

“ Leaf Life”, by Sirish Rao, Tara Publishing, Rs. 80/-, 1998.

“ Trash: On Ragpicker Children and Recycling”, by Gita Wolf, Anushka Ravishankar & Orijit Sen, Tara Publishing and Books for Change, pp. 112, Rs. 150/-, 1999.

A friend of mine is very fond of relating the following story. Once she went as a parent volunteer to her child's class in one of the best known progressive schools in Delhi. This friend, being a linguist was very curious to know about language learning in children in the primary classes. She started telling them a story in Hindi about a “kisan” in a village. After some time, she sensed that something was amiss and the children were getting lost. So she asked the children if they knew what a kisan did. To her surprise, a vast majority of the kids thought that kisan was the person who made a popular brand of sauces and jams!

This story is obviously an indicator of the astonishing ignorance of the Hindi language among today's (or in this case tomorrow's) MTV generation. But it also hints at how much we have become disconnected from life outside of our cocoons in the metropolis. This tendency is all the more apparent in children whose exposure to the world outside of their television sets and video games is minimal. Sadly, the curriculum in schools in no way promotes going out and observing and experiencing nature. Though nominally each school has environmental studies built into its curricula, the teaching is never really connected with the real lives of children. Thus children may parrot homilies on the greenhouse effect or conservation of resources, but never connect it to their own wasteful lives. Of course, the children are not to blame for all of this. The fault lies in the way we teach, in our books and indeed in our own lifestyles.

The two books under review are an attempt to correct these anomalies. “Leaf Life”, by Sirish Rao is the first book in a proposed series “Relating to Nature”. The world of leaves is a fascinating one. The variety of colors, shapes and sizes that leaves come in. How many times have we stopped and wondered about these amazing food producing factories for all of life on planet earth? The central idea behind the book is to encourage children to explore the world of leaves y observation and experience. The design of the book is appealing; line drawings and sepia tinted photographs make it beautiful. The main text is in a font attractive enough for children while a lot of supplementary information is given in small type. At the end, there are suggestions for how educators and parents can use this book. This includes individual and group projects.

Having said this, there is however a problem with the supplementary information in the book. At one place, the author talks about how leaves produce tannin, a bitter substance that acts as a deterrent for monkeys and other predators. The monkey chews on a leaf, finds it bitter and leaves the plant alone. This much is of course correct. However, the author goes on to say that this tannin in the air is then sensed by trees downwind which start producing tannin in advance. This is just plain wrong. There is simply no mechanism by which trees can sense tannin in the air. Authors especially those writing for children must be extra careful their facts. For a child, the final authority on any topic is the teacher and the written word.

From the favelas of Sao Paulo to the rubbish dumps of Mexico City and the slums of Mumbai, every metropolis in a developing country has its shanty towns. These so called “eye-sores” house millions of migrants in inhuman conditions. The migrants have come from villages in hope of employment and a better life for themselves. Once here, they form the large pool of informal labor force that is essential for life in the city. The small child who cleans utensils in the roadside tea-stall, the maid working in middle class houses and the daily wagger who works in the car garage are all from these slums. They live without any civic amenities or job security, constantly being hounded by either the slumlords or the authorities. Yet, they provide cheap labor for the metropolis, their poverty subsidizing our lives in a way.

The book, “Trash: On Ragpicker Children and Recycling” is the story of Velu, an eleven year old who has run away from his village and come to Chennai. Here he meets a street-smart ragpicker Jaya who escorts him through the travails of living on the street. Through the story we are

introduced to the underbelly of a metropolis, complete with a devious slumlord, a sinister moneylender etc. The precarious existence of those living on the margins of society, their joys and struggle and of course the nature of their work is brought out well in this book. The emphasis is on ragpickers and the service they provide to us. Throughout the book, there are boxes that provide information on relevant topics like recycling, the waste disposal systems and even the constitutional rights of children. The book is well written and has good color illustrations, most of them superimpositions of photographs and paintings. It also has some suggestions on what the reader can do for ragpicker children as well as for becoming more conscious of our wasteful lifestyles.

Both the books are tremendously overpriced, at Rs. 80 and 150 respectively. National Book Trust also has several books on similar topics that are far cheaper and perhaps equally good. Arvind Gupta's book on creative uses of household trash or Suresh Rajan's book on making pumps from trash are just two examples. Understandably, book production is expensive. But the publishers have to explore ways and means of making books affordable. Books like this are very essential if we want our children to be sensitive to their environment as well as world around them. The hard part is now for educators and parents to use these and similar books creatively to "educate" the children and expose them to a world so different from the unreal world of Cartoon Network and MTV.

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