

SCHOOLS OF THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

T K Sundari

It is about half past seven in the evening. Having got off the bus on the main road, one walks down a winding road, leading to the "colony"@ of the village. It is pitch dark everywhere. There are one or two street lamps along the path but they are not functioning. There is a lone light in the distance. Walking towards it one reaches a thatched hut, lit by a petromax light. About twenty-five children are sitting inside. Their appearance suggests that they come from very poor families and are there now after a long weary day. They are sitting in two groups. One group is busy painting with bamboo stick brushes on old newspapers and the other group is filling in the blanks in their work books. There is a young man walking around. "Vathiyare, Vathiyare" (teacher) the children call out to him frequently. Maybe they want to discuss a problem or show him what they have done.

This is a familiar scene to the residents of the "colony" in the 30 villages in Chingleput Taluk, (District Sub-Division) where the "alternative schools" for children of the Rural Development Society have been running for the past two years, catering for the needs of children between 6-14 years who cannot attend school, since they have to work during the day.

The Milieu

Chingleput District in Tamilnadu is immediately south of Madras, the capital of Tamilnadu and the farthest village in the project area would be only about 100 kilometres away from the city.

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the inhabitants. Rice, millet and groundnut are the main crops in the area. There are at least two harvests of rice and one of groundnut or millet every year. High yielding varieties are cultivated and pump set irrigation is prevalent in all the villages. Due to the intensity of cultivation, there is need for farm hands the year round and employment opportunities are not scarce.

Despite the richness of land and abundance of produce, degrees of poverty and inequality are glaring. For example, while more than 40 per cent of the population own not even a scrap of land to eke out a living, 4 per cent own nearly 48 per cent of the total cultivated area. Miserably low wages are paid to labourers. The average wage earned by agricultural labourers for a 9-hour work day is between 3 rupees and 6 rupees for men and 1.50 to 3.50 for women.

@ The 'colony' is that section of the village where the scheduled caste reside and is called 'cheri'.

Caste discrimination still prevails. The harijans who are the lowest in the caste hierarchy are even to this day considered 'untouchable' by the members of other castes. Every village is divided into the 'Cheri' or 'colony' where the harijans live, and the 'Oor' (village proper) where members of all the other castes reside. They are nearly always separated by a distance of at least one kilometre, so that the distance between the harijans or out-castes and other castes is real even in the geographical sense or physical sense. It is easy to distinguish the 'Oor' from the 'Cheri' of any village from the thatched huts and lack of basic amenities in the latter.

Though caste and economic class hierarchies are no longer congruent, harijans are for the most part agricultural labourers. A good number of them are landless as well. Whole families - men, women and children - have to toil hard in the fields to keep body and soul together.

As regards infrastructural developments Chingleput district is far ahead of many others. The villages are well connected by public transport. All the villages have electricity and street lamps are to be found along the village roads.

The percentage of literates is between 20 and 30 but for the harijans this falls between 8 and 12. Most harijan children of today will be the illiterate adults of tomorrow, since they work to support their families and cannot attend schools even though nearly all the villages have at least one primary school within a five kilometre radius.

The schools are usually run by Panchayat Unions; in some villages however there are Church of South India (CSI) schools. The Panchayat Union and Government schools are all located in the upper caste sections of the village, whereas the CSI schools are in the harijan 'Cheri' (pronounced Cheyree). The Panchayat Union schools are more an excuse for the term "school" since they far from perform that function. There is one teacher managing a school with three (grading) classes. There are 40 or 45 children to a class. The same teacher simultaneously teaches Class I, Class II and Class III. He writes the vowels A, Ae, E, Ee, on the board and asks the children in the first class to keep repeating them and writing them on their slates; it is 1, 2, 3 for the children in the **second** class. One boy, the "class leader", stands in front of the class and calls out a lesson endlessly. A whole day's work is just this. In this way, what would a child learn?

One day in a meeting, the animators sat and discussed the union or formal schools they went to, as children. They recalled how they had sworn never to be teachers. Their experience, as pupils, had led them to believe that there could not be a more uninteresting or meaningless job they could have aspired to. The animators came to see teaching as a joyful and creative learning process only after their association with the National Adult Education Programme and the

Rural Development Society. Here are some descriptions by the animators of the union schools which they went to.

"I studied in a union school located near my village. The 'Vathiyar' (teacher) would ask us, the Cheri boys, to report at his house at eight in the morning. Our chores would begin with cleaning up the cow-shed and collecting the dung. After that, we would go home, eat our morning meal and hurry back to school. If one or two of us did not go to his place promptly at 8 a.m. because of some work at home, we would be punished ..."

"Punishment was such an integral part of life at school, that to us school came to be associated with the rod. It seemed to us that we were coming to school not for our benefit, but to fulfil some unknown obligation towards the teacher ..."

"Once we were about 13 years of age, the work load at home would be immense. We would get up by 3 a.m. to plough the fields and then go to school at 9 in the morning. Most often, we would have to walk or cycle 4 to 5 kilometres. After returning from school, we had to take the draught animals for grazing and would be too tired to study at night. Even if we did make an attempt, insufficient lighting would make it impossible. The single oil lamp at home would be needed for cooking, taking care of the babies and doing various household work. The street light is not reliable since it is so often fused. It is a very difficult life for us harijan children. We cannot get very far with formal schooling. That is why even the handful of us who have gone to high school are all eighth class failed or S.S.L.C. (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) failed ..."

The National Adult Education Programme

The winds of change began to sweep across the village cheris with the coming of the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) of the Government of India in 1978. The Tirukazhukundram and Tirupporur Blocks were covered by the programme through the efforts of a voluntary organisation. In nearly all the villages selected for the programme, the centres were started in the cheri. The teachers in these adult education centres, young men and women also from the cheri, were trained by the project personnel.

The adult education centres were probably among the first real programmes that actually reached the people of the cheri. Even today, the "adult" programme - as the villagers refer to it - is remembered as the most important landmark in the cheri's history, though the programme lasted only for about fourteen months. The programme tapered to a halt due to various reasons.

Even while the programme was ongoing, one question that the adult learners asked was: "what is the point of running a school for us when so many of our children are not educated? It looks as if you want to have batches and batches of illiterates so that adult education programmes can go on forever." That made the participants and organisers think

seriously about starting evening schools for children and about a follow-up programme for the adults who had become literate through the NAEP.

In the gap between leaving the NAEP and starting the Rural Development Society, the organisers kept in touch with the animators and had meetings with them as and when possible. Those animators who were interested in continued involvement in community work came to these meetings. It was then that the plan to work in villages through evening schools for children and discussion groups for adults crystallised.

The Rural Development Society

The Rural Development Society (RDS) was formed late in 1979. The ground work for the programme in terms of selections of villages and animators, planning for the animator's training and setting up the administrative office began in January 1980. The training for animators was held between 21 and 30 April 1980, and the schools started functioning immediately afterwards.

The schools were intended to become manifestations of "people's power" to prove their capacity to run their own organisations and institutions. The RDS believed that given the opportunity to actually get involved, the community would, with experience, prove itself capable. Only through such experiments could genuine people's organisations emerge.

The RDS visualised that animators drawn from the villages would become competent in teaching, planning the curriculum and in due course also preparing learning materials by themselves. It was also hoped, that eventually, even the administration of the schools would be totally in their hands, and that more and more villagers other than animators would get actively involved in the running of the schools. As for criteria the animators' commitment to this idea and their enthusiasm to train themselves to meet the demands made on them were more important than academic brilliance or achievement.

It was envisaged that these non-formal education centres would not merely be an attempt to provide push-outs and drop-outs from the formal education system with an opportunity to learn, but in fact endeavour to be an alternative to the formal system without its evils. The shortcomings in the formal system consist not only of failures in strategy, scarcity of resources or certain characterisations of its bureaucratisation or institutionalisation, but also in the values and ideas perpetuated through its techniques of communication and by the interpersonal relationship within the system.

The RDS children's non-formal education centres on the other hand were to be concerned with providing the children with knowledge and skills relevant to their lives, developing in them a capacity for objective inquiry and critical reflection instead of passive adaptation, helping grow up as men and women who comprehend their roles in the environment around them and make intelligently conceived efforts towards change.

Their classrooms were to be open discussion forums where both teachers and students have the freedom to ask and answer questions. The structure of the learning situation would be non-competitive, with no provision for marks and tests, no individual comparisons or urges to compete. Only in such an environment would the children learn to share their skills and knowledge. No rules or regulations were to be imposed and the rules felt necessary to be observed by all would be laid down by the students and teachers jointly. Each child was to be helped to work at his or her own pace and level and would not be pressurised to attain and maintain predetermined standards.

The centres, it was visualised, would thus strive to impart values that serve the interest of the oppressed and promote social change. The techniques would be low cost with teaching aids made from local materials by the animators and children as a mutual teaching and learning experience. In short, "self-reliance" would be the goal, which is indeed essential if the programme is to sustain itself ultimately with the limited resources of the people.

The Objectives

The specific objectives of the programmes are summarised below.

- (1) To help children increase their sensitivity to the beauty and wonder of the world around them:
 - a) to encourage the child to ask questions, and to conduct experiments;
 - b) to prompt the child to test the validity of each and everything prior to acceptance;
 - c) to help children practice suspension of their judgement and be prepared to wait and observe rather than to jump to quick conclusions;
 - d) to help the child to collect information about the world around and to present this information in an orderly way;
 - e) to help the children to develop sufficient basic skills to choose for themselves what they want to learn, taking care to see that they identify and acquire the scientific way of thinking (observe, record, analyse the recordings, and in daily life apply such analyses); and
 - f) to encourage children to cooperate with each other in experiments and in the enjoyment of scientific discovery and to encourage peer learning.

- (2) To provide the children an opportunity to learn and to practice some important and useful skills, drawing, copying, observing and recording, collecting, measuring and mapping;
- (3) To enable children to acquire learning skills, particularly those of language and numeracy through interesting and relevant activities;
- (4) To provide important means of enriching the child's experience of the world through creative arts - to provide children with means for self expression, helping them to develop aesthetic sensitivity;
- (5) To help children to use their voice to express their feelings and emotions; to widen the range of the child's voice, to learn folk songs, national songs and action songs and to encourage group singing;
- (6) To help children become aware of the inherent rhythm that exists in the body and surroundings through dance and also to discover rhythm in walking, movement patterns, expressing emotions through movement and the improvisation of folk dances;
- (7) To help children discover the dramatic element in an episode from daily life by dramatising a story, improvising dialogues, building up characters and staging plays; and
- (8) To help children to integrate various fragments of collected information, deepen and increase their perception through displays and exhibitions.

The People

The Children

The children attending the alternative schools are all from very poor families and have dropped out or have never attended school. They work during the day and come to the evening schools after a very hard day's work. Most of the harijan children start work at the very early age of seven or eight, and are engaged in what is known as "Padivelai". A harijan labourer who needs a loan from a landlord agrees to send his son to work for him in return for the loan given. The boy thus sent has to do any work that the landlord asks him to do, is given two meals a day and a monthly wage of about ten rupees. Even this monthly wage is usually adjusted against interest payable on the loan taken. This is called "Padivelai".

Thambiran, a 12 year old comes to the 'alternative school' in his village since he does padivelai during the day. He says: "In the days when the field has to be prepared for sowing, I go to work at about 10 or 11 o'clock at night, and start ploughing the fields.

I come home before dawn. After some rest, I clean the cow shed, remove the cow dung and take animals for grazing. At noon I get rice and curry to eat at the landlord's place after which I get back to grazing the animals. By five in the evening I bring them back to their shed and feed them. With that, my work day is over. Sometimes I may be asked to run an errand or two in which case I have to come late to school."

It is only boys who are sent to do padivelai. The girls have to do household work, take care of the younger children in the family and also take the family's animals, if any, for grazing. Their days are so full that they find it difficult to attend even the evening school. They have to give their mothers a helping hand in preparing the family's only meal for the day which is cooked in the evening. Also, once the girls attain puberty, the parents are not willing to let them go out after sunset. The prospects for the education of girls is therefore bleaker than for the boys.

The children have been coming to the alternative schools for two years now. Here is what some of them had to say about themselves, the school, and the reasons why they have been attending it.

"I am Perumal. I work as a construction labourer. I only work in my own village or in the neighbouring village. I am paid four rupees or three rupees a day and given a meal. I work from ten in the morning to five in the evening. I studied up to class three and had to stop schooling to take care of my baby brother when my parents went away for harvesting. I have been working for the past three years as a construction labourer. Before that I did padivelai for two years. I worked in a Mudaliar (upper caste Hindu) home for one year and left because he gave me very little to eat. In the next place I went to work in, I was underpaid. I finally decided to stop doing padivelai."

"I am just returning from working in the Thalaivar's (village headman) house. I just finished tying the cows back in their shed and feeding them straw. They gave me 10 paise when I came. I have not eaten still. I will have to go back from the school and then eat."

"I studied up to class one and then stopped studying to graze the cows we own. One day when I was in the grazing grounds, some of the boys told me that a school for boys like us had started and that it functioned in the evening. So I decided to come ... so that I can learn the alphabets ... You ask me why? Suppose I get a letter now, I have to run to others and ask them to read and tell me the contents and more often than not, they will say they are too busy. If I am literate I do not have to be dependent on others for such things."

"If one studies, one can get a job ... not the kind of work I do; something much better like an office job. I want to study a lot - up to the very end ..."

"I work in the fields, ploughing and harvesting. Now I can read and write, it is good to know to read and write. It is not directly useful for agricultural work. But what is wrong with being literate and working in the fields?"

"Every cow herd in this colony is now in this evening school. We do get together during the day on the grazing ground while watching the animals and sing a song we learnt the previous evening, or practice writing numbers and alphabets or play a game."

"We learn a lot of things in the school and in the exhibitions. This time, in the science exhibition, we learnt that house flies are the cause of so many dreadful diseases. But try telling this to people at home! No one listens!"

"It is a very difficult life for us. I work, my mother works and my father works. The landowner does not have to work - he sits in the shade and yet gets enough to eat ... If only I had five acres of land, then I won't work for anyone else. I will work on my own land and take all the harvested grain home ... With what I earn, I will buy a milch cow or two and through selling the milk, I will earn more money ... You ask what I will do with all that money? Say someone wants a hundred rupees or so as a loan, I will lend it out on interest ... I will buy good clothes, eat good food, and I won't have to struggle like this ..."

"I was very keen on going to school, but my parents made me stay back at home after I finished class one. They wanted me to take care of the goats. Now when I take books home from this evening school and read and write, they say, 'If this child had gone to school, imagine how well he would have done!' Only now they realise this. Earlier they used to say, 'what is the use of going to school, you won't learn a paisa's worth ...' Now they say, 'Poor child, he should have been allowed to study further ...'"

There was one incident which jolted the RDS into realising the utter monotony of these childrens' lives and the truth that poverty had robbed them of childhood's most precious attributes, fun, fantasy, wonder, imagination. This is a recollection of what happened in a story telling session in one of the classes where each child said one line and a story was built up. "Once upon a time there lived a king and a queen ..." "They had a son". "The son was sent for padivelai ..." "He used to get up early in the morning and go to work and come back late in the evening ..." "and thus he grew up, and got married one day ..." "This couple had two children, a son and a daughter ..." "The son went for padivelai and the daughter did work at the house." And so the story went on, through generations of royal children who did padivelai or took care of younger siblings at home till all the 30 children in the class had added his sentence in the story. The incident reinforced the commitment to the objectives with which RDS started. The children should have an opportunity to open up their minds to see nature and around them and be stimulated to experience childhood pleasures.

The Animators

The animators or teachers are all young men and women drawn from the cheri in which the school functions. As mentioned earlier, with the exception of two or three, the rest of the animators had earlier worked with the National Adult Education Programme and were teaching adults. In a sense, many of them were part of the present programme from the planning stage itself. They range in age from 19 to 37 years and the majority of them have either studied up to class eight or have failed their school final exams. They are all harijans. Most of them are occupied in agriculture and work during the day on leased land or land they own. This enables them to conduct the classes at a time suitable to the children, whose working hours like theirs change with the agricultural seasons. The animators being from the same village share similar experiences in agriculture and animal husbandry, and other environmental problems with the children, and understand their problems and difficulties. They do not write the children off as dull, stupid or ineducable. They know what it is to be labelled thus and the damage it does to the child's mind. They are willing to give every child a fair chance. This kind of identification with the children is of far greater importance than the skills and efficiency a "trained" teacher from outside would perhaps have. When they began, the animators did not have the necessary formal training, had a poor information base, and had never been introduced to serious self learning.

To the RDS the challenge was to explode the myth that education is a field so specialised that it is beyond the comprehension of the ordinary man, that no man with common wisdom can dare become an educator - someone who can initiate the learning process. For, is not life itself education and is not everyone learning at every stage of his life? The RDS accepted that training was essential, and that it should be made easily accessible to motivate individuals.

The schools are run part-time, so that employment in this project does not become the animator's sole means of earning a livelihood. Dependency of that kind erodes the commitment and dedication with which they start, and the project deteriorates into a source of employment. If this project ended they would be compelled to look for employment in another project instead of staying on in their own villages and working for their people.

The Programme Implementing Agency

The Rural Development Society which is the agency implementing the programme, was started through the initiative of those who were associated with the NEAP in the Tirukazhukundram block. It is a secular organisation with committed young people. The programme started with a staff of three coordinators in charge of administration, materials and methods, training and research respectively, and three assistant coordinators each of them responsible for 10 schools and one assistant coordinator responsible for follow-up programme for adults. In addition, there were 33 animators and two office staff.

The plan was that as the programme progressed, the animators would be gradually given more and more responsibility and some of the coordinators and assistant coordinators would withdraw. Accordingly, there are now only two assistant coordinators and of these, only one is responsible for the schools. There is a single coordinator for the whole programme. The animators are gradually getting more and more involved with all aspects of running the programme. In early 1981, all the animators became members of the Rural Development Society with the right to take decisions affecting it, and to be acquainted with all matters connected with the society. In late 1981, the first executive committee of the society gave way to a new one consisting exclusively of the animators. This committee now looks into the accounts, plans the monthly budget and takes decisions regarding staff appointment and running of the programmes. The programme coordinator is only an ex-officio member of the committee with no voting powers.

This has been the first step towards making the RDS a people's programme. The animators are now participating actively in the preparation of learning materials and development of the curriculum. It is hoped that the day is not far off when the programme will become self-sufficient not only financially but in all other aspects as well.

The Programme

There are in all 30 schools run by the Rural Development Society in 30 villages located in the Chingleput Taluk of Chingleput District. The schools began functioning around 15 May 1980 and have now completed their second year. The total number of children between 6 and 14 years covered by the programme is 1211 of which 640 are boys and 571 girls. The enrolment per school varies from 25 to 65. Usually a single animator handles each centre. Where there are more than 50 children there are two animators to a school.

The duration of the course was not fixed in the beginning and the plan was to take the children as and when they joined, group them according to their ability level and help them learn at their own pace. As the children progressed, materials and aids to meet their learning needs were to be prepared. A child could leave after becoming literate, if that is what he wants to do, or he could stay on to learn further. The Open University courses conducted in Tamil by the Madurai Kamaraj University are a blessing for non-formal education programmes like this one, since those children who do wish to go ahead up to the university level now have an opportunity to do so.

Financial help for running the programme is provided by a secular organisation in West Germany. The cost per child works out to Rs.178 a year or roughly Rs.15 per month. The initial project period was three years ending December 1982 and it is already planned to meet future project costs from local fund raising villages and also from the proposed income-generating programmes of the RDS.

Training

The animators started the schools after a 10 day orientation and training programme. Thereafter, they have had ongoing training regularly for two days a month for the past two years.

The 10 day training programme was an attempt to orient the animators into understanding children, appreciating each child's uniqueness and worth and learning to respect the child's ability. It aimed at laying the foundation for an approach to learning, dramatically different from what the animator or the child would have experienced. The activities and experiences provided in the training had one main theme - to kindle in the animators a "sense of wonder" about children, their thinking, feeling and action, and learn about the methods and materials which would help sustain their natural curiosity, and help them learn.

Besides being introduced to basic concepts regarding teaching children, the animators were made to observe children in the age group 6-14 years and to attempt to get a glimpse of the child's world. They gave a critique of the present formal education system based on their personal experience and outlined how different the new schools would be. They did clay modelling, painting and collage, sang songs, prepared children's stories, put on plays, made puppets and aids for teaching literacy and numeracy, gathered objects from the surrounding environment and discussed how they could be used as teaching aids. In addition, material was given to them to read and widen their knowledge about what the teaching of children involved.

The monthly two-day meetings serve as a forum for animators to exchange their classroom experiences, discuss the learning difficulties of children and how to overcome them, the problems they face in communicating with the children, the practical difficulties faced in handling a class of children in a variety of age-groups and levels and in the usage of aids. On these occasions they are also initiated into understanding the process of learning, psychology of child teaching and educational philosophies. Fresh ideas are brought in by the participation of resource persons from outside. For instance, the RDS invited Cathy Spagnoli who introduced the concept of rhythm to the animators and taught them how to use body movements to make children open out. She also exposed them to a wide range of songs in many different languages. A visitor may be surprised to find a harijan child in a remote village of Chingleput sing 'Che Che Kole', a tribal song from Africa. A craft teacher from Bal Bhavan taught them how to make beautiful articles from ordinary materials; there was another craft master who introduced making moulds and dolls - the list is a long one.

These meetings vitalise the programme by re-kindling the sense of wonder in the animators. There is always something new to learn about teaching children.

After the first few months the animators expressed their lack of confidence in handling science and arithmetic lessons since they were themselves not qualified in, or aware of, many of the basic concepts. This was when the RDS realised that the information base of animators needed to be strengthened if the schools were to run as visualised. If the animator lacked basic knowledge of the subject and was not grounded in the fundamentals, he could not be expected to teach the children imaginatively. They often resort to making the children learn by rote and give unintelligible information from a book. This method will obviously not be able to hold the attention of the children, who will then not find the classes either challenging or appealing. Ultimately, discipline will degenerate into ordering and caning.

In every monthly meeting therefore, some time has been set apart to provide imaginative experiences for learning science and arithmetic concepts for the animators. It now makes more sense to them when they hear of teaching science through the "discovery" method as they have experienced it themselves.

Of late, one session is spent on getting to know more about what is happening in the world today - politically, economically and socially. Current news from papers or periodicals is compiled by one of the staff and is given to the group for reading and discussion.

The RDS started with a group of young people from the villages whom many would have considered ill-equipped to teach children imaginatively. But they understand their children well, are enthusiastic about the task they undertake and above all are open to new ideas, willing to work very hard and eager to learn. If what the children and their parents say is to be believed, the animators in the RDS night schools are better teachers than their counterparts in the local village schools.

The Curriculum

The curriculum was planned with the major objectives of the programme in mind. The child should sustain his innate sense of wonder about the world around him. This sense of wonder should be kept alive and channelled to acquire mastery over learning, language and numeracy and other useful skills by expressing himself creatively. This would be done by providing the child with creative learning experiences.

It is difficult to imagine the kind of handicaps that a child from a socially and economically deprived background has. He or she has probably never seen a printed book in the first five years of life and is not familiar with the written word. Even pictorial representations of three dimensional objects are difficult to comprehend. The child has never been asked questions nor has had an opportunity for anything more than basic communication. Life for the child has very few avenues for expressing imagination and developing latent creativity. Being burdened with adult responsibilities from an early age, the child has ceased to be a child in the real sense of the word.

Given this situation in the RDS school understandably the emphasis has been on creative activities such as games, music, dance and story telling, drawing, painting and clay moulding. Activities were designed to involve the child prior to the introduction of the actual alphabet. Aids were prepared and introduced in the following sequence as a necessary pre-literacy stage.

- Step 1: The two dimensional forms of familiar objects to just identify the objects;
- Step 2: Another set of the two dimensional forms of the same objects to match with the first set of objects;
- Step 3: Two sets of two dimensional forms of objects which are very much similar but still different to match, to develop facility for subtle discrimination and identification;
- Step 4: Slightly more abstract two dimensional pictures (a set of four and another one which is identical with one of the four pictures). The single picture is to be matched with its pair in the group of four; and
- Step 5: A series of pictures each depicting an event in a story for helping them to serialise them and see the continuity.

After this, simple words representable pictorially were introduced. The children learnt words, then letters comprising them and used these letters in other combinations to form new words.

In numeracy, the basic concepts were introduced through children's experiences with concrete objects followed by the teaching of number symbols.

Learning about the environment was through the scientific process of observation, experiment, recording, inference and generalisation. It was planned that at a later stage plays and stories, role playing and simulation games would be used to help the children view their lives and milieu critically and to contemplate how they could work towards changing these.

The curriculum as we see it is different from that of formal schools only in one essential sense. While the formal school curriculum seems to operate in a vacuum, closing eyes to the context in which it functions, the RDS schools seek to highlight the context and help the children reflect critically on it. But this is only in addition to their learning the basic skills imparted in any well run formal school.

The Method

At first only aids and teacher guides were given to the teachers. This soon turned out to be a disaster. The animators had begun to teach children the alphabet and numerals by rote since that is what the villagers expected a "proper teacher" to do. As far as literacy was concerned, reaction was elicited by introducing words (illustrated with pictures) before teaching the alphabet. A frequent question raised by the community was how could one introduce words before teaching the letters. Apart from that, there should be sequential learning of the alphabet; the method to them was strange, to say the least. Teaching through games and aids was not considered "real teaching" by the parents. They thought that only a teacher who talked all the time was doing his job. The animators who felt insecure without textbooks and the usual paraphernalia succumbed to the villagers' pressures.

There was also severe opposition from the parents for activities like clay modelling. They felt that it was only because these children were from backgrounds where "they have to soil their hands in agricultural labour" that the teachers dared to ask them to work with clay. All these are forgotten events now, and parents pride themselves on how well-versed their children are in singing, or how clever they are with their hands.

The RDS had to reach a compromise. It was decided that language would be introduced through words. But the words would be in alphabetical order. Aids and activities for language, arithmetic and science formed the main tools for learning.

Textbooks containing the activities mentioned in teachers' guides had to be designed and introduced in accordance with the suggestions of the animators. For reasons not easily explicable the animators have found it easier conducting activities if they are in textbooks which children keep, than guides which they have to go through.

Project Evaluation

The programme is founded on trust and respect for all who are a part of it. External evaluation of a supervisor sitting in judgement has never been a part of it. It is acknowledged that the entire team is experimenting with something new and can only learn through trial and error. Self-evaluation therefore would be the best course.

The animators are helped by the assistant coordinators in running their centres effectively. They fill in weekly records giving details of the class and activities. These are consolidated from time to time and the animators are given a feedback on their progress. Discussions are held on the remedial measures and follow-up action taken.

Pupil Evaluation

For the children, there are no regular examinations or tests. The animator or the coordinator makes a note of the progress of different children through classroom observation. If, for example, half the class is found to be unable to identify numbers beyond a hundred, the animators group in the monthly meeting discusses the kind of regrouping which needs to be done, the additional aids to be prepared and how help can be given to this set of children.

There is no "passing" or "failing" and no "clever" and "dull" children in these classes. The actual benefits of this will only be visible in the long run. For the present, it can only be said that while the formal school was a place to fear, the alternative school has become a place children enjoy.

The Children's Summer Fair

Any account of the RDS schools would be incomplete without the mention of the marathon children's summer fair held in May 1981, to mark the first anniversary of the starting of the alternative schools.

All the approx. 1,200 children of the RDS schools assembled at the vast open grounds of Sembakkam village, along with some of the youth and elders of each of their villages. They were there for three days - from 1 to 3 May 1981. The children were engaged in creative activities - they drew, painted, made collages, articles from palmyra leaves and dolls from metal wire and rope. Every school put up an item in the cultural evening that lasted nearly five hours. There was a science exhibition where the children could do simple experiments with ordinary things (like making a lens with glass and water). There were fun parlours, a couple of merry-go-rounds and shops with delicious eats. There was a film show and a magic show as well.

To the children, it was an experience which was the first of its kind and is still fresh in their memory. For the animators, it was, as one of them said; "proof of just how much all of us animators could do through months of toil and cooperative effort. A year later, it still seems too good to be true." And for all the others who witnessed the children's activities, it brought home the truth that even children from very deprived backgrounds had immense potential which is often untapped.

To keep up with the tradition started with the 1981 summer fair, and to commemorate the second anniversary of the RDS alternative schools, a science exhibition was held in May 1982 in three village centres, to which children from all the other RDS schools came. There were charts and models and slide shows on the solar system, evolution of life, plants and animals and man - how the human body functions and what causes basic malfunctions.

Community Participation

From the beginning, the involvement of the community in the running of the schools was considered to be of primary importance. Since the NAEP was being run in all the villages, the community was acquainted with the persons who started the Rural Development Society. In many cases it was the people themselves who had suggested that there be night schools for children in place of or at least in addition to classes for adults. There was a community meeting in every village once this plan was crystallised. An agreement was reached that the villagers who were interested in having the alternative schools would allocate the land and construct a thatched hut which would house the school. All the schools were built by the community. The villagers therefore feel responsible and claim their right to determine the running of the schools.

When the schools began, parents of many of the children who came to school would come regularly and observe what was going on to make suggestions and give the animator a helping hand whenever needed. The organisation is deeply involved in the villagers' lives. The interactions range from informal meetings to organised discussion of issues, role playing and staging of street theatre.

A meeting of village elders from all the villages was called to discuss steps through which the villagers could start playing a decisive role in the running of the schools. It was suggested that village committees be formed which would be responsible for ensuring that the school functions regularly for the benefit of the children, provide some financial support to the school through collection of grain from the community after harvest, and also enable villagers to participate in the activities of the school, by identification of resource persons from among themselves who could teach the children music, dancing and various skills.

The school has become a base from which many other activities emanate. Whenever there is an issue to be discussed, the villagers assemble near the school after the class hours and discussions take place around the petromax lamp. Regular discussion sessions also take place in many villages as part of the follow-up programme for adults. News clippings about major events and issues concerning them and their relation to the people's present down-trodden situation are discussed. These discussions are open-ended and are intended more for strengthening critical awareness than for solving immediate problems.

The school has provided the cheri people links with 30 other villages through their respective animators. More than once, a problem faced by a particular cheri has been solved through the involvement of all the animators who succeeded in bringing it to the notice of the authorities concerned.

In the last year, a drama group was formed from among the animators. They have been staging plays using "street play" techniques in all the villages at regular intervals. The plays centred around the life of the villagers highlighting their lives critically. For example, in one of the plays, there is one part where the poor harijan who works as padiyal for a big landowner needs a loan and promises to send his son for padi work in return. The mother who is keen that their son should study has sent him away to school. The padiyal fights with his wife, goes to the school room, abuses the teacher for taking the child away from work and spoiling him, says: "He would do better earning 10 rupees a month grazing cattle - at least he will eat, " and drags the child away from school.

This scene simultaneously brings an uproar of laughter and comments like "they are only depicting what is happening here." After the play there are usually discussions on why the poor are compelled to deny their children some of their basic needs and are so badly exploited. In some of the villages, the plays have led to formation of youth "Sangams" or associations with a view to co-operative action to improve their lot.

The RDS 'Alternative Schools' are thus more than just places where working children come to study in the evenings. They are centres of action for the development of the community as a whole.