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MITRANIKETAN: A RURAL HERMITAGE

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Mitraniketan is a non-profit organisation, established in 1956 by K. Viswanathan a native of Vellanad in the district of Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala) and a Gandhian who was an active partaker in the Freedom Movement, for the uplift of the downtrodden in society. The organisation began as a small unit adjacent to the present Roman Catholic Church of the Mitraniketan campus, and was engaged in spinning with Thakkili and Charka which became the seed that gave shape to Mitraniketan. Today Mitraniketan crosses 52 years of its never ending quest for new approaches in community development.

The institution as a whole is considered to be an '*education based community engaged in imparting community based education*' which forms the central theme of Mitraniketan. As education is the main concern, Mitraniketan activities concentrate on imparting life centred education to school children, especially those from the marginalised sections. Various activities are initiated in order to make education meaningful, joyful and life oriented. K. Viswanathan, the founder of Mitraniketan believes in all-comprehensive education, equipping students with the skills to face challenges and to be good Samaritans. Education, according to him, widens knowledge, opens new phases to community life, and strengthens community relations and general well-being.

BEGINNING OF MITRANIKETAN

After completing his school education Viswanathan decided to dedicate his life to the uplift of the marginalised people in the society. He was highly influenced by the teachings of Gandhi (especially on basic education), Tagore and the noted educationalist, Grundtvig of Denmark. He

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then travelled through America, Denmark and other Scandinavian countries in the quest for knowledge. He met Arthur E. Morgan and other great educationalists of that time. After returning to his native village, he was warmly greeted by his villagers and family. Despite the overwhelming welcome, even his old friends and well wishers promptly rejected his ideas of village regeneration initiatives. Most believed that he should cash in on his educational experiences from abroad and seek a high government post. The reality of Vellanad itself presented a great challenge. Many who had risen up and profited from the Independence Movement and the subsequent government programmes had taken up jobs in the cities or moved away for better opportunities. Viswanathan rebutted his doubting friends: "If we are all going to leave, who will help this community?" He understood that, instead of taking up a political office, he first needed to develop the base of the people to help them take control of themselves. Wedded in every respect to his family, community and the cause, Viswanathan was convinced of the need to realise the Gandhian ideals and practice in his own place. Within days, on the one and a half acres of land Viswanathan's father had given him, the soil was ploughed once again. A small group of friends, many of them school drop-outs, came for tilling the soil in the mornings, discussing plans for the community in the evenings and bringing Viswanathan up-to-date on the village.

Viswanathan and his small group of friends wanted to work with the community, especially the majority of the lower tier. The weekly correspondence with Dr. Morgan became valuable. However, it was the school children, in fact, who inspired the first action. Spontaneous, curious, energetic and not inhibited to watch or question aloud while Viswanathan spun Khadi or worked in the field, the children came to his parents' house in droves to see this man who had just returned from America.

The children had come from all over. They arrived in the early mornings before school, then in the afternoons and even on weekends. They simply were in need of a place to meet, to call their own, to feel free. Viswanathan's family house became a community centre. Instead of launching into a tedious adult-planned programme for children, Viswanathan and friends decided to let the children create their own programmes, shaping an atmosphere where kids felt free to organise activities for themselves. At the same time, informal training activities and tutoring were offered to whoever was interested. When the number of children became so large and the rainy

season approached, a spacious shelter was constructed on the nearby property leased from the Catholic Church. Although every hand was put to work, no money was collected. The children formed their own associations, called Balasamaj and youth clubs, and held weekly assemblies and activities. Many rushed to Mitraniketan after school. Dramas and variety entertainment performances were put on once a month for the parents and public. The programmes also provided the opportunities for parents, students and teachers to meet, which resulted in the formation of the first parent-teacher association in the region. As facilitators, the Mitraniketan workers offered only constructive suggestions during the activities, while tapping community resources in the form of identifying persons from the community who could give lessons in acting, music and folk dance. A drawing master was engaged as teacher, and camping, trekking, rock-climbing and scouting were also organised.

In a few weeks' time, a difference could be seen in the children. Even the village school teachers came and acknowledged the change in the children's attitude. Within a few months, with 300 children and 15 youth workers, the experience had altered the whole outlook of the kids. Contrary to the closed, severe environment of the schools, which commanded respect out of fear and authority, Mitraniketan created a refuge full of freedom and possibilities. Instead of immediately throwing the current school education overboard all at once, the workers of Mitraniketan agreed to work with the village schools, helping the children in their spare time with an after-school programme. Soon it was termed as the "supplementary education" programme. With an emphasis on activity and community development, opportunities for work experiences were soon introduced. Programmes in notebook making, printing and vegetable gardening were gradually introduced. The children organised themselves and produced home made charkas – improvised from umbrella hooks and spare pieces of wood - and a "spinners' club" was formed. Soon with the support from the All-India Khadi and Village Industries Board Viswanathan founded the Mitraniketan Khadi Produces Industrial Cooperative Society.

Through the methods of contour bunting and terrace farming, Viswanathan converted the dry waste lands in the village into farm lands. He also discovered that the milk yield from local cows was shockingly low and the Mitraniketan workers added animal husbandry to their programmes. Viswanathan recalled his experience in Denmark, where the upkeep of cows

produced fantastic yields of milk and dairy products. The only way to upgrade the cows would be to introduce a high quality bull, for which there were no facilities yet in the nearby locality. Somehow Viswanathan managed to get one bull named David as well as a few heifers from England. His brother Sahadevan went for training in Bangalore and returned with the expertise in animal husbandry and artificial insemination process. At first the villagers were afraid to allow their cows to be inseminated from this mammoth bull, but as Sahadevan inseminated the Mitraniketan cows and the deliveries all went smoothly, the local farmers were convinced. Within five years the programme developed into one of the most successful extension projects in the region. Yield reached 7-15 litres of milk per day per cow from the meagre one litre per day. Through financial support from the OXFAM as well as the English family of a volunteer teacher Anne Hood, Mitraniketan constructed a barn and larger facilities, and several more cows were purchased.

To liberate the village folk from the local money lenders Viswanathan called for institutionalisation of the “savings plot plan”. Through this plan villagers were allowed to buy one share for five rupees. In six months’ time enough money was collected for issuing small loans.

The supplementary education that Viswanathan provided to the local children along with his own educational experiments took the shape of Mitraniketan Vikas Bhavan School. His wife followed his footsteps and helped him in all his ventures. She provided him with all essential support and encouragement that he badly needed in his early years. After obtaining her B.Ed. from Santhiniketan and M.Ed. from the University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram she took the responsibility of Mitraniketan school.

ACTIVITIES OF MITRANIKETAN

Today Mitraniketan has taken the form of a rural university where emphasis is given to rural development through empowering the children, youth, women and farmers. More than 5000 people benefit from the activities of the Mitraniketan every year. They include tribal children, rural youth, small and marginal farmers, artisans, rural women, non-government organisations (NGOs), volunteers and university students. The thrust of Mitraniketan is development education and rural development. The main programmes and projects, through which Mitraniketan has been pursuing it, are the Vikas Bhavan School; Sisubhavan Nursery; Rural Technology Centre;

Study Centre of the National Institute of Open Schooling; Centre for Education, Research, Innovation and Development; Technology Resource Centre; Mitraniketan Krishi Vigyan Kendra; Mitraniketan Education Extension Centre; Mitraniketan People’s College; and Mitraniketan Nodal Continuing Education Centre. Other related development programmes of Mitraniketan include those of women empowerment, and activities carried out through its community health centre and fruit processing and bakery units.

Mitraniketan Vikas Bhavan High School

The Vikas Bhavan high school is one of the core development education projects of Mitraniketan. The school adopts the concept of ‘education for life,’ which believes that it is the responsibility of the community and the school to mould the children to live as active members of the community. The Mitraniketan school has always stressed non-formal education and it became the centre of all Mitraniketan activities. In order to train the students in vocational skills several sections like carpentry, pottery, book binding, tailoring, agriculture, drawing etc. were started. The Mitraniketan school aims to empower children through an alternative system of education which integrates need based practical knowledge with a formal academic stream of learning. The school provides not only education, but also board and lodging, clothing, and other day-to-day needs to the rural and tribal children belonging to different parts of Kerala. The majority of the tribal children attending the school are from the tribal communities from Wayanad, the district with the largest percentage of tribal population in Kerala. These students are picked up from their villages on school opening and brought back by summer vacation.

In addition to academic training, the senior students are trained in craft skills in the evening with the objective of developing livelihood skills for employment. The craft skills include tailoring and embroidery, carpentry, shoulder bag making, electrical, mushroom cultivation, fruit processing, coir mat weaving, and *agarbathi*, soap, candle and umbrella making. Furthermore, they are also trained in computer application and agriculture. Music, instrumental music, dance, painting, and other related traditional art activities are also an integral part of the education programme in the school.

The school organises students’ clubs to help unfold the potential of each child. The clubs include *Gandhidarshan*, *vidyarangom kala sahithya*

vedi, environment club, science club, mathematics club, and social science club which aims to create values, leadership skills and interest in literature and science among the students. The school also organises a number of programmes in painting, poem writing, story writing, poster making etc. The students are also given special training in sports with the help of volunteers from abroad. In addition, the school organises study tours, nature study camps, and parent-teacher meetings.

The organisation receives partial hostel grants from the state government for the scheduled caste and tribe students. The sponsorship of the other students in the school is partly given by the friends and well wishers of Mitraniketan from India and abroad. The activities of the school are undertaken completely with the available resources of the institution.

Sisubhavan Nursery School

The Sisubhavan Nursery School of Mitraniketan was established with the belief that in a democratic society there had to be opportunities and freedom for even the youngest in the community. It was the first pre-school institution in the village setting created in the region. The nursery school became an early example of the Mitraniketan approach to teaching by experience.

The nursery school of Mitraniketan provides pre-school education to the children in and around Mitraniketan. The school has children in lower kindergarten (LKG), upper kindergarten (UKG) and day care centre. The method of teaching adopted in the nursery school is based on the principle of 'learning while playing'. The pre-school children have also been trained in creative arts, music and dance. All the children of the nursery school are provided free mid-day meal, and transportation facility at a reasonable cost.

Rural Technology Centre

Mitraniketan Rural Technology Centre was established for training the rural youth in vocational skills. It functions with the twin objectives of providing technical training to rural youth and artisans, and production of goods so as to sustain the centre. This training-cum-production centre has been engaged in metal fabrication, carpentry, sawing, printing, pottery and coir mat weaving. In the year 2007 the centre could export coir foot mats and coir filters to France through the Mitraniketan Coir Trust.

The rural youth in the Vikas Bhavan School benefit from this centre as it gives them hands-on experience in technical skills like pottery, sawing, carpentry etc. The goods produced in the process of the training can be marketed and thus the ideology of 'earning while learning' is also materialised here.

Study Centre of the NIOS

Mitraniketan is an accredited centre of the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), Government of India, New Delhi. The centre has the sanction to conduct courses in both academic and vocational streams. An average of 150 students enrol for the vocational courses every year. The courses include plant protection, plumbing, carpentry, electrical and computer application.

Mitraniketan is also recognised as a rural community workshop of the NIOS. The objective of the community workshop is to develop course materials and conduct action research studies for strengthening the technical and academic training programmes of the NIOS. Mitraniketan has developed a course material on 'mushroom production' in the year 2007 for vocational training programme at all India level. The course material is published by the NIOS for its course at all India level.

Centre for Education, Research, Innovation and Development

Centre for Education, Research, Innovation and Development (CERID) is an approved research centre of the Kerala University. CERID generally aims to support the development education activities of Mitraniketan through action research studies, development of curriculum, course materials and teaching aids, conduct of trainers' training programmes, and documentation and publication. The centre hosts seminars and workshops in various topics. Currently this centre is engaged in research studies on training-need assessment, problems and potentials of education for different groups, and programmes of teacher training and trainers' training.

Technology Resource Centre

Mitraniketan is recognised as a Technology Resource Centre (TRC) of the Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology

(CAPART), New Delhi. Its objective is to transfer technologies for rural development through training, demonstration, adaptive research, and documentation and publication. Over the years Mitraniketan has conducted frequent technology transfer workshops in the field of roof water harvesting, ground water recharging, vermiculture, mushroom cultivation, low cost nursery techniques, red clay pottery and organic farming. In addition the TRC has produced a documentary on “mushroom production”.

Mitraniketan Krishi Vigyan Kendra

The Krishi Vigyan Kendra or farm science centre is one of the wings of Mitraniketan engaged primarily in the transfer of technology in agriculture and allied fields by imparting training and carrying out extension work in villages. This is the oldest Krishi Vigyan Kendra (established in 1979) in the voluntary sector in the state of Kerala. The cardinal principles of the Krishi Vigyan Kendra are the following.

1. Agricultural and allied production will be accelerated through the adoption of technologies.
2. “Teaching by doing” and “learning by doing” will be the methods of imparting skill training.
3. Training efforts are to raise the living conditions of the poorest of the poor.

The mandate of the Krishi Vigyan Kendra can be summarised as follows.

1. Conduct “on farm testing” for identifying technologies in terms of location specific sustainable land use systems.
2. Organise training to update the extension personnel with emerging advance in agricultural research on regular basis.
3. Organise short- and long-term vocational training courses in agriculture and allied vocations for the farmers and rural youth with emphasis on “learning by doing” for higher production on farms and generating self-employment.
4. Organise front line demonstrations on various crops to generate production data and feedback information.

Since each Krishi Vigyan Kendra designs its own training programme based on the local needs, there is no common list of contents for the programmes of the Krishi Vigyan Kendra. The following are the areas presently functioning in the Krishi Vigyan Kendra of Mitraniketan:

1. Agronomy
2. Horticulture
3. Agriculture extension
4. Agricultural engineering
5. Home science
6. Animal science.

In these six areas the centre conducts the following programmes: vocational training programme on landscaping and nursery management, on-job training, farmers’ field school, and organic farming. In addition workshops/seminars are conducted on processing of agricultural management for programme coordinators. Other activities include cooking competition, on farm testing programme and front line demonstrations.

Mitraniketan Education Extension Centre

Mitraniketan has an education extension centre at Mananthavady in Wayanad district to cater to the education and training needs of tribal youth. The centre mainly provides integrated education to tribal youth, especially tribal women covering both life and livelihood skill development. Programmes of vocational training, women empowerment and facilitators’ training are the main activities being held at the centre. During the last five years, a six month facilitators’ training programme has been regularly conducted every year in order to empower the tribal youth as leaders. In the six month course 50 tribal youth are enrolled every year. The course consists of general education for developing leadership skills and knowledge base, and technical education for developing livelihood skills. The items covered in technical education include tailoring and garment making, and computer application. Majority of the participants are tribal girls belonging to the age group of 20-25 years.

In addition, the centre conducts training programmes for housewives in order to create awareness among rural and tribal women on health, environment, micro-credit, and income generation activities. The staff members of the centre consist of a principal, two technical training teachers and a general education faculty. The extension centre is located at a distance of 8 km. from Mananthavady town and does not have good transport facilities which affects the enrolment of students from tribal villages located at distant

places. The students who are currently attending the programme are coming mainly from the 4 square km. area of the centre.

Mitraniketan People's College

Mitraniketan People's College (MPC) was established in 1996 with the technical collaboration of the Association of the Folk High Schools in Denmark (FFD) and with the financial support of Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA). People's College is an innovative development education project based on the ideas of the Danish Folk High Schools and Indian Gurukula system of education along with necessary inputs to take care of the local needs. It follows the concept of *education for life* rather than education for degrees and diplomas.

Following are the unique features of the courses of the MPC:

- No educational qualification is fixed for enrolling students.
- No formal examination is conducted to grade the students.
- Curriculum is need based and life oriented.
- The concept of 'learning by doing' is accepted.
- Participatory teaching learning methods are followed.

The vocational educational course options include: automobile, agriculture, electrical, computer, plumbing, tailoring, fruit processing and carpentry. Efforts are made to get the trained students in touch with the related industries and to place them as either employees or apprentices.

The one year vocational-cum-personality development course is the main activity of the MPC since its inception in the year 1996. An average of 90 youth have been trained every year. Youth belonging to tribal and backward communities are given preference. The objective of the course is to empower rural youth through an integrated residential education programme which is need based and socially relevant. The course concentrates on three major areas: (i) need based general education, (ii) vocational education and (iii) associated activities.

Nodal Continuing Education Centre

The Nodal Continuing Education Centre is one of the education extension schemes of the Kerala State Literacy Mission Authority (KSLMA) sanctioned to Mitraniketan. The objective of this centre is to promote functional literacy and equivalency programmes for the identified illiterates. The identified illiterates are given training for attending the equivalency examination by the *prerak* working at the centre. The centre also organises rural women for functional literacy programmes with the help of the existing women empowerment activities of Mitraniketan. A small library is also functioning under the centre for its members.

Women Empowerment

Currently women empowerment programmes are one of the main extension activities of Mitraniketan at the village level. All the programmes of Mitraniketan for women empowerment are implemented through the 42 women's organisations formed over the years. The women members of these organisations are availing of the benefits of different projects of Mitraniketan including the MPC and Krishi Vigyan Kendra. The programmes include leadership training, housewives training, simple technical training in farm and non-farm sector, literacy skills, awareness creation on health, environment and sanitation, and legal literacy.

The members of each women's group have weekly meetings among themselves. In addition there is a monthly co-ordinated meeting of the executive committees of all women's groups at Mitraniketan to plan and review the programmes. Four leaders have been identified from the women's groups and placed as extension workers so as to follow-up all the activities of women's groups.

Mitraniketan has been conducting several programmes for the housewives. They include training in life skills such as health, environment, water and sanitation, leadership training for group leaders, sports training, yoga classes, organic farming, income generation skills in pain balm, herbal tooth powder, lotion and detergent, and fabric painting. Services of resource persons from various institutions of Kerala, including volunteers from Universities, have been utilised for training women.

As part of its activities for women empowerment, Mitraniketan is running a working women's hostel. The objective of the hostel to provide board and lodging facilities to working women and is located at the Thiruvananthapuram city. The hostel can accommodate 65 women and its facility is fully utilised.

Community Health Centre

The objective of the Mitraniketan health centre is to provide primary health care to the Mitraniketan community members and the local people around Mitraniketan. It caters to the health care of about 500 community members living in the campus who include school children, youth and aged. The health centre is equipped with an X-Ray unit. However, the extent of the use of this facility at the health centre has come down due to the installation of a new X-Ray unit at the private Vellanad hospital and also due to the availability of scanning technology. The staff members in the health centre conduct frequent awareness sessions on various aspects of health care to the school children and trainees of the MPC. The centre has also been engaged in training rural women in health care and has been successfully utilising the potential of these women for improving the health care system.

Fruit Processing and Bakery

Mitraniketan has a project for training rural women in processing and preservation of fruits and vegetables, and production of value added horticultural products. This project was undertaken with the financial support from the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. Under this project a nodal fruit processing unit was established at Mitraniketan and 50 selected women were trained in fruit and vegetable processing. The trained women are supplying semi-processed raw materials to the nodal centre and also engage themselves as production workers in the unit alternatively. The unit is in the process of increasing production and networking its market. Two staff members and a consultant are currently engaged in the unit.

Mitraniketan has a bakery unit contributed by the German friends of Ettlingen community and Richard Nussbaumer Bakery, Germany. A team of bakers under the leadership of Martin Stoerk visited Mitraniketan for two weeks to install the bakery and train five persons at Mitraniketan. The bakery was transported from Germany in a container to Kochi. The total cost of the

unit is Rs.5,49,248. The bakery produces whole grain bread for marketing, and Indian buns and snacks for the community at Mitraniketan.

CONCLUSION

Mitraniketan celebrated its golden jubilee with various activities in such a way as to review its effects since its inception in the year 1956. The 52 years of the efforts of a team of dedicated workers under the leadership of K. Viswanathan institutionalised Mitraniketan as a centre for development education. During the period Mitraniketan has established a high school, the Krishi Vigyan Kendra, the Rural Technology Centre and the People's College for catering to the needs in the field of basic education, agriculture extension, technology transfer and non-formal education. Over the years Mitraniketan has experimented with various activities in the field of education and rural development which led to the development of an alternate model of education and development. It integrates education and development to unfold the full potential of an individual. Tribal children, rural youth, rural artisans, small and marginal farmers, women, teachers, social workers are some of the important beneficiaries of the institution. The activities of the institution have attracted a large number of visitors from India and abroad. The core activities of Mitraniketan have functioned to cater to the education and training needs of the people. This has become more relevant today in the wake of globalisation and privatisation.

Mitraniketan is grateful for the support and guidance from Government of India, Government of Kerala, Association of Danish Folk High Schools, Friends of Antioch, Heisenberg Gymnasium and other well wishers which helped us continue the core activities of the institution over the years. The institution also records its gratitude to all its staff members, and council members for their support and guidance in pursuing the goals of Mitraniketan.