



NETWORK

Profile / Sushama Nagarkar

Educating The Imagination

Bangalore-based Sutradhar as a resource centre for children's teaching aids, seeks to promote creative education.

Bangalore-based Sutradhar is a registered non-profit organisation devoted to providing enriched educational experiences to children and probably the only one of its kind for the diverse range of services it offers. It is the brainchild of Mandira Kumar. In early October this year, Mandira was awarded the Rotary 'Quest For Vocational Excellence' award at a glittering function in Bangalore for her 'commitment to excellence, ethics and values and her outstanding contribution to her vocation and thus community'.

"I have always been interested in children's education," she shares. "For about a decade or so, I have been travelling around the country. Occasionally on my own and occasionally as an educational co-ordinator. I had been noticing that there are many grassroots organisations developing sets of textbooks and other materials for children. I felt that there was a need to bring the spectrum of all these materials under one roof."

So in November last, with financial support from the US-based Amar Foundation and CRY, Sutradhar opened shop, literally, in downtown Bangalore. "We offer a variety of materials under one roof which otherwise are not available in the regular marketplace. Thus, we are not only providing a service to folk toy makers, we are also providing a service to manufacturers and non-profit organisations who are developing teaching aids by providing for the end users—parents and educators," Mandira explains.

Thus, there is a wide range of (indigenously made) toys available, attractively displayed on easy to access shelves and arranged according to age ranges and skills. Besides that, Sutradhar also offers a variety of low-cost books, teaching aids as well as story books. Having garnered a whole personal directory of contacts in her decade-long travels across the coun-

try, Mandira sources all the materials herself. "New materials one gets to hear of," she adds. "We are also constantly looking at ways of using existing materials differently. Every state has a folk toy-making tradition. Many of these are made and used in a very transient way. As a central body, we are also trying to see how designs can be translated into wood and made more long lasting."

She is convinced that children are the agenda of every parent. "In fact they are a mother's prime agenda," she feels. "There are a lot of mothers who want to be involved in their children's education but there is also a lack of awareness. Sutradhar is a kind of drop-in center where people not only buy a toy, but if they are looking for specific information, that is also available. It is also an occasion for us to build awareness. For instance, we talk to them about the importance of reading with the child. A parent of a child with special needs or one with cerebral palsy may come by. Sometimes, the parents are at a bit of a loss as to what to pick up, so we help them out."

Bangalore was chosen as home for Sutradhar, because Mandira feels that

there is no such resource centre available in the city. "There may be pockets of educational groups who have a knowledge of what is available locally. But our centre has a wider range of activities than that. We basically promote creative education." Besides the sale of toys and materials, Sutradhar organises workshops, seminars and exhibitions. In January this year, there was a workshop on making and using folk toys in classrooms. The main faculty person was Sudarshan Khanna from the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. In July, Sutradhar organised a three-day Bal Mela for children, exposing them to a variety of creative ideas and experiences.

As part of their open fora programme, a first session for educators from Madhya Pradesh was organised on Teachers' Day this year. "This group is very strong at micro-level work as well as thinking of it as systemic change. We screened two films and had an interaction with about a 100 people," says Mandira.

In October, another seminar on the arts and education has been organised. "We are trying to bring together a community of like-minded people who use art



Toys and materials for a range of ages and skills are effectively displayed.

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and creative mediums with children in a reflective way, and thus have common interests. We will discuss what it is like to work with different groups of children in different settings. Again media and the art are our particular focus."

Of all the hurdles that Sutradhar has faced along the way, the most ironic, perhaps, have been the concepts about education amongst educators themselves. "Toys and literature are not meted importance by educators," Mandira laments. "For instance, people tend to think of education of the underprivileged as concerned with reading, writing and starting of a balwadi. That's it. It is imperative that young children have play materials, books and literature. Language is contextual and literature is exceedingly important for that. Very often persons considered senior in the field of education would look at my little bag of toys and ask what they had to do with education..."

But rather than look at it negatively, Mandira has taken it as an opportunity for creating awareness.

As for future plans, Mandira hopes and is working towards having a permanent open access centre for children. "Such centres already exist for womens' studies, health and environment issues. But for



Children craft coir and rags into a tree of life.

children and education, there are no such accesses where one can go for material and information." She visualises ongoing processes occurring in the living storehouse where a synergy could take place.

Where there could be collaborative work between traditional craftsmen, where one could infuse new life into traditional crafts. At Sutradhar, Mandira consciously works at creating a via media for successful ideas transfer. "People need to share good ideas. Educators who work with slum children say we can't use these materials, but our idea of keeping these materials on the shelves here is to show that they serve as a symbol of a learning concept and can be adapted using local materials. We not only keep books which tell you how to adapt the materials. We also serve to be a mini museum."

Mandira acknowledges that the reach of the Barbie (read multinationals) is farther and has a stronger imagery than most Indian flavoured toys. And according to her, schools are microcosms of society, thus they also reflect what popular culture is. Perhaps where Sutradhar does yeoman service is in propagating the Indian ethos and tradition in learning.

Mandira first went to the Rotary Club in search of a van to take her learning materials out to people in a travelling exhibition. She ended up with an award instead. It is hoped that the van is still on the Rotary agenda. **H**