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Waldorf Education in India

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India is a richly diverse country of deep mysteries, enduring cultural traditions, and striking contrasts where the western imagination is easily stirred by the vivid colors, fragrant aromas, and haunting sounds. Twenty-first century India is a rapidly developing country with an increasingly large global footprint and what has been primarily an agrarian society is experiencing significant growing pains with the transition into the digital age. The often romanticized western picture of mystical India and bucolic village life is undergoing rapid changes and the country has seen a tremendous migration of its population to urban areas, significantly straining the limits of the infrastructure and available resources.

Modern India

Our state of Andhra Pradesh and in particular, Hyderabad, is widely acknowledged as a major IT hub of the country and continues to experience staggering growth rates averaging 10% a year, ever expanding city limits, and increasingly ambitious construction projects at every turn. The steadily growing numbers of mostly unskilled laborers migrating from rural districts and the rise of an affluent and educated middle class have led to widespread cultural changes in all levels of society. The dynamic of rapid, unchecked urbanization seen in Hyderabad is shared throughout the country.

A common pattern in developing countries is a belief that limitless growth is the measure of human progress, which usually results in the hasty use of every inch of available space. Lush green lands are turned into concrete jungles, mighty rocks that stood the test of time are reduced to rubble and dust to create millions of square feet of livable space

for the steady stream of new residents. In a country with a population of over 1.2 billion people, the impacts of such urban expansion, the pressures on infrastructure and available resources, as well as the limitations to individual opportunity cannot be underestimated. With increased mechanization and industrialization has come the scourge of water, air, and soil pollution and India faces monumental challenges with this darker side of modernization.

There is another dark side to the changes being experienced in India but these are less quantifiable for they are social in nature. Our new technologies bring additional, often welcome comforts and conveniences but also have the effect of dividing and further isolating individuals in an already highly stratified society. Labor is cheap and the very large majority of Indians live a life of hardship, hunger, and poverty. While the standard



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of living has risen for many, the gap between "haves and have-nots" is widening at an alarming rate and questions of social or moral responsibility are not being addressed effectively. The enforcement of existing laws can easily get bogged down in a bureaucratic labyrinth dominated by personal agendas and petty corruption. The very foundation of society is strained with the rise of a consumer based economy and the frustrations born out of growing financial inequity.

On an individual level, the digital revolution and increasing westernization are having a deep and lasting impact on established social norms and expectations. Time honored traditions struggle to compete with the flash and sparkle of consumer culture and particularly among the young middle class, more permissive western attitudes are fraught with unfamiliar temptations that color the social fabric. Amidst the gleaming, glassy monuments celebrating unconscious materialism, the richly diverse spiritual traditions of India remain a dynamic and fundamental aspect of everyday life. Although exaggerated individualism, westernization, and changing attitudes strain social and familial relationships, it is religious practice and devotion that gives form and meaning to life. Devotional activities and ritual are fully integrated into daily rhythms, giving form, direction, and deeper meaning to society and its cycles. Just as it has been for millennia, religion and spiritual practice is imbedded into the very structure of society.

Education in India

India has always had strong traditions in education, which supported and nurtured our spiritual nature but with modernization have come so-called improvements in the educational system. India is following the lead of so many western societies by emphasizing only the intellect and academic achievement while the soul development of the children is woefully neglected. The government maintains strict control over curriculums and schools where children are rigorously tested, and forced into accelerated academics and intellectual working very early. There is little time to play, explore the wonders of the world, or exercise their growing bodies, much less their imagination and creativity. They only sit at their desks, listen to lecture-like presentations, and mechanically write what they have heard - a poor substitute for the joyful activity of learning.

These methods are primarily about disciplining and teaching children to behave in a particular manner and how to fit into a predetermined order. The honored profession of teaching

has been reduced to that of a technician who conveys pre-approved information as efficiently as possible. Education has adopted what is essentially an assembly line model and the joys of learning and teaching are lost to over reliance on quantitative evaluation and teaching for the test, by only valuing the accumulation of information, and solely rewarding academic merit. As a result Indian children are highly stressed and under tremendous pressure to both conform and perform, for competition is fierce and opportunities limited. With such systems, there is a very real risk of losing not only much of our cultural heritage but also the precious gift of childhood.

The Healing Impulse of Waldorf Education

With the unique privileges of childhood under such assault, Waldorf education came as a healing balm desperately needed in a high-speed electronic world that fractionalizes and desensitizes the human being in so many different ways. There are many aspects of Waldorf education that harmoniously resonate with Vedic traditions and the soul development of the human

being. In education, those traditions have provided a safe and loving space for the child to develop and strengthen their body, soul, and spirit so, it is perhaps not surprising that India has proven to be such fertile and fruit bearing ground.

The first seeds of Waldorf education were planted in India many years ago thanks to the inspired determination and steady efforts of a small community of people made up of parents, doctors, aspiring teachers, and concerned individuals.

Master teacher, Tina Bruin-sma came from Holland and for an extended time served



Festival celebrations are a large part of life in Indian and in Indian Waldorf schools.

as a mentor and teacher trainer for a growing collective of people interested in anthroposophy and Steiner education. As a result of her inspirational example and insightful guidance, aspiring teachers and parents came together to establish the first Waldorf school in India. In 1997, Sloka Waldorf School opened its doors in Hyderabad with 19 children and 4 teachers.

Today, Hyderabad boasts 4 recognized schools, Sloka, Diksha, Prerana, and Abhaya. Diksha opened their doors in 2000, followed by Prerana in 2001, and Abhaya in 2002. There are also Waldorf schools in Mumbai and Bangalore as well as kindergartens in Pune, Chennai, Coimbatore, and Goa. There are now over 50 Steiner-inspired schools using Waldorf methodology and incorporating Steiner's insights in their mainstream syllabi. This carefully tended garden has steadily spread and grown abundant with fragrant blossoms and soul nourishing fruit.



Why Hyderabad?

It is interesting that Waldorf education in India has been embraced so strongly in Hyderabad, a major IT hub where Indians are experiencing some of the most jarring and radical shifts in traditional culture and society. Hyderabad has seen glory days in the past and is reaching greater heights with a rapidly rising middle class that are well educated, tech savvy, and increasingly cosmopolitan. Many young Indians have travelled or lived abroad and there has been a great influx of ideas and people from Europe, Australia, and America. These factors certainly have been significant forces behind the development of anthroposophical initiatives here.

Committed individuals who are ready to walk that extra mile, those who understand and meet the needs of the situation are rare -- this has made the difference in Hyderabad for the teachers, doctors, and parents who have made Waldorf education a reality have tirelessly given of themselves and brought a true gift to India. Like most initiatives throughout the world, the schools have encountered their struggles and some very significant challenges but have persevered to overcome them with determined effort and steadfast conviction.

The four established schools continue to grow and in the past several years, all have relocated and built new facilities to meet the steady growth in enrollment. Concrete buildings don't make community and recent shifts have required a renewed vigor to build upon shared commitments and developing new means for collaboration.

Vallaki Teacher Training was an early initiative that brought many trainers, mentors, and master teachers to Hyderabad helping to enliven and deepen understanding of anthroposophy and the curriculum. Many teachers and parents benefitted from those efforts and the schools continue to sponsor workshops, artistic events, symposiums, and training conferences on a regular basis. The annual seminar on Waldorf education in Khandala (directed by Aban Bana) that draws participants from all over India and the world, continues to be a great support for both practicing and aspiring teachers. All across India, conferences and workshops held by master teachers and mentors from Europe, Australia, the U.S., and elsewhere are occurring with

greater frequency, in an increasing number of cities, and are drawing larger, more diverse participants.

Stepping into the World Waldorf Community

This dynamic culture and a growing number of anthroposophical initiatives have been strongly supported by the international Waldorf community and those connections continue to expand. There are anthroposophical initiatives and groups working in many different fields; from curative education, social therapy, and Camphill communities, to pedagogical and curative eurythmy. There are established groups of doctors and educators working with anthroposophical medicine who sponsor regular and well-attended conferences. In other areas, there is a rapidly growing interest in Biodynamics and newly formed groups working with threefold social order.

One program of particular note for the Hyderabad schools has been working with the Friends of Waldorf Education who sponsor young Waldorf graduates to come to India and elsewhere. These young volunteer interns generally commit to a year working with the schools and bringing their youthful enthusiasm, diverse talents, and Waldorf experience to the children; they are warmly welcomed into school communities. The entire school culture is enriched through this intimate sharing and volunteers gain an enlivened and strengthened sense of confidence and deeper sense of self. The building of such bridges transcends cultural differences and the warmly human connections built by such programs are profound and lasting.

Not only do visitors come to India but Indian teachers and doctors contribute and participate in countless conferences in Europe, Australia, and throughout Asia, sharing their experiences once they return home.

In May of 2011, The Asian Waldorf Teachers Conference (AWTC), organized by Friends of Waldorf Education was held in Hyderabad. The Friends or Freunde maintain a strong rhythm of sponsoring conferences in different countries every other year. Initiatives and schools are flowering across Asia and these conferences draw increasing numbers of practicing and aspiring teachers, doctors, and artists from all over the world, casting new seeds of inspiration and nurturing those germinating sprouts.

After years of work, accomplishment, and so many successful endeavors, this strong and committed Indian community officially founded the Anthroposophical Society of India in October of 2011. There are two branches active in Hyderabad; The Rudolf Steiner Branch (Nirmala Diaz) and The Mercury Branch (Dr. Swapna Narendra) and there is one branch in Mumbai, The Gateway Branch (Aban Bana). There are also study groups in numerous cities such as Bangalore, Pune, Coimbatore, and Chennai.

The society and schools working together are sponsoring an increasing number of diverse and insightful workshops, developing a rhythm of training conferences and artistic presentations, all in support of the living vision of social renewal. One can contact the society directly for details on the many new initiatives in the country: <http://www.anthroposophical-societyindia.org>

Social Renewal

As part of a worldwide movement encouraging social renewal, the initiatives in India are part of a much broader community striving to provide a glimmer of light, a sanctuary for the human spirit in the midst of powerful and unconscious forces of change. I have been working intimately with Prerana Waldorf School as a mentor and teacher trainer since 2004 and my work with the schools in India has been a genuine inspiration. The steadfast determination and untiring dedication of teachers and parents have achieved a great deal and has led to steady growth in the schools but the challenges facing India are monumental. The crushing burden of over population, the competitive climate of Indian society and the financial struggles of modern living are formidable challenges.

Increasingly, I hear from young parents who express grave concerns about contemporary educational methods and the values they promote. They want their children to be successful in the modern world but they also want their children to enjoy the profound blessings of childhood. For a growing number of families, Waldorf education is something of a sanctuary in today's fast paced world for it provides a safe and loving space for the child to develop their imagination and sense of wonder as well as their intellect. Families from all walks of life see that it is a powerful means of finding balance in a world of uncertainty and instability. By honoring the gifts of every child, nurturing their imagination, and encouraging a balance of academic, artistic, and social skills, a measured path is prepared for the child to embrace their individual destiny and engage themselves with meaningful purpose.

Our work is a process of synthesis, an embracing of creative possibilities rather than one of dissection and divisive limitations. Our diversity is a strength rather than a liability for our constructive sharing and active interest in one another widens our perspective, increasing the depth of our understanding, not only of the world, but also of ourselves. In our sharing and celebrating of all festivals, (whether Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, or Christian), the rich tapestry of our shared humanity and the wide range of human experience is joyfully embraced. The artificial differences that divide and separate human beings are minimized and the wholeness of life on earth and the connections that bring us together are emphasized. The child is welcomed into a world that is inclusive of all and filled with light and love.

Indian Waldorf School Contacts:

Sloka Waldorf School (Hyderabad) www.slokawaldorf.org

Diksha Waldorf School (Hyderabad) www.dikshaschool.in

Prerana Waldorf School (Hyderabad) preranawaldorf.org

Abhaya Waldorf School (Hyderabad) website currently down

Bangalore Steiner School (Bangalore) www.bangaloresteiner-school.org

Inodai Waldorf School (Mumbai) www.inodai.org.in

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