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A DOWN TO EARTH SUPPLEMENT FOR THE YOUNG AND CURIOUS



## To the 'T'

A Teacher's Day special edition drawing  
inspiration from those who truly practise  
what they preach



# Green is my colour



**A unique experiment in 'nature-based learning' is in progress on the banks of the Atreyi River in Balurghat, a small town in West Bengal, near India's border with Bangladesh.**

*Tuhin Subhra Mandal*

**I**t was 2004. I had started teaching in a school close to the verdant Jaldapara National Park. I have always nurtured a deep love and respect for nature and environment (maybe a legacy of my mother), and the natural beauty of Jaldapara was a motivating factor as well – I resolved to make issues and concerns of environment a part of my classes, activities and discussions with my students.

We gave this initiative a name: *Sankalpo* (meaning, resolution in Bengali). Using this platform, we organised and performed plays and skits on environment and conservation – the first of these was called 'Tree is life'. We conducted anti-plastic campaigns. The best part is all the students participated in all these activities with great gusto and enthusiasm.

In 2006, I moved to Balurghat's Ayodhya Kalidasi Vidyaniketan, which became the nurturing home for another bunch of very enthusiastic girls and boys. Our forum here was named *Dishari Sankalpo* – meaning a 'resolution that shows the way'. Theatre can be a very powerful tool for dissemination and awareness-building – we used theatre, plays and skits to talk about environment and its protection.



What's more, we started stepping out of the classroom and into the neighbouring Raghunathpur forest to understand nature and what it means for us – as we explored the forest, we would try to identify birds, trees and butterflies. Once, I urged my students to hug the trees of their choice and then tell the group what they felt. Their reactions were quite interesting: some felt that they were hugging a friend, while others imagined that they were resting in their mother's lap. One student who had an argument with her mother, found consolation in her tears as she hugged a tree.

I ask my students to establish a lasting friendship with their trees. By talking to them. By protecting them. And by celebrating the trees' birthday as well on the days they celebrate their own.

Our excursions have also extended to the banks of the Atreyi River. Every month, the students gather together near the river under our 'Come to the riverbank' campaign to express their love and appreciation for this ancient waterway in our town. We write and recite poems about the river, compose and sing songs about it, and try our

best to keep the river and its banks clean.

One interesting addition to this campaign has been a play composed and conceived by the students. Named 'The tale of Atreyi' (*Atreyi'r Upakhyaan*), this play demonstrates how the river is not exclusive to any one nation – it belongs to both India and Bangladesh, and children from both the countries must strive to conserve it. The play has received rave reviews from its audiences.

Our students are the future guardians of this Earth. They must be involved and encouraged to participate in every effort to save the environment. I believe that through our collective effort, my students and I – the *Shobuj Mitras* (Bengali for 'green friends', literally) – are now reimagining our lives and existence alongside the river and this environment.

*The author is a Geography and Environmental Sciences teacher at the Ayodhya Kalidasi Vidyaniketan, Balurghat, Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal. The article has been translated from Bengali to English by Souparno Banerjee.*



# A Coimbatore School Walks the Talk



**From food waste composting, avoiding single-use plastics, promoting metal containers, recycling paper, and harnessing solar—this place has it all!**

*S. Uma Maheswari*

Environment education does not advocate a particular viewpoint or course of action. Rather, it teaches individuals how to weigh various sides of an issue through critical thinking and enhances their problem-solving and decision-making skills.

Children can learn about the environment in many ways, and they should start this education at school. Experiential lessons in the school yard, field trips, green clubs, and school-wide sustainability projects can make environment an easily accessible and understandable topic.

Primary education is a crucial stage in the development of a person's behaviour, social awareness and selflessness. At school, we learn values and behaviours that stay with us throughout our adulthood and define who we are. That is what makes it so important to spark an interest in caring for and protecting the environment while children are still at school. The aim should be to make caring for nature part of children's lives, as opposed to just studying it.

Environment education has other positive effects on young people. In 2017, Stanford University studied how this subject affects

schoolchildren and found that 83 per cent of schoolchildren improved their ecological behaviour and 98 per cent scored better in other subjects such as maths and the sciences.

Keeping in line with these observations, our school has initiated a number of practices and measures towards building awareness about environment and its conservation.

- We segregate waste into three categories—landfill waste, waste that can be recycled, and food waste for composting.
- Children are encouraged to make compost pits at home.
- They are encouraged to bring home-cooked food only that too in stainless steel tiffin boxes and metallic water bottles (not plastic ones).
- Children are asked to eat healthy food; the school

regularly observes 'healthy eating week', 'national lunch week', 'vegetable day', 'fruits day,' etc.

- Students are motivated to donate their clothes, toys, and books to the library, from where these items reach disadvantaged children.
- Management of food waste is an important area of work. Leftover and spilled food waste is collected from each class for making manure, using a mud pot digester. The natural fertiliser it produces is used in the school garden.
- Class teachers have their lunch in the classrooms with the children to ensure that no food is wasted.
- The subject of food waste is discussed in science and social science sessions.
- Healthy food charts are shared

with parents to make them aware.

- The school puts special emphasis on reduction of paper waste. We ask the children to bring paper waste from their homes. It is weighed and then children are given stationary items—like, pencils, erasers, colours, notebooks, etc.—in return. All waste paper and cardboard is sent to a recycling centre, which gives back recycled notebooks. This year, to minimise paper use, we adopted a system of writing on slates—so we gave slates to all classes from KG to Grade V.

- Our campus has been made litter-free and use of plastic items is strongly discouraged.
- The campus uses solar energy. Our school takes care to build awareness on renewable energy and energy conservation through exhibitions, mime shows, skits, songs, debates, etc. We also celebrate occasions such as 'Wind day', 'Earth day', 'Earth hour', and 'Energy Conservation day'.

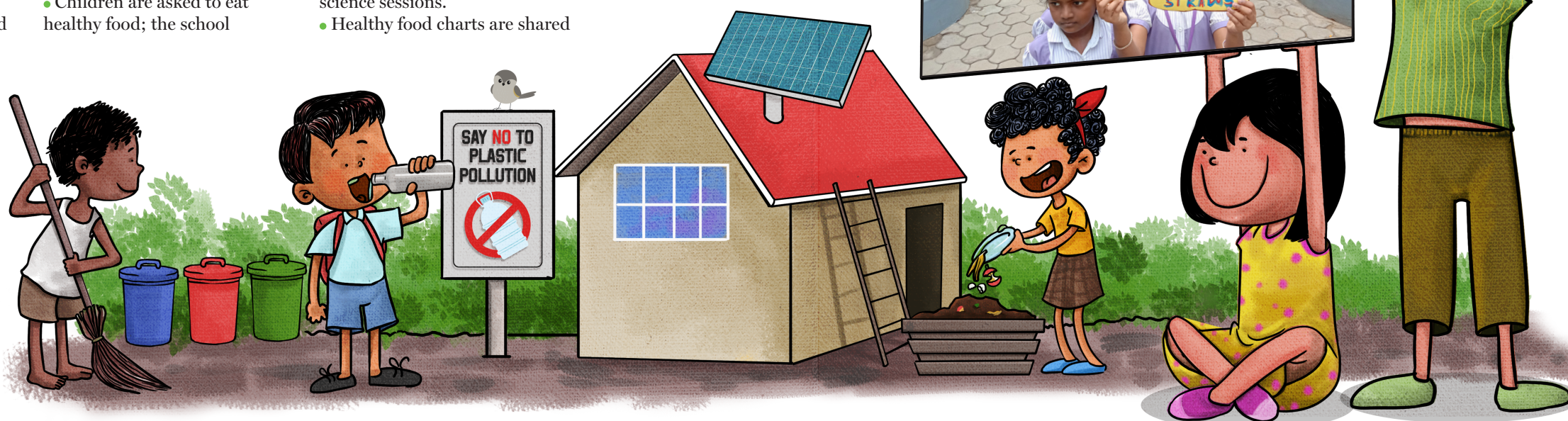
- Efforts are also made to change the mind-set of parents—they are asked to use cloth bags instead of plastic ones; replace

plastic containers in their kitchens with containers made of other materials; and discard the use of single-use plastic items (crocery, etc.) during marriages and other social and community gatherings.

We strongly believe that 'the environment is where we all meet, where we all have a mutual interest—it is the one thing all of us share...', and it is our responsibility to keep it safe and thriving. We hope that all these practices would result in our greater common good.

*The author teaches Computer Science and Tamil to classes 3-5 at PSGR Krishnammal Nursery and Primary School, Coimbatore.*

**At school, we learn values and behaviours that stay with us throughout our adulthood and define who we are.**





# No More Complacent Dinosaurs



**A thoughtful and frank perspective on teaching environment education in a classroom, coming straight from the ground level.**

*KS Rai*

**“You cannot protect the environment unless you empower people, you inform them, and you help them understand that these resources are their own, that they must protect them.”**

The Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel winner, Wangari Mathai, has rightly expressed the sine qua non of environmental education at school level. That's where our country's future spends its quality time and energy for about 5-7 hours daily.

However, the paradox is that our curriculum does not have enough space for environmental lessons except for some scattered terms like 'climate change' and 'global warming' spread across a few pages. Though there are designated chapters in Geography, they are inadequate to address our present complexities and can be wrapped up within barely 2-3 periods. In fact,

most schools—especially those subscribing to CBSE—do not have specific textbooks for environmental studies. Our academics is impaired by such disciplinary boundaries which are as rigid as icebergs. Though our National Education Policy emphasizes upon an interdisciplinary approach, our formal institutions continue pursuing an assessment-driven methodology.

Environmental sciences demands experiential learning. It is application-based and cannot be limited to bookish knowledge. Thus, the much needed environmentalism loses its essence in today's scenario, especially given the secondary students who are as complacent as dinosaurs prior to their extinction!

In such circumstances, the most that an academic institution do for environment protection is—paper-work, like organizing painting and essay competitions; or one-day plantation drives that are mandated by the government and accompanied with no follow-ups. Usually, the students who participate on such occasions—One Day to Mother Earth, Ten Minutes to Earth, Environment Day, Biodiversity Day, etc.—aren't even bothered

about the survival of their saplings. Disclaimer: This observation is solely based on my personal experiences of being a Green teacher over several years and may not be generalised.

We know that environment degradation is vividly horrifying and urgent actions are needed by all stakeholders and stockholders to stabilise the ever-escalating situation. No doubt, a school with its huge and potential human resources is a significant hope. Also, a teacher's conscience does not allow him/her to turn a blind eye upon this catastrophe. But it all depends upon the concerned teachers, who have these young children at their disposal, to impart environment-related knowledge and inculcate behavioural changes among them.

All being said, our school also weighs the pen-and-paper evaluation more than the cross-disciplinary approach. However, there are plenty of topics through which teachers can discourse upon environmental issues and that is exactly how most classroom transactions take place, including ours. I, as a teacher, scrape out topics from Social Studies, General Science, Mathematics, etc. to develop the environmental skills and competencies of my students.



For instance, I find a plethora of scope to talk about deforestation through Class 8 History—the timber demand in Britain from India and the spread of print culture causing large-scale chopping of our trees. Poems in English readers, like *No Men are Foreign* by James Kirkup in Class 7 and *On Killing a Tree* by Gieve Patel in Class 9 also spark insightful discussions on ecology.

A major catalyst in rousing environmental consciousness in our school is the Eco-Club established in 2015. It recruits green corps from across the grades 6-12 and also plays a critical role in breaking the disciplinary barriers. Under its banner, children not only take the responsibility to keep our campus clean but also organise local outreach awareness programmes, specifically about the ban on single-use plastic implemented by our state.

Our young enthusiasts do everything within their capacity to inculcate green habits and practices among their peers.

Since our school is located close to the district headquarters, it is criss-crossed by several pavements which are prone to plastic and paper litter caused by everyday pedestrians. Our locality also ails from water shortage. All in all, our building does not have an eco-friendly location. But these hurdles do not dissuade our determined campaigners, whose objective is to create a waste-free zone within the school and its surroundings.

To achieve this target, they pick up waste daily and store it in a designated place during after-school hours as it is unfeasible to undertake these activities during school time due to studies. On holidays, they treat all this waste collected—particularly, the plastic waste by washing and drying it for reuse. Earlier, we re-used this plastic waste to make sofa cushions, flower vases, pen-holders, etc. However, ultimately we realised that these items are eventually

rendered useless and become waste again. Therefore, these days, we re-use the plastic waste to make large durable dustbins for our school campus.

Similarly, our school has also installed a water harvesting tank and a compost pit. For greening our premises, we have used all the non-concretized area for cultivating organic vegetables and fruit trees, instead of only growing flowering plants. As per their season, suitability, and climate, the most successful crops are of pumpkin, cucumber, peas, beans, spinach, round chilly, cabbage, avocado, cherry, and guava. Their yield is sufficient to feed our mid-day meal kitchen.

Needless to say, we are not doing anything unusual but it is definitely of worth for conserving our environment; as Wendell Berry says, 'The earth is what we all have in common'.

*The author is a Green Teacher at the Government Senior Secondary School, Namchi, South Sikkim.*



# HAPPY TEACHER'S DAY

WITH LOVE FROM,

