎಂಬ ವಿಚಾರ ನಮಗೆ ಕೊರೆಯುತ್ತಿತ್ತು. ಅಲ್ಲಿಂದ ಆತ ನಮ್ಮನ್ನು ವಿಭಿನ್ನವಾಗಿ ಕಾಣಲು ಶುರುಮಾಡಿದ. ಕ್ಷಮೆಯಾಚಿಸಿದನು. ಸಮಸ್ಯೆಗೆ ಪ್ರಜ್ಞಾಪೂರ್ವಕವಾಗಿ ಪರಿಹಾರ ಹುಡುಕುತ್ತೇನೆ, ಈ ರೀತಿ ಪ್ರಜ್ಞೆ ಕಳೆದುಕೊಂಡು ನಿಮ್ಮನ್ನು ಅವಮಾನ ಮಾಡಿದ್ದಕ್ಕಾಗಿ ಕ್ಷಮಿಸಿ ಎಂದು ಕೇಳಿಕೊಂಡ. ಇದೇ ನಮಗೆ ಬೇಕಿತ್ತು. ಅರಿವು ಮತ್ತು ಅದರ ಮೂಲಕ ಆರೋಗ್ಯದಾಯಕ ಬದಲಾವಣೆ. ಸದ್ಯ ಆತ ಶಿಕ್ಷಣದ ಜತೆ ಖಾಸಗಿ ಸಂಸ್ಥೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಕೆಲಸ ಮಾಡುತ್ತಾ ಕುಟುಂಬದ ಜತೆ ಸ್ವಲ್ಪ ಮಟ್ಟಿಗೆ ನಿರಾಳವಾಗಿದ್ದಾನೆ.

ಇಲ್ಲಿ ಗ್ರಾಮೀಣ ಭಾಗದಲ್ಲಿಯೂ ಹೆಚ್ಚು ಬೈಗುಳಗಳು, ಅಪಹಾಸ್ಯಗಳು ಸಾಮಾನ್ಯ. ಅದರ ನಡುವೆಯೇ ಬದುಕುವ ಯುವಜನರು ವೈಆರ್ಸಿಗೆ ಬಂದಾಗಲೂ ಅಂತಹ ಭಾಷೆಯನ್ನು ಬಳಸುತ್ತಿದ್ದರು. ಪ್ರತಿ ಬಾರಿ ಬೇಡ, ಬೇಡ ಎಂಬ ಪದಗಳಿಂದ ದೂರ ಉಳಿಯಲು ಪ್ರಯತ್ನಿಸುವ ಯುವಜನರಿಗೆ ನಾವೂ ವಿಭಿನ್ನವಾಗಿ ಅರಿವು ಮೂಡಿಸುವ ಪ್ರಯತ್ನ ಮಾಡಬೇಕಿತ್ತು. ಒಮ್ಮೆ ಮೂವರು ಗೆಳೆಯರು ಅಂತಹ ಹೆಣ್ಣನ್ನು ಕೀಳಾಗಿ ಕಾಣುವ ಪದ ಬಳಕೆ ಮಾಡಿದರು. ನಾನು ಎದ್ದು ಹೋದೆ. ಚೆಸ್ ಬೋರ್ಡ್ ಅವರ ಮುಂದೆ ಇಟ್ಟೆ. ನನಗೂ ಆಟ ಕಲಿಸಿ ಎಂದು ಕೇಳಿದೆ. ಆಟ ಶುರುವಾಯಿತು. ಅಲ್ಲಿಂದ ಒಂದೊಂದೇ ಚರ್ಚೆಯೂ ಶುರುವಾಯಿತು. ಅವರು ಬಳಸಿದ ಪದದ ಅರ್ಥ, ಹಿನ್ನೆಲೆ, ತಾವೇ ತಮ್ಮ ತಾಯಿ, ಹೆಣ್ಣುಮಕ್ಕಳನ್ನು ಅವಮಾನಿಸುತ್ತಿರುವ ರೀತಿ ಎಲ್ಲವೂ. ಚರ್ಚೆಯ ಕಡೆಗೆ, ನಾವು ಬೇಕು ಅಂತ ಪದ ಬಳಸಿಲ್ಲ. ಕೆಲವು ಪದಗಳ ಅರ್ಥ ನಮಗೆ ತಿಳಿದಿಲ್ಲ. ನಿಮಗೆ ಬೇಜಾರಾಗಿದ್ದರೆ ಕ್ಷಮಿಸಿ. ನಾವು ಅಂತಹವರ ನಡೆವೆಯಿರುವುದರಿಂದ ಬಾಯಿಯಲ್ಲಿ ಬಂದುಬಿಡುತ್ತದೆ. ಇದರ ಬಗ್ಗೆ ಎಚ್ಚರ ವಹಿಸುತ್ತೇವೆ ಎಂದರು. ಅಂತೂ ಈ ಘಟನೆಯಿಂದ ನನಗೆ ಸ್ವಲ್ಪಮಟ್ಟಿಗೆ ಚೆಸ್ ಕಲಿಯಲು ಸಾಧ್ಯವಾಯಿತು.

"ನಿಮ್ಮ ನಿರ್ಧಾರದಲ್ಲಿ ಬದಲಾವಣೆ ಬೇಕು ಅನ್ನಿಸುತ್ತದೆ. ಅದನ್ನು ಮಾತನಾಡಬಹುದು" ಎಂದು ಕೇಳಿದವರೂ ಇದ್ದಾರೆ. ಖಂಡಿತ ಮುಕ್ತವಾಗಿ ನಿರ್ವೈಯಕ್ತಿಕವಾಗಿ ಮಾತನಾಡಿ, ನಿಮಗೆ ಸಮಾಧಾನವಾಗಿಲ್ಲ ಎಂದರೆ, ಉಳಿದ ಮೆಂಟರ್ಸ್ ಹತ್ತನೂ ಮಾತನಾಡಬಹುದು ಎಂಬ ಆಯ್ಕೆ ಇಟ್ಟಾಗ ಅವರಲ್ಲಿ ಮತ್ತಷ್ಟು ನಮ್ಮ ಬಗ್ಗೆ ನಂಬಿಕೆ, ತಾವು ಲೀಡರ್ ಆಗಿ ಹೇಗೆ ನಡೆದುಕೊಳ್ಳಬೇಕು ಎಂಬುದು ನೋಡಿ ಕಲಿಯಲು ಸಾಧ್ಯವಾಗುತ್ತದೆ. ಈ ಘಟನೆ ನಂತರ ಕೆಲವು ಯೂತ್ಸ್ ತಮ್ಮ ತಂಡದಲ್ಲಿ ಆಗುತ್ತಿದ್ದ ಸಂಘರ್ಷವನ್ನು ಅಷ್ಟೇ ಡೆಮಾಕ್ರಟಿಕ್ ಆಗಿ ಜವಾಬ್ದಾರಿ ತೆಗೆದುಕೊಂಡು ನಿಭಾಯಿಸಿದ ಉದಾಹರಣೆಗಳೂ ಇದ್ದಾವೆ.

ನಾವು ಮೆಂಟರ್ಸ್ ಸ್ನೇಹಿತರ ಹಾಗೆ ಇದ್ದರೆ, ತಮ್ಮ ಅನೇಕ ವಿಚಾರಗಳನ್ನು ನಮ್ಮೊಟ್ಟಿಗೆ ಹಂಚಿಕೊಳ್ಳುತ್ತಾರೆ. ಕೆಲವರು ತಮಗೆ ಸೆಕ್ಸ್ ಕುರಿತು ಬರುತ್ತಿರುವ ಆಲೋಚನೆಗಳು, ಪ್ರೀತಿ ಹುಟ್ಟಿದ ಅನುಭವ, ಮೊದಲ ಬಾರಿಗೆ ಪ್ರೀತಿ ನಿವೇದನೆ ಮಾಡಿಕೊಂಡ ವಿಚಾರ, ತಾನು ಪ್ರೀತಿಸುತ್ತಿರುವ ಹುಡುಗಿಯ ನಿರ್ಧಾರಗಳ ಬಗ್ಗೆ ಆತಂಕಗೊಂಡು, ತಾನು ಪುರುಷ ಪ್ರಧಾನ ಧೋರಣೆಯಿಂದ ಯೋಚಿಸುತ್ತಿದ್ದೇನಾ ಎಂಬ ಗೊಂದಲದ ಬಗ್ಗೆ...

We knew what had caused his condition. Everyone turned to mocking him, and we were left wondering: Is there anyone who truly understands young people? After that, he began to see us differently. He apologized. I will face my problems sensibly, he said. I am sorry for not being in my senses, for embarrassing you. That awareness, leading to positive change, was exactly what we hoped for. Today he continues his education, works in a private organization, and lives with his family, enjoying a little more stability.

In the rural areas these youth come from, abusive language and taunts are common. Young people grow up surrounded by it, so they sometimes bring the same language into the YRC. Instead of simply telling them "don't do this," we try to create awareness in different ways. Once, three friends used a derogatory word for women. I quietly stood up, placed a chessboard in front of them, and asked them to teach me how to play. As the game began, so did a conversation—about the meaning of the word, its history, and how such language insults their own mothers and women. Eventually they said, We didn't use it on purpose. We didn't know its full meaning. If it hurt you, we're sorry. We use such words because we hear them everywhere. We'll be more careful. I even learned a little chess through that incident.

Sometimes young people also tell us, "I think your opinion should change. Can we talk about it?" When we encourage them to discuss it openly—even with other mentors if they are not satisfied—it builds trust. They also learn how leaders should behave. After such moments, some youth have gone back to their own groups and handled conflicts democratically and responsibly.

When mentors relate to them like friends, they begin to share a wide range of matters with us: some share their thoughts about sex, the experience of falling in love, the first time they confessed their love, anxieties about a partner's decisions, and even doubts about whether their own thinking is shaped by patriarchal attitudes...

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HOW DO I READ A STUDENT?



There are ways of classifying students in a classroom—as weak, distracted, curious, lazy, interested—that I realised I had inherited as templates when I started teaching undergraduate students. While these templates help in making sense of the classroom, they risk limiting the depth of connections possible. In this piece, I recollect the process of arriving at these easy classifications, the assumptions involved in those, and what they do for students.

1. Whenever asked about how the first year of teaching has been, I respond in a half-true, half-autopilot way: there are some students who make it worth it, but the class is a mixed bag. It is a template I respond in, to avoid confronting the complete, messy truth.
2. Teachers older than me, teachers with more experience, teachers more prepared than me, all tell me: you can't reach everyone in the class, it's okay as long as most students get it. I feel dissatisfied. I don't want to believe that, but I also don't know better.
3. A Sweet But Non-Compliant Student sits on the front desk, refuses to do the exercise I've asked. He will go on to get his assignments written by someone else, but at the moment I request: "Ashay, please, at least one sentence." His friend, The Regular Sincere Student, tells me, he won't do it, he is here because he didn't get into law, he doesn't want to study. I believe him.
4. Sometimes, I simply don't feel the classroom. It does not move me. I am unable to resonate with friends and colleagues who share anecdotes of classrooms as emotional, funny, heartwarming, transformative. My classroom has so many dull, static moments. I rationalise these moments to myself: I see these students only twice a week; they have so much else going on; they might not care about a sidey writing course; they are homesick, breakfast-less, maggi-fuelled 18-year-olds. On more resentful, self-righteous days, I think of them as uninterested, only-here-for-a-degree, bratty 18-year olds.
5. But these moments also reveal the truths I was avoiding: I am not getting through to all of them. Something is not working, and none of these factors explain that. Something I'm doing creates a rupture in the connection I can have with the students. A rupture that comes in the way of us recognising each other completely.

6. I feel unsettled by the Smirky Backbencher, even after repeating to myself that the smirk isn't about me. I avoid following up on his work, I am unable to address his sometimes-trollish responses. I resign. I decide, immediately and almost unconsciously: He is the way he is.

7. I make other conjectures, all partially true. I don't command much authority, actually. It's the shorter height maybe, possibly the boyish haircut, also the age, and of course, the gender presentation. When The Obedient, Enthusiastic Girls always come to class, they confirm my hunches. They listen, laugh, and contribute with ease. I feel, sometimes with relief: They are just like that.

8. The Talkative, Lurking-After-Class Curious Student energises me. I must be doing something right. We ask each other questions, we move beyond banalities. The Quieter, Interested Student who sits next to him joins in sometimes. He always shares a coherent first draft, asks for feedback, revises his drafts and submits a final one, before the deadline. I feel I am effective, I feel energised. But when their other classmates pass without any eye contact, I pause: am I only reaching the already clued-in students?

9. On many days, I don't move the classroom. I don't move most students. But what does it mean to move? A shift, to arrive at a place you weren't in when you started. To have experienced, and to have changed. To have become, not just to have been. To learn.

10. But how will they be moved if I have already fixed them in place? I claim to be reading them, but I sort them in the process. What does the sorting do for students as learners? Who do I see as having the capacity to learn, and how does that shape the many acts of learning in the classroom? I inevitably saw some students as the ones who would learn, and others who would get by, and some others who I need to ignore. And then, without realising, I don't view students as individuals who can change and reorient themselves. That ended up shaping not just how learning happens but also what learning is.

How we conceptualise students—socially, interpersonally, relationally—is deeply linked with how we conceptualise learning itself: a stable encounter based on innate properties of the teacher and student, or something more dynamic that invites and alters us. To do the latter would involve an attempt to meet the student where they are, yet not reduce them to that. It would involve seeing them in their complexity, in their structural and temporal realities and not do so begrudgingly, or with resignation. It would require me to be open too. To move and be moved, one needs open space, anyway.



COMPLIMENTING TEACHERS

"Such an original mind...he's just brilliant!"



"Is there anything he doesn't know about?"

'He's just got this 'polish' in his speech...'

Neel Chatterjee, Prof, Sociology, ABC College

"She's hardworking and helpful...but wish she was more lenient sometimes.."

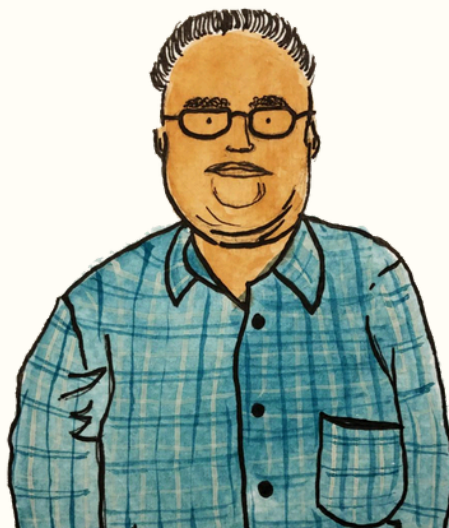


"She's points out interesting details in the text...but not the big picture ideas like Neel....I mean he's a philosopher, we can't compare"

"She's...smart...but could be more structured?"

Sweja Sundar, Prof, Sociology, ABC College

"His ideas are interesting and I know he's the only Dalit prof in the department, but he should stop teaching the same course on caste every year! "



"He's a nice guy, but not 'cool', you know?"

"He's really quite good for a reserved category teacher..."

Ramesh Kamble, Prof, Sociology, ABC College

The comic 'Complimenting Teachers' offers a parallel to the piece 'How do I read a student?' by showing how students can categorise teachers. Social biases routinely influence how students perceive the 'intellectual' worth of teachers. Surveys across universities globally have shown male professors from dominant communities are disproportionately called 'brilliant'/'geniuses'. Meanwhile, women are scrutinised more for their intellect, appearance and emotional traits, and also expected to be more 'caring' and 'accommodating'.

Teachers from marginalised castes and communities are falsely considered inferior by default, and framed in existing stereotypes. Further, they are judged against more socio-economically elite teachers (in course content, speech, appearance) who are assumed to be the 'meritorious' norm. This is also reinforced by how the elite student's judgement of teachers is given more importance socially and institutionally.

To combat these perceptions, there need to be reflective conversations among students and faculty that critically examine the sources and effects of such perceptions.

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THE SCIENTIST IN YOU

A lot of my thoughts about what it means to learn and be good at something were shaped in school. It is interesting to look back on how differently ability and improvement were seen inside and outside the classroom. For example, I was neither athletic nor especially interested in basketball, but I remember becoming a decent player through sheer practice and repetition. It was reassuring to intuitively see myself improve week on week; the sensory evidence of practice leading to progress kept encouraging me to play more.

Academic subjects came more easily to me; however, I'm unsure whether my classroom experience did much to deepen and solidify my understanding of them, as playing and talking about basketball did. I found science subjects fascinating, so I would go through all the textbooks before the school year started. Once classes started, however, I would just nod along with everyone else at what was being said. Even during lab sessions, we were not always trusted with delicate equipment or methodology, and were usually asked to observe as an aide demonstrated the experiment for us rather than perform it ourselves.

Since I read ahead, I consistently scored higher than my classmates, leading me to conclude I was "good" at science. If there were no exams at all, I don't even know if I would have been able to assess that I was "better" at science than my classmates, or "better" at physics than biology. All this felt very different from basketball, where my own senses would tell me whether I'm doing well or poorly.

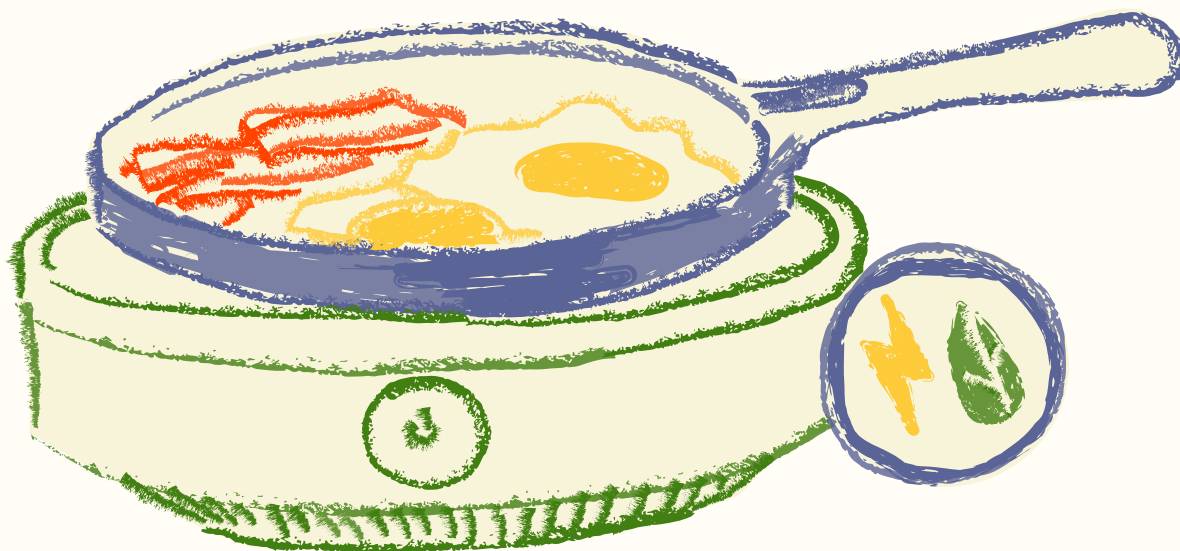
After many years out of school, I question whether it was even correct to say I was "good" at science in the first place. The label itself feels arbitrary, leaving out many everyday practices of science. Who was even eligible to be considered as doing science, let alone being good at it?

I remember spending many hours in a small garden outside our house helping my grandfather tend to plants. We had small pomegranate and guava trees, along with ridge gourd vines that would bloom with yellow flowers. He would instruct me on all parts of the process, such as why we chose some plants over others, when to dig out weeds, and when the gourds were ready to be picked. Most of what he passed on had either been shared by his parents and friends or simply learned through trial and error over many years of tending the garden. This process of looking at what worked for others, followed by working closely with your hands, resembles the classroom/lab experience that science education seems to strive for, yet nobody ever said that my grandfather was good at science. He himself would have laughed at the notion that his gardening could be called scientific performance.

It is as if our institutional definition of science often excludes most of the everyday practice of its principles, reinforcing the belief that science is only for "smart" students who will be taught about it in classrooms that few get to access. As a result of this segregation, even students who gain access to elite scientific education often focus on their exclusive status and how it can help them stand out in a competitive workforce, rather than engaging critically with the ideas they're being taught.

When we lock science away in elite institutions and treat it merely as a vehicle for a career or for clearing an exam, we create a group of learners who are either kept away from scientific learning or learn to wield it only in highly specialized environments for career gain. For both groups, this pedagogy leaves a vacuum in everyday reasoning.





This void is too easily filled by superstition, dietary fads, and unquestioned traditions. Consider how we approach our own physical fitness. It is incredibly tempting to fall for pseudoscientific supplements, crash diets, or fitness myths marketed with flashy buzzwords. Scientific temper urges us to treat our bodies as biological systems rather than rely on hearsay. Adjusting protein intake, monitoring recovery times, and observing how our joints respond to stress are deeply empirical processes. It is the practice of biology and physics, applied directly to ourselves.

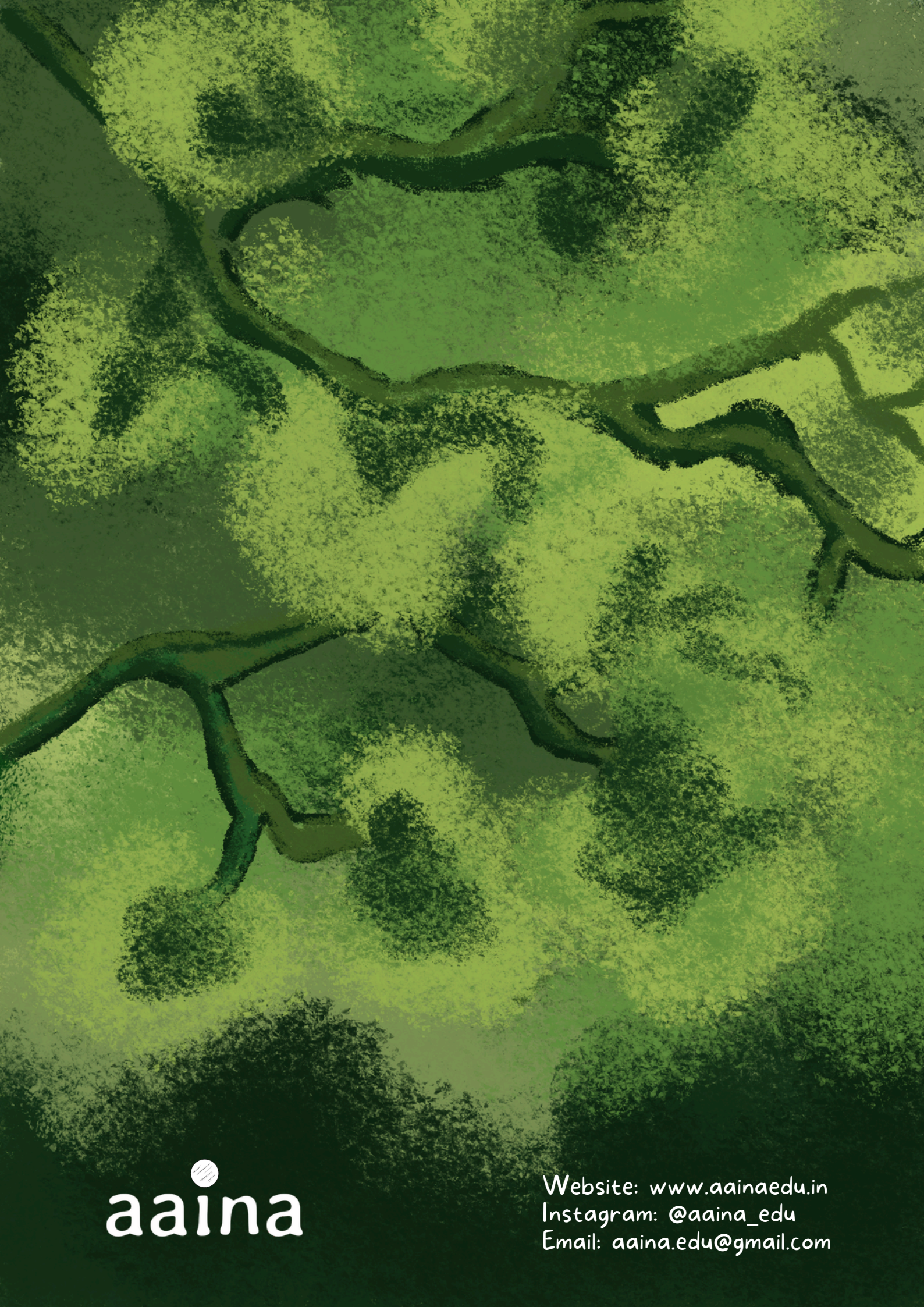
On the flip side, we are constantly performing science when forced to solve practical problems, yet we simply don't label it as such. We often celebrate this as *jugaad*. But it is rarely just a hack; it is frequently a brilliant, intuitive application of physical and chemical principles. When a street vendor wraps a block of ice in thick jute sacks to slow its melting in the sweltering Delhi heat, they are intuitively applying the principle of thermal insulation. Every time we use a clay pot to store water or curd, the porous surface allows water to seep outside and evaporate. This draws the latent heat of vaporization directly from the insides and keeps them cool.

Scientific principles are constantly at play in our everyday practice; we often just don't acknowledge them. Recognizing these practices as scientific would encourage people to also involve scientific inquiry and reasoning in other parts of their lives.

To nurture a scientific temper is not to uncritically borrow authority from experts, but to ceaselessly hone our own skills in observation and recognition. What we lose when science becomes merely academic is the sense of participation in a shared curiosity about the world. If nurtured correctly, everyday scientific practice would naturally lead to academic practice, just as playing basketball every day led me to watching professional games and reading about its theory.

When we cook, plant, repair, or even argue thoughtfully, we participate in the process of discovery. Small changes are all that are needed to imbibe the spirit of discovery in every part of our lives: reading food labels instead of advertisements, and asking how something works instead of only whether it does. When we employ rules of thumb, such as avoiding storing salt in steel containers, it's good to look up the underlying principle to build the habit of questioning our existing beliefs.

Another important practice is to document observations, making notes about one's health and the result of trying something new while cooking, gardening, or cleaning. Over time, one might start to find patterns in one's notes, which can then be looked up against scientific textbooks and research. As one develops this practice, the relationship between the self and the world is deepened. Slowly, scientific knowledge is experienced not as achievement or status, but as accumulated memories of all the times we paid attention, asked questions, kept records, looked up information, and overall engaged with our surroundings.



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