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BLOSSOMS IN THE DUST

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In the late thirties, I had seen a movie called 'Blossoms In The Dust' which was about a group of children brought up by a kind-hearted woman, taking them away from the misery of poverty and neglect in which they had been living. This generous lady who had herself experienced in her childhood the unhappiness of neglect and loneliness, though luckily not of poverty, had decided to devote her whole lifetime to the task of raising these tiny 'blossoms' from the dust in which they were lying, and transforming them with infinite love and care into full-grown 'flowers' that would be admired and accepted by society. I was poignantly reminded of this movie a year ago when I visited Swa-Roop Wardhinee, an organisation of which I knew almost nothing at that time, and saw the wonderful efforts being made by a band of totally determined men and women to create an oasis of greenery in the midst of a desert of lime, stone and cement. The place was a small playground in the compound of municipal school near Pune railway station, where sixty odd boys from the age of ten to fourteen were playing games with great gusto and abandon, but with an impressive display of self-imposed discipline. There was a gentle fragrance

of hope and fulfillment in the very atmosphere that I could not miss.

Mr. Patwardhan, the Chairman, briefly explained how his colleagues had been able to gain the confidence of the boys and their parents. They could get the boys to join the institution only if the parents agreed to it, even if they did not necessarily believe in the good it would do them. He started with a smart looking boy who was playing Kabaddi in front of us.

"This boy," he said, "had scored more than 80% marks in his last annual examination. Kumar, that's his name, belongs to a family whose head, having risen from a menial job, is now earning almost a Rs.1,000/- a month, but rarely hands over more than a couple of hundreds to his wife ! "What does he do with the rest of the money ?" I asked, and was told that he spends it all in drowning himself in drink every evening, and when he finishes it all, he beats his wife to get more money from her. "The poor woman works in a factory and earns a couple of hundred rupees with which she somehow manages to make the two ends meet", said Mr. Patwardhan, and added, "Kumar is a good scholar, and participates in all the school activities like elocution competition etc..." Incidentally, Kumar

was a regular gambler before he joined the 'Wardhini', but now he does not go anywhere near it.

Then he pointed to another boy, slightly big for his age, and said, "He is Yashwant, once a very hot tempered and arrogant boy, who used to go about with a belt made of razor blades worn round his waist which he would take out at the slightest provocation and swing it at any one who dared criticise him". It seemed that his father was a very skilled mechanic, but he always got into some trouble and lost his job, and took to drinks. "But thanks to our efforts", the Chairman continued, "this boy is now fully reformed, wears a leather belt, and is an expert at manual work like screen-printing.. He is of course not interested in academic work for which he has no patience. But he is a born leader, has an I.Q. of 140, and can be depended upon to undertake and complete successfully any task, however difficult."

But perhaps the most heart-rending case, was that of the motherless little boy, Suresh, sitting all by himself. That boy, I was told, lived in a dark novel where you need a lamp the whole day to see anything. His father, who was a good worker at one time, somehow lost his mooring when his wife died. Now he is an alcoholic who thinks that the only thing that his son is good enough on the verge of a nervous break-down, and would certainly have become a delinquent, if a friend from his neighbourhood had not brought him to us. You know, he has stood first in his class in the school, and is now one of our brightest blossoms," said Mr. Patwardhan, with obvious joy

and pride.

"I could keep on relating such shocking true stories the whole evening, for almost every boy there had a family background with some kind of misfortune. But they had all, with a solitar exception, vindicated the faith which we had placed in human nature while selecting the boys from hundreds whom we interviewed", he said with great satisfaction.

I asked him if I could talk to one or two of the boys he had been speaking about, so he called Kumar and introduced him to me. "Well. Kumar how do you like being here?" I asked him. Almost before my question was over he said in a very sincere voice, "I am very happy. Previously I did not know what was in store for me in life. Now I can be someone good and useful". I asked him what his parents felt about it. He was silent for a moment, looking a little serious. Then he said, "My mother is very happy ! she is grateful to the Wardhini". He did not say anything about his father. But I understood.

Mr. Patwardhan then called Suresh and introduced me to him. He certainly looked a calm and confident youngster in marked contrast to what he must have been a year ago. "Do you like your school?" " I stood first in the last examination. I am going to learn a lot and become an engineer".

I looked at my watch and saw the time was almost 7 p.m.. There was no more time left to meet the third boy, as they are very particular about the punctuality of their programs. Within a few seconds, at the sound of a whistle, I found them form themselves into four

groups, lined up with precision. At a simple sign from their leader, they all started singing a prayer to God which was followed by a salute to the Nation. The prayer was as secular as it should be but none the less fervent, and the invocation to serve the nation as solemn as it ought to be. The whole effect was over-whelming and a source of inspiration to all, including a few passers by who had stopped to see what was happening.

After the prayer, the boys dispersed from the playground, and assembled in four different classrooms for 2 hours of lessons in science, mathematics and a few other subjects from the curriculum. I was told that the entire programme for the evening (including the lessons) lasts for three hours from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. , a schedule that is strictly followed seven days a week (7 a.m. to 9 a.m. on Sundays), and fifty-two weeks a year, not because of any rules or regulations made by the organisers but because the boys have unanimously opted for it. Any proposal for a holiday is educational tour to some place where they can learn something new and add to their knowledge. This is undoubtedly a tough task for the teachers but they certainly enjoy this 'hardlabour' affectionately imposed and willingly accepted.

All this is certainly very heart-warming, but a gnawing suspicion was lurking in my mind all along, which I could not help expressing to the Chairman.

"This is really wonderful", I said, "but after all, these kids are with you only for a few hours a day. For the rest of the day they are on their own. What about their families ? How do they cope

with that ?" My friend was silent for a moment - a significant silence and then he said, "but we are not pessimistic. It is a tough challenge, but I think we have made a breakthrough", "How?" I asked him "Our boys have made some openings, rather tenuous ones, in the curtain of ignorance and misery", he said , "Some rays of understanding can reach through and brighten their homes. But this is only the beginning, and it is going to take efforts, patience and perseverance". " And inevitably, a few disappointments", I interrupted, "Yes, of course, "he is with no trace of despair. "But we shall feel very happy at having achieved something worthwhile when we do it."

After all that I had heard from the Chairman and seen for myself, I could not help asking him some personal questions. Though it was quite evident that the staff were all completely devoted to the cause, I was curious to know something of their background, and also to find out how they managed to run an institution like this, which does not get any grant from the Government. The Municipal Corporation has sanctioned an annual grant of Rs.5,000/- for the last two years, but the amount is yet to be received. The Chairman was, naturally, very modest about himself, and gave most of the credit to his colleagues, members of the Executive committee and other friends.

The Chairman, Mr. K. L.Patwardhan, who retired as Head Master, Raja Dhanarajigiri High School, Pune on 1st January, 1979, got the inspiration for social work while working as a school teacher many years ago, during the time

(1964-76) he was with the "Dnyana Prabodhini", an educational institution of repute, well - known for the stress it lays on character building and socio-economic uplift amongst its students.

The Honorary secretary of the institution, Mr. R. P. Desai, retired voluntarily in 1979 at the age of 55 from the Department of agriculture, to devote his full time to social work for which he had a special urge even in his daily working life. He is a recipient of a silver medal for blood donation (which he had done 45 times), and is an active member of the 'Netra Daan Mitra Mandal', a voluntary organisation which has so far succeeded in restoring the eye sight of more than a hundred persons ! "Mr. Desai", the Chairman particularly mentioned, "Specialises in visiting the homes of the boys from the 'Wardhini'", He has a flair, I gathered, for talking to them and their parents an persuading them to let the boys join the 'Wardhini', a mission in which he always succeeds, through he does not always reform the parents. His experience has been that reforming a boy is usually a 'One shot' affair, but reforming the parents takes a lot more, and sometimes without success. But he is not disheartened.

Apart from Mr. Patwardhan, Mr. Desai, and other colleagues who deal with the day to day work of running this institution, a large part of the credit for the success of this venture must be given to Mr. P. V. Shroff, the President, who is a successful and renowned industrialists, and Mr. A. N. Gogawale, Vice-President, who wields considerable influence in the area in which the institution works. The

other members of the Executive Committee also take a keen interest in the activities of the institution.

Inspite of all the wonderful work, which all these devoted persons are doing voluntarily, I could not help wondering how they make both ends meet without any grant. Mr. Patwardhan told me, "We depend entirely on donations and voluntary contributions. Our society is registered and all donations are eligible for Incometax deductions. We get Rs. 1,000/- per month from a French sponsor (anonymous) through the medium of the India Sponsorship Committee, of which Begum Ali Yavar Jung is the Chairman and Mr. F. A. Fazalbhoy is the Vice-Chairman". He added that they have not so far accepted a grant from the State Government because it would mean a lot of unnecessary controls that will inhibit their work. They are grateful for the Corporation's gesture' of making the building and the premises of a school (Rabindranath Tagore Vidyaniketan, a primary school of P. M. C.) available to them for three hours in the evening, "for a small charge" !

I looked at my watch and saw it was already 9 p.m. and the boys and started buzzing out of the classrooms, full of energy and confidence, their faces beaming with the glow of happiness. In a few minutes they had vanished in the darkness outside, but not before each one had paid their willing regards to us by the words and gesture - "Namaste". I was greatly impressed and moved by this urbane behaviour of the boys brought up in environments where neither respect nor affection had a place

in their lives. I stood silently for some time wondering how many such blossoms must be lying in the dust all over, and how many tireless efforts would be needed to cope up with such a tremendous task. The Chairman perhaps understood my thoughts and said, "We are doing all that we can/but there is lot more to be done."

A year has passed since then, and during that time Swa-Room Wardhini has taken many steps along the uphill road that its founders have chosen to follow. There is however no feeling of complacency and there is an all pervading sense of urgency and enthusiasm for continuing the journey up the hill to the adopted goal. 'There are promises to keep and miles to go', seems to be the motto that guides and motivates this devoted group of workers, for most of whom it is a welcome labour of love !

A special feature of the Wardhinee's multi-faceted activities is the effort to establish a rapport with the parents of the students by inviting them for meeting the teachers, and also by visiting at least three or four homes of the students everyday to help the parents in solving their problems. Their reactions have been very encouraging - though there are inevitably a few disappointments. "Let us help each other to complete all the projects". "If there was a Wardhinee in my young days, my life would have been very different", are some of the words used by the parents to give expression to their feelings. The organisation that started its activities in a humble way four years ago with only 12 boys, has now over 125 boys attending regular classes and participating

in all other activities such as annual camps, group discussions, elocution competitions etc. An account of the milestones passed by this organisation in its self-chosen uphill task during the last 12 months cannot be complete without a mention of the achievements of 12 of its students who appeared at the S. S. C. examination this year and passed it with great success scoring more than 80% marks.

All pioneering efforts - whether, in the field of mountain - climbing or character-building - however, require resources as badly as they need resourcefulness. While the organisers of the Wardhinee certainly have the latter in ample measures, they need the former also in equally, if not more, large measures. As Mr. Patwardhan said to me when we last met, "Any-gift, large or small and in cash or in kind, would be most welcome. It will go to serve a uniquely deserving cause and shall make the donor happy !" I understood what he meant by that remark, and the words of William Shakespeare came to my mind :

"The quality of mercy
is not strained;

... ..

It is twice blessed.
It blesseth him that gives
And him that takes."

The quality of generosity -
like that of mercy,

I thought - was also not strained !

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