

"Haathi bhai to jaada
Jaane mota paada;
Aagal latke moti sund,
Paachal latke tuti poonch."

A school with

BIMALA Bahen Badheka, a woman in her sixties, sings this rhyme with the pleasure and innocence of childhood. There are many such songs and couplets about cats, monkeys, horses, frogs, mice and parrots which flood the atmosphere at the Bal Mandir of Dakshinamurti School in Bhavnagar. Riddles, stories and games fill the hours of children who come here to be initiated into the ways of the world — and discover the universe, layer by layer. It is open to children from the age of two-and-a-half years to five years. They climb a small hillock to reach the main building of the school, spread their own "pattis" on the floor, keep the room clean themselves, play a lot and enact most of the stories they hear.

Yet, it is not possible to describe the Bal Mandir as a pre-primary school or a nursery. What makes it different, is the acknowledgement of a child's individuality in itself — and not as a "miniature adult." This implies that a child's sensitivity is to be respected. An adult can only guide the child and not bully him or her either about learning or cleanliness. As a child discovers his or her pace of growth, a judgemental or patronising attitude of the adult can snub the creativity within the child.

Here, a world is created where children learn from each other. Older children help the smaller ones to climb up the stairs; fill their own cup with water; find their rickshaws, while remembering lines of songs and answers to riddles. Children also spend nights here — so that they can together see and under-



Giju Bhai

stand the sun set and rise; the moon and stars in the sky and also peel potatoes for the collective dinner. The overnight stay of "tiny tots" might cause anxiety to parents who drop in to see their children, but the latter are happy to be on their own.

The Bal Mandir is unique in more ways than one. It is the crystallization of an experiment in education that started as early as 1920, and is probably one of the earliest schools of its kind to have been started in India. Today, it lives on

in memory and as a tribute to its founder — Gijubhai — a man who dreamt of a school for children, where there would not be the fear of cane; a place to which they would go willingly and not be dragged or bribed by parents to do so.

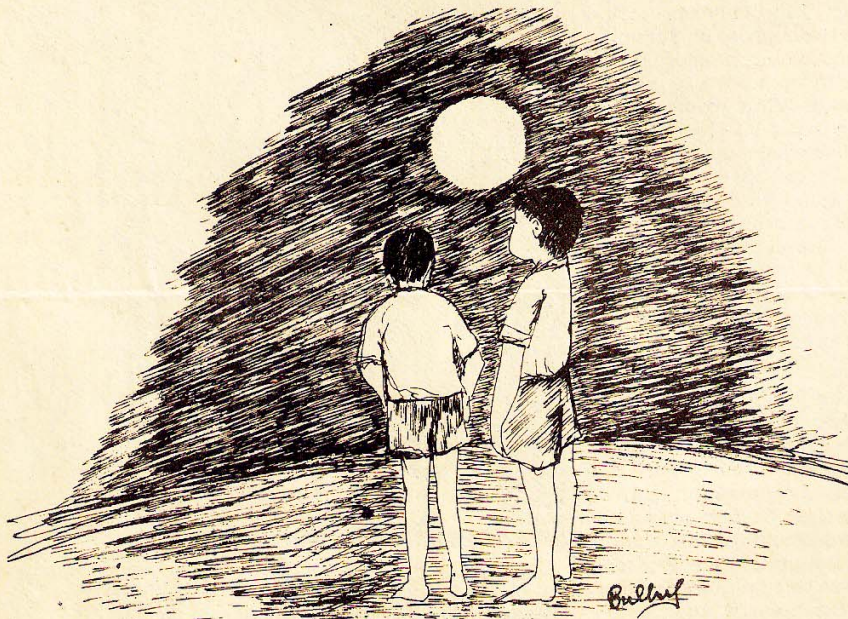
Born on 15th Nov. 1885, Gijubhai or Girija Shankar Bhagmanji Badheka was a pleader in the district court at Vadhanan camp. He left this job and joined Dakshinamurti Vidyarthi Bhavan as a rector and later became headmaster of the 'Vinay Mandir' — or the High School. During this time, he observed students and teachers closely but it was the world of little children that was beginning to intrigue and allure him. He finally resigned from the High School to start the Bal Mandir.

Gijubhai's experiment was influenced by the writings of Madame Montessori who was working in the same field, about the same time. However, Gijubhai had to discover his own idiom. Ram Narain Pathak — an associate of his recollects, "Gijubhai finally managed to convince a few parents to send their children to him. In those days, when children would be kept at home till they were

By TRIPURARI SHARMA

seven or eight, it seemed a mad idea to imagine a school for three-year-olds. Anyway some children came. He placed a lot of toys in front of them. But one child went into a corner — crying his head off, another hid in another corner; some tried to run, while one or two threw away the toys. It was a disaster to begin with. Gijubhai didn't know what to do. He quietly got up and started rearranging the toys, winding the keys and moving them about. Children started watching him. That was the beginning..."

As he was a man who could play with toys, children could overcome their fear of a strange adult and play with him. He could also tell stories, not only of kings and queens, but of animals, plants and naughty children — and the stories invariably ended in small plays, in which he also acted. "Mian Fuski" and A King In The Rat's Tale are roles which his contemporaries recollect with glee and amusement. There was also emphasis on observing nature and walks and outings were a regular feature of the school's activities. Initially, he implemented the use of tools and methods envisaged by Montessori, but later moved away into thinking of ways that were more inexpensive, easily available locally and un-



a difference

inhibiting of children who were not affluent.

Tara Bahen Modak, who joined him, further carried on the work in this direction — specially when she decided to work in Maharashtra. However, the emphasis was not on tools and techniques of teaching the alphabets or numbers, but on giving the children an atmosphere where they would feel free to express themselves. To be a good teacher one had to listen carefully to what a child had to say — and observe him (her) attentively — but without intruding on the child's effort to do things all by herself (himself).

Evidently, this approach excludes examinations and gradation in the conven-

tional sense. Children have to pass one phase of development to the other. The very fact that labels like 'primary', 'middle' and 'high school' are not used speaks of the attitude of the founders. Instead words like 'Bal Mandir', 'Kishore Mandir' and 'Vinay Mandir' have been preferred. 'Mandir' having specific connotations of worship of the child. This would at least be a place, where the child would not be beaten, insulted or jeered at.

The school fee in the early days was Rs 2 which included transport and refreshment for the child. A lot of donations came from various sources as the experiment caught up. The Prince of Bhavnagar gave the school land and a bus, so that children could easily come and go.

Today, the fee has gone up to Rs 40 per child. The Bal Mandir runs a morning and an afternoon shift. This keeps the school going as over 60 children attend it. Of course, part of the functioning has changed. A teacher now has to look after 30 children — earlier the ratio had been one to fifteen. There is also an 'Adhyapan Mandir' for teachers' training, affiliated to the school.

Gijubhai has written a large number of books in Gujarati — mostly for children. They include stories, rhymes and songs. He also wrote for parents and guardians of children. In one such essay is a passage wherein he asks the adults how it would be, if they woke up one fine morning to find themselves in a world of giants — where doors and windows are huge; stairways too high to be climbed in one step; vessels are huge and shelves suit the height of inhabitants ten times taller than them? He adds that probably this is the way infants feel in the world of adults — where everything is designed to suit the needs of grown-ups. The child is not only overlooked, but rendered helpless, because he (she) always has to ask a grown-up for water or a toy, thus irritating them. Why do we always try and keep things out of the reach of a child? Elsewhere he says, "A child is a complete person; has intellect, emotions, mind and understanding; has strengths and weaknesses — and has likes and dislikes... Let us understand the emotions of the child."

In this, talking down to a child or didacticism had no place. When Mahatma Gandhi wrote a 'Bal Pothi', laying down the norms of behaviour for children — Gijubhai rejected it as a book meant for children. It is believed that Gandhiji accepted the criticism and prevented further circulation of the book. He also wrote, "Who am I to write about Gijubhai? His enthusiasm and devotion has baffled me. His work is sure to grow." This was in 1939, when Gijubhai died. Like many other dreams seen by pioneers before Independence — this too has not blossomed.

Deepak Bhai, the present principal of Dakshinamurti, puts it clearly when he says, "We have been able to faithfully implement Gijubhai's ideals only upto the Bal Mandir. After that we are expected to follow the same pattern as other schools. Of course there is rapport and warmth between students and teachers..." Why has the experiment not been cherished? Today we tend to glorify the methods of teaching in those public schools which only aim at churning out generations of a ruling elite. Efforts that attempt to nourish and bring out the creativity in each one of us do not seem to catch our imagination. Is it too unimportant or too idealistic for our sensibilities?

