

ASHRAM STORIES

Tales told by and about grandmas



Asha ajji stories- part 1
Titles 1 to 33

M.D . Swapna

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PREFACE

Asha Amre, hailing from an affluent family from somewhere near Pune, Maharashtra searches for a job which would satisfy her desire for a career that would keep her happy, busy and also meaningful to society. She tries various so-called good posts and quits. Finally she settles down to serve a destitute children's shelter, which she names ASHA , the ashram. This was years ago [from the time of writing these stories] when both free India and Asha were young. Then why 'ajji' which means grandmother? This is because the narrator of the stories looks back at the events and imagines a grandmother FIGURE.

This booklet is not a novel or a serial or a collection of short stories. This is a report on various events that were taking place in the ashram at that time. Swapna narrates the 'stories' to her friends, at the present time, around 2020 CE in a place in south India where the local language is Kannada.

Readers have to mentally shift some decades for the sake of the story. They should return to the present when the listeners start to discuss. Different font types are used to help the readers to shift from the past to the present and vice versa.

Most of the events are seen or heard about by the author. Most of the 'newsworthy' items are omitted. Like what? Like netas' [leaders] speeches in or about the ashram of children, bribe, swindling of money, mismanagement, violence, abuse, human trafficking, mishaps , accidents.

Then what is left? Mundane matters such as building a personality, adopting practices aimed at shaping humane and rational human beings. In this author's opinion the latter needs to be recorded and remembered.

Hence this booklet.

Mysore D Swapna
2023 CE

Normal font - story, past time . place : ashram, children, Asha, other ajiis viz. Mangala [aka] , kalpana [aa] , didis who were assistants to Asha also called housemothers, care takers

Italics – present time, discussions Narrator Swapna, her fans Elizabeth [English teacher} Jabeena [journalist], woman 1,2 ..., Place : homes of Swapna's friends

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1. Adoption Centre

[Adopting a child was not easy]

Swapna is the story teller. She told about true (!) events (called them stories) that took place when she was a fresh graduate. At the present time (call it 2020 CE),. Swapna herself is in her seventies. Ashatai Amre was the head of an ashram for girls. It is in this ashram the other ajjis (grandmas, old persons) became fast friends with the then young Swapna admiring all of them {for the readers of this story, four female graduates, all unattached, coming together can only be imagined}..Not much of the biography of any of the four is known to this author. As Swapna the narrator says the personal details contaminate the essence of the events being described. So Swapna avoids them. Let us listen to the narrator.

Swapna : Friends! I am the story teller. But you are all welcome to get in and discuss. I am going to narrate incidents that happened in ASHA ashram to which I had been a witness. The ashram and its warden Ashatai Amre were already established and running at the time I came into the scene. What I now describe is what I have heard through others.

Asha was in the first batch of students of an internationally (now) acclaimed Social Science Institute. That was the time freedom fighters, patriots and social workers lived and worked for common cause viz the people. Our Asha can be called all three rolled into one. Those were the days when it was thought that women's place was home. Those who need not work to bring the money, need not go to work. The fact that our Asha already had a degree in science before she joined social service course, indicates her family did not need her to work and support them.

So Asha's decision to look for a job had a reason viz **put your talents to use.**

The first job offer came from the Institute itself. They had an 'adoption centre' where persons who wanted to bring up children could legally get a child. Rules for adoption at that time were not only strict but also almost against human nature according to Asha.

First one is about children – only childless couples can adopt – single persons male or female cannot (this one was directly against the practice at that time in Hindu families – there were what Asha called 'child widows' or 'lifetime widows' Then there were single women (never married) variously called spinsters, witches or loners. According to Asha, they are the ones who needed the facility of adopting. It will help them in their old age. Many wanted heirs to perform religious rituals for their souls to reach the other world.

Government rules never cared for people's beliefs. The British made the rules. Indians simply continued with them. If the persons applying were young, the rules required that after the adoption date there should not be biological issues. To ensure this, vasectomy for the male was recommended! (in those days rules were RULES by the RULERS). All these clauses under the law were revealed to Asha AFTER she accepted the job. Asha regretted that she never took studying law seriously.

Swapna turned to her audience and said "I have given you background information, could you guess what Asha did?" Opinion among the audience varied.

Woman 1 : She worked as per rules until she knew all the loopholes and somehow circumvented them to suit her ideals.

Woman 2 : Upright Asha would have fought for change in illogical rules.

Jabeena, was the journalist in the group. She said, "This was her first job. The adoption centre was started by her Alma Mater viz. the famous social service centre,

So she quietly quit. Swapna : Shabash Jameena! Asha left but not before telling the Institute –in-charge at that time.

2. Beggars' Home

[Did beggars think it (begging) was a career?]

Next offer for Asha was the beggars' home maintained by the state government department. Since there was a choice, she accepted the women's wing. For a few days all her dreams were images of women each one was busy in her own way. One making garments out of whatever length of cloth she found..Another was making soft toys out of whatever old pillows contained. Another was organizing many others to make papads. Another had a hill of old newspapers on her left and neat stack of paper bags on her right. In short, each resident was doing something useful. But these were only her [Asha's] [day] dreams.

Soon she realized that no one was willing to do any work other than necessary: like washing one's own clothes, plates, etc. The young upper middle class Asha Amre until then thought that a beggar's life was the most difficult and every beggar would like to get out of her ordeal. What a disappointment!. Except the chronically ill persons, others resented even the strict discipline of the beggars' home. At the earliest opportunity many 'escaped' from the 'home'. As per rules they should be somehow employed and self sufficient [in a reasonable time].Many did not mind going back to streets and beggary.

Swapna asked her standard question : “What would Asha have done?” Before anyone could answer, Jabeena the journalist told her opinion.

Even the criminals kept in the jail had a release date.

Even those sentenced for life could be released earlier based on their good conduct. Perhaps a beggars’ home was a decent and dignified rehabilitation .

Elizabeth: Yet, majority opted to slide back into where they came from. Isn’t it strange?

Swapna agreed. True or not, that was the tendency of many of the residents. Perhaps Asha did not have any close friends to discuss as we are now doing.

Elizabeth : So she quit?

Swapna : Yes and did not do any more job hunting.

3. Care Centre

[Medical care or spiritual care?]

When an offer came to be manager of a 'seriously sick' patients' home, Asha thought she would try it. 'Home' here is the term used for an institution.

When Swapna said this, her audience laughed. One person said that if they named it 'home' they thought it will be a cozy home,

Elizabeth : Even at the time of Charles Dickens, the residential schools were 'discipline centres' or 'torture houses'. There, they were permanently labeled as 'problem boys'. Perhaps here they were 'problem patients'.

Jabeena : Long time stay at hospitals was not medically justifiable except for patients in coma.

Swapna said, " I wonder how my friends here are so negative about the idea. It could have been a great idea to put together 'terminally ill' persons.

Elizabeth agreed : " It can be everyone crying on the shoulders of another or together divert their own attention away from their present state." Swapna went back to the story.

We are now following Asha's career path. I cannot make any general statement here. The institution where she was offered a job was supported by a well structured religious organisation. They were known in India and all over the world for their 'homes' for abandoned babies or for very old and sick persons.

She hoped she would gain some direct medical methods of serving people. Typically, a day started with an extensive prayer. After breakfast and a round of visit (not

by doctors) by a group of trainees for priesthood, they were given a lecture.

Elizabeth : You could have clearly mentioned 'nuns' instead of calling them trainees. And the 'lecture's were some 'psalms' or 'selections' about the great merciful God.

Jabeena : The 'lectures' I am sure were in sessions to local groups in their own language.

Swapna : Specific details are not relevant to my story. Some story tellers may take pride in describing the attire or words of the caretakers. For my story details were not important.

Asha found that she could get very little 'medical' insight. She only found 'group therapy' by turning to devotion for solace. Many patients were left in the institution by relatives for good.

Elizabeth : 'For good' as stated by our respected Swapnaji has nothing 'good' about it. I hope our listeners know this. Many confused faces were seen, so Elizabeth continued, 'for good' means permanently.

Jabeena : Thank u my dear English teacher. Relatives brought the patient and left, never came back.

Swapna: Please tell me when I am not cogent. [Elizabeth again hard words!) Sorry. Shall we proceed ?

Asha noticed that some relatives came to visit the patients on weekends. She talked to each one of them. Also encouraged them to be with her. She then learnt that a patient was a graduate and a scholar in her language. She told the relative to bring some of the books she liked to read.

In another case, she came to know that the patient was a singer before she had throat cancer. She suggested to the visitor to bring some of her favourite cassettes.

When these relatives came next time. Asha gently asked if they brought the books or music.

She came to know that the caretakers had quietly taken those extra items away. Then Asha came to know that the Institution believed in equal and uniform 'care' for all. They were giving all of them 'hope to meet a peaceful end'. Asha wondered if she could continue. Then, another incident decided for her.

Doctors sometimes were accompanied by medical students, during the rounds. In one case she heard that a patient can be 'cured' and need not be given 'palliative' treatment, if some recent diagnostic methods were made and found positive. It needed release from there and admission into the specialty hospital.

Asha talked to the relatives about this. They were interested and asked about the possibilities and the expense involved. Asha said that she was not sure about money needed and could not say about the recovery since she did not know. She said they can consult the experts. The young couple discussed among themselves for some time and decided to let the patient stay in the 'palliative' peaceful home.

That is when Asha realized, it was a home for 'abandoned' relatives. Swapna stopped here.

Woman 1 : She quit this job also, right ?

Woman 2 : Quit or not, she did not like the job, because the young relatives did not want to spend money on the old person while they can build a house with that kind of money.

Woman 3 : It is the relatives' (perhaps son and daughter-in-law) decision, isn't it ? Why should Asha be worried about it ?

Woman 1 : About reading and music, there will be standard rules for all persons like the time for lights off, etc. in any hostel. Asha should have asked about the time-table and not decide to quit.

Jabeena : Let Swapnaji say.

Swapna : According to Asha, the place did not encourage CHEERFULNESS or USEFULNESS, but only looked for PEACEFULNESS.

So, she quit.

4. Slum Development

[Dwelling in slums : is it habit- forming ?]

Swapna saw her audience assembled well before the usual starting time. She was surprised and expressed her thought thus: "I never thought all of you will be so interested in what Asha did next."

Jabeena said: I have heard from elderly people and also from newspaper articles that jobs were not easy to get at that time. Even my own family's elders stayed with their first jobs.

Elizabeth: (English teacher) : I have also heard that a person who quit a job found it difficult to get another. No matter whether he or she quit on one's own or fired, it was held as a point against the person.

Woman1: It is very difficult even today. My niece left a job amicably for her first delivery and child care. When she went back recently her own company dodged any reply, not to talk of other institutions.

Jabeena: Jobs were much less in those days.

Woman 2: We all know relatives or friends who could not cope with the work they are supposed to do; this is why we are curious and assembled early.

Swapna : I am sorry to disappoint you all. I was not even introduced to Asha at that time. We met much later. But I have heard from others.

It will be dishonest to say Asha was not disappointed. She was also frustrated. She even had doubts about her own psychology about working under bosses and as per rules.

It was the time when major nation building projects were under the government or its various institutions including research. Very few private companies were there to do innovative work. Many were doing just business.

Even at that time all India competitive examinations were held for government jobs. Successful candidates were given special training just as today. Asha decided she would try. So her dejection days were not wasted.

Swapna continued: No need to say Asha got through. Looking at her social work qualification or just by chance, she was given the responsibility of slum development in urban areas.

Swapna asked her audience : Do you want to know what and how much she did in this field of work?

Jabeena, the journalist : I wonder whether everybody here wants to know about urbanization, paucity of housing in cities and such dull matters. Certainly, I don't want to hear about the compulsions of people who are part of slums.

Woman 3: I have heard that beginning with smuggling, all kinds of criminal activities were related to slums.

Elizabeth: You have heard. We have seen in those days, movies about dons and slum-lords.

Swapna: So I will just restrict my narrative to Asha. About other gory data, I myself do not know enough.

Asha studied the problem and found out any rehabilitation took the slum dwellers away from their original habitats to places miles away or even to the outskirts of the city.

A family who had built up means of living had to go and find new livelihoods. Unless the vacated space is properly utilized a new slum develops.

So she argued, fought and did what she should to get a grant for improved housing not far from the original slum. Thus house-help, milk, provision, paper and other suppliers to apartments, repair shops, tailors, garment factories, tea stalls, leather goods makers, flower, fruit sellers, fisheries, etc. could continue to run their business. If this list included smuggling, black marketing in rationed items, cinema tickets or railway reservations, she could not help. They could also continue. In spite of her inability to curb illegal activities, Asha was happy and perhaps a little proud of her achievement.

Then came the shocker. The new housing she planned for the slum-dwellers in a short time began to look very nice. Two-wheelers and four wheelers parked everywhere, coaching classes and beauty parlours opened here and there, a few pubs and bars instead of the desi-daru addas of the old place. Asha was astonished by the transformation.

A little investigation solved the mystery. The new occupants of the new place were middle class and above. She also came to know they were all tenants, the owners being the erstwhile slum dwellers. A little more sleuthing revealed that most of the slum dwellers have

dispersed to make new slums, the rents they get being a major part of their steady income.

Jabeena, the journalist: The proud social reformist, walking on the clouds, came down crashing.

Elizabeth: Frustration led to instant asking for a new posting.

Woman 1: Why should she leave? It is not her fault.

Woman 2 : Was there any agreement by the slum dwellers that they will not give for rent?

Swapna: I don't know the details. I know that Asha felt cheated and did not like to do any such thoughtless work.

5. Women's Hostel

[No time or aptitude for ideal development]

Swapna: After asking for a transfer, Asha waited for postings. Fortunately or due to the respect she got thanks to the detailed 'report on slums', officers consulted her. Therefore she had a choice for the next posting.

She avoided tax, audit and corruption, anti smuggling and such policing posts. When a post on women's hostel came, she opted for it.

Swapna asked her audience: Did she like her post ?

Woman 1 : That depends on the salary and status. Was it good ?

Woman 2 : Did they have all facilities - quarters, phone, car, servants ?

Woman 3 : Include travel allowance and chance to travel in India and abroad at least sometime.

Elizabeth : I wonder if Swapna meant, all these ?

Swapna : No, I could never imagine such thoughts in our group. I also did not know. Being an officer I thought she got enough for a comfortable living.

Woman 4 : Then what was the problem ?

Elizabeth : Swapnaji your friends here have not listened carefully. Turning to the women, Elizabeth asked, why did she quit the earlier jobs?

*Jabeena : I know, I can explain. For the same reason I quit mine. **Job satisfaction.***

Swapna : Yes Jabeena you hit the nail on its head. Satisfaction that my work means something, contributes to something. Once long after all these events were over there was a discussion on this topic among the ajjis and I was there. Shall I tell as much as I can recall?.

Jabeena : As a reporter if you just say without comments what took place, that is true reporting. Your or our comments or opinion can come later.

Elizabeth : True news reporter talking (claps).

Swapna went back to her narration. The following conversation was among herself [Swapna] and the other two aiji's about Asha.

Mangala : That is the time of extreme rationing. All food grains – fuel , like kerosene – even milk.

Kalpna : I also thought the same way – why did she not get into production, marketing.

Swapna : Rationing department itself ?

Mangala : It was a period of green and white revolutions. She could have joined research and applications.

Elizabeth, the teacher, could see question marks on the faces of few elderly women.

Jabeena : See these people, Their faces show that they do not follow. They are not so old as to have directly seen the steps to these revolutions. Not so young as to read about them in school textbooks.

Elizabeth : Nor do we care where our consumables come from or how.

Woman 4 : No personal criticisms please. All of us were not lucky like the ajiis or Swapna.

Woman 5 : Nor like you or Elizabeth, our world was our kitchen, dining table and children.

Swapna: Please avoid self-pity or self- glamorization. She turned to Elizabeth and said, " Could you explain these revolutions so that I can continue my story?"

Elizabeth started, 'These were not like French revolution.....' After Elizabeth finalized a brief account –

the science, statistics and organization, Swapna continued.

The reported conversation continued. Asha said in a nutshell I am giving only a gist. Farmers being called 'annadata' is fine. Workers build nation is OK. Building dams, factories, power stations OK and many other industrial and commercial – to national resources.

Mangala : Then why not any one of them ?

Asha: Kalpana can answer this – why play with children ?

Kalpana : What do I know ? I feel happy. They feel happy

Mangala : Don't you think this happiness makes them better persons in future ?

Kalpana : If I say it will look like boasting so, I did not.

Asha : See Human Resource, find it. Develop it if you can. At least save what is there. Now you can see how a hostel fits into human and also women's improvement.

Mangala : Like I say. All girls who go to college for higher studies, improve themselves in skill and intellect. Also, they are examples for others to follow.

"Was that all?" one listener asked. Swapna said basically yes. Other points I think are already known to everybody.

Elizabeth : As Mangala, the Head mistress said teaching also OK ?

Jabeena : Or any skill training centre.

Swapna : Now I recall Asha worked as a counselor in a school. It was due to her knowledge in psychology.

Elizabeth : Say, qualification.

Woman 5 : You did not tell about it.

Swapna : I will, another time.

6. Student Counselling

[Counselor for correction or dossier making ?]

Swapna in her next meeting was apologetic that her narration was not chronological. She remembered Asha's another adventure, That was as a student counsellor in a prestigious school. She thought a non-teaching outside adviser is good for the school. She looked at her job as problem identification and solving.

For the first few weeks she was happy that she could just meet small groups of same age children and no teaching, but LISTENING to them - It was revealing in two senses: one, the meeting revealed the anxiety of students to cope with the standards set by the school; second the anxiety of not getting a negative report by the counselor. Later she came to know from the teachers that the administration was very strict when a negative report about a student is given by the counselor.

In one case she found a student, a first-time school goer in their family for years. This student had a single mother caring for her with her daily wage job. Asha felt she could help. She wrote this. When the group came again after a few weeks, that student was missing. Asha learned that the student was given TC (transfer certificate) for not submitting homework for days together. When Asha asked the headmistress why she (Asha's) offer of help was not considered, she was shocked to hear the reason. It was impractical and would set a bad precedent even if somehow managed.

Academic difficulties of various groups were discussed. Asha felt that the problem pointed out to one teacher and Asha thought she could talk to that teacher. Headmistress said that the counselor's job is limited to advising problem students. That is when Asha realized that she was being USED. Like the Labour Welfare Officer or Human Resource Counselor in large private

companies viz - justification before 'taking action' -not to improve administration.

One woman wondered if there are such problems in major 'glamorous professions'

7. Government Home

[Good but bound by procedures]

In the next ASHA meeting Swapna asked a question to the listeners: How many of you think Ashaji's frustration in her younger days, led her to religious guru or ashram herself?

From body language it was clear that almost all agreed that she must have gone for and got some spiritual help.

Elizabeth: I have a question to you, Swapnaji ? Do you know or do you think she went for guidance from other religions? After all Christian institutions were there for almost two hundred years in India.

Jabeena said that Islam is well known for taking care of their destitute and poor people. Every earning person gave a percentage of his income for charities. Asha could have gained some guidance.

Woman1: Other religions of India also maintained maths and monasteries ; such as Jains, Buddhists.

Woman2: I don't know for sure, but I guess the gurudwaras and Parsi associations must have run orphanages.

Woman 3: If there is a teacher of social science, she can reel out names of spiritual leaders who established ashrams.

Swapna: Yes. Ashrams existed all over India. In Asha's time your 'social science' was called 'social studies'. As a

senior most here I remember it was mainly history and geography.

Elizabeth: Every region and language in India had local spiritual pundits and gurus.; also called babas, sants, saints, swamis.

Woman3: How about Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna Missions all over India?

Swapna: Jokingly, Elizabeth! What do you think of GK of our group?

Elizabeth: I will give 9 out 10 marks.

Swapna : Good, you did not give 10 out of 10. That one mark deserves mention like general hospitals, mental hospitals, correctional institutions like jails, government was managing orphans and destitute, along with juvenile criminals.

Swapna resumed Asha's story. Asha must have visited one or many of the religious institutions to get over her frustration and diffidence. She must have decided also that helping destitutes and orphans is better than any other group for job satisfaction.

When she found out that many cadre officers were reluctant to go to remand home, she opted for it That is where she learned first-hand, details of managing an institution with a meagre budget. The experience was useful when she established a small-scale ashram.

Swapna asked her audience: 'Do you want to know very useful positive points, or umpteen negative points about the institutions ?'

Woman1: We have heard or read about negatives in newspapers.

Jabeena: Because only murders, riots, disorders are newsworthy.

Woman1: Are there any good things about government-run institutions?

Swapna: You will be surprised, there are a few things Asha had told us about her experience which you may not see in a religious gurukula or convent. Remember to ask me about them later. Today I will tell you about two anecdotes.

A gruff looking (gentle) man was in the campus and looking around. He was asking a girl her name.. Security staff asked him politely to leave the place. Next day he was asking to see a girl. [Swapna asked: Is the name necessary? Let us just call the name Anami.] Asha asked him who he was and why does he want to see Anami. He gave his name and address. Swapna said she does not remember those details.[Let us say Faziabad near Agra.] He said he was her uncle and wanted to take her away to care for her. Asha said Anami is at school and gave him a day and time to come back. She watched him as he left the gate and told the security to have an eye on him. They came back and told her that this man talked to a van driver parked nearby and he and his friend left on a motorbike. Immediately Asha could smell a rat (as they say in Hindi 'there is something black in the dal'). Since she knew that Anami spoke Marathi and of a dialect of the coastal region.

On the appointed date and time the (gentle)man and his friend appeared at the office. A pair of men in khakhi were ready to speak to them. Asha could see fear in the eyes of the (gentle)men. They quickly retreated to their motorbike. The Policemen said, 'Don't worry madam, they will be nabbed. Our team is ready'.

The opposite happened another time. This (gentle)man was also asking for a girl who was his relative. His name (as given by him) was Badruddin. [Swapna was amazed at herself for remembering the

name]. There were only a few Muslim girls in the institution. He could tell the correct name of one of them. When Asha sent for the girl (to bring her to the office) she just happened to notice that this (gentle)man was the one who accompanied the Faziabad man. Through the window she could see a van. Now also strong smell of a rat was there. The girl came and they both said 'salam' to each other. When Asha said paperwork has to be done and police to be informed, Badruddin expected this. a signal from him and two khakhi clad men appeared. The man said he would finish the formalities and let Asha send the girl with the police. How did she manage the situation?

Swapna: What do you all think?

Elizabeth: She was in a tight situation, three ruffians (the two khakhis were surely fake ones) with a girl almost willing to go.

Jabeena: A lot of child trafficking was there in those days. Even a couple of Hindi films were made on the subject.

Woman 1: Tell us the result. Why suspense?

Woman2: Did she telephone the true police i.e. police station?

Woman 1: They were ruffians. They had already disabled the watchman.

Swapna: Details are not known to anyone. Asha on some pretext left the office and quickly padlocked the door. Went to the children's area and locked that too. Then she reached a telephone.

8. Finder or Founder

[At last a fairly autonomous ashram]

Swapna began the meeting with the statement : 'I am to tell you today how Asha founded the ashram named it ASHA'. Before I do I would like to ask you all a few questions. One, do you have anyone in your family or friends group start and run an orphanage or a child adoption centre? Second, have you seen how one is working on day-to-day basis?' It came to 'yes' and 'yes' from almost all the persons present.

Jameela: This is a small town. Here one can count at least 10 anathashrams or children's homes. Many of us have relatives whose profession is related to such institutions.

Swapna: Then someone tell us how difficult or how easy it is to start one such institutions.

Elizabeth: It can at most be as difficult as starting a school. (Jabeena: or a manufacturing company). Permission from a few departments (of the government) and regular checks by officials.

Swapna: I can be brief and to the point since you are all well aware.

Even at her time, Asha found this as a challenge. If a philanthropist finds one or ten children on the street and cares for them, she or he may be praised by all in the neighborhood but what he did would be illegal. At any time anyone claims a child as his or a relative or just not an orphan, the well-wisher will be in legal trouble.

Thus the entry and exit modes of children into or from the institution have to be lawfully done and documented. Asha coordinated with the highest office of the local police. Whenever she found an abandoned child, she

noted down the place, date accurately and time and very importantly a few identification marks.

With this data she went to the police to lodge a 'Found' report. This information made public just as "missing" persons were advertised. Any enquiries were routed through the police department.

She thought : "Let me worry when the time comes

*As expected Elizabeth , the English teacher added;
Cross the bridge when you come to it*

9. Hope

[Asha finds a position suited to her sense of social service]

The next meeting with Swapna's friends was unusual. Usually, all the friends wait for the host. Some hosts preferred to start with snack or light munches to be followed by coffee. And then it will be over coffee any listening or discussion will take place. Today even before the host proposed anything the others could not contain their curiosity.

Jabeena the journalist seemed to have taken up as their spokesperson. She said without any greetings or introduction.

'We all have the same basic doubt, Your ideal Asha, though young at this time of her life, seems to be full of ideals, so full that she could not stay with any job. She is no different from today's nerds with nose high up in the air and looking down on sincere workers.'

Elizabeth: Those are harsh words. It appears she could not adjust to strict rules or bosses.

Woman 1: Even the name Asha for her ashram is like self-promotion.

Woman2: Our Swapnaji would not know. She did not know these aji's at that time.

At this point in the discussion Swapna joined: "Thank you all. I really do not know whether all your doubts are true. But I preferred to look at her behaviour from an idealist point of view. A person who would like to do service to society may even today feel like Asha.

Swapna continued her story.

ASHA is an acronym for some health scheme today. Since the word "asha" in most of the Indian languages means 'hope', it had been used for quite a long time; especially when referring to the less fortunate persons in society.[someone said many girls are named Asha over centuries- not to mention the famous singer]

But that was not the case in this event. It was an acronym coined by Ashatai Amre. Perhaps she was a little conceited, I agree. It was really, '**Atheist Shelter House for All**,' If it were today, she would have used 'the term '**secular**,' Soon some well wishers of Asha started to call it Aashraya for all. Aashraya we all know means shelter. It became **Ashrama** and even today the sign board stands as 'ASHA'.

Swapna here stopped and tried to remember. ASHA had some phrases to describe her ashram. I may be making up now since my memory is poor and I have no records with me.

A -Almighty does not need any religion.

S -Scientific attitude to any subject.

H - Humanness is higher than morals or rules.

A – All those who need help.

She had some principles based on which she ran her ashram.

Jabeena to Swapna: You joined her later. Were these principles achieved by that time ?

Elizabeth: Looks like my new year resolutions, made every year. Never really achievable.

Swapna: Elizabeth is right. These were aims,. guidelines on which to do your work. My further episodes will tell that Asha really tried.

10. Half and Half

[women need a career, decent income, and also family life, Asha finds a way of balancing these.- a concept of 4 hrs/day for work]

ASHA as all our readers know is Ashrama Ajji. People around knew that there is an ashram [without any temple, math (religious institution), or Guruji] run by a single woman.

Asha's ashram was fully managed by women [of course until government took over, when required staff were provided]. Girls of all ages under the guidance of didis, [didi -- a Marathi word meaning elder sister , akka of Kannada]. Some institutions use the word 'house mother' which is a sham show word, according to Asha since NO ONE can substitute for a mother. Perhaps a biological grandmother could and that depends upon circumstances].

Asha herself was addressed as Asha Thai ['ajji' in Kannada] which she did not mind. Perhaps she started the ashram with a handful of children way back before Indian Independence. At that time she also might have been young enough to be called akka (didi was the true word, but this series is narrated by the writer when ajji,

akka, etc. are appropriate). When our story starts, she was called 'ajji'.

Ajji and akkas managed almost everything. But quite a few chores needed extra hand. So, she employed paid help.

Especially office work needed day time work. She has seen in all the offices and factories, women had difficulty managing a professional job of 8 hours of work plus added travel time made it difficult for them. Many quit or made to resign soon after marriage. As soon as a child came, it was certain the woman resigns. Exception was those affluent and fortunate women who had ayah and domestic help (either paid or in-laws and relatives).

Asha used to discuss with her friends, mainly Mangala and Kalpana, the IRONY of the situation. It is the less affluent women without any relatives who have to work for a living. Thus her ashram, even after it came under a government scheme, had a unique employment pattern.

For a given post, she appointed two persons (of almost equal skills). Each worked for 4 hour duration (call it shifts). The two were allowed to consult each other well before taking the job. This is to make sure shift 1 (say morning) will be suitable for employee (1) and shift 2 (evening) for employee (2) and they agree to work as one team.

Even with half the total income for each, women were happy because otherwise they would have had no income. Many, Asha thought, will learn to have confidence and self-respect to her job. It was unbelievable, she could have had dozens of women (even at her time) but she has neither work nor funds for so many employees.

After the government take-over, auditors and administrators were surprised. One post, 2 names! Some

raised objections. How can we pay two persons for one job?.

Asha argued and tried to convince them, in vain. But she could not sacrifice her proven practice and ideal. She had a solution. It was that one person's name will be in the muster and she would share the money honestly.

Of course, on payment day, both will be present and would get equal share.

Many owners of small factories learnt about this arrangement. They even found 4 hours shift worked extremely well with perhaps a tea break. No lunch time or closing of the desk increased the efficiency since no one got tired or bored at the end of the shift..

Swapna's friends who were listening to the story, wondered: how come we have not heard of it ; not even in "management" guide books or courses. Swapna said I can guess. Anything to help women can be undermined by the bosses and administrators.

See around today, so many medium sized businesses - go and see, not one of them will have a 'day care centre' for the infants of the employees. Common reason given: not enough number to pay a few people at the centre. Did any inspector of factories suggest? What ? Many in the same industrial zone can join and contribute to a 'day care centre' for all the mothers in the area. Even charge for pickup service.

Tell me if there is anywhere in India (in any small town).At that time with a few women seeking employment and social pressure and prejudice against a working woman, Asha's idea did not become popular.

As a matter of fact, she herself was compelled to abandon it. because automatic attendance machines came.

11. ASHA OR SHABARI

[Head of an institution should know the quality and quantity of food served to the residents. And also other associated facilities.]

Swapna: Today I'm going to describe something which to most of us will look like overdoing. But Asha had a science and engineering background, which I forgot to tell you. She would never take anything for granted unless logical. Then in her duty as warden, she was used to the hundred-year-old British government order about food distribution.

All items were served in a thali (plate) and bowls. All the items to be served to the inmates were on the plate.

As a duty she would test (=taste) each item, and approve if it is satisfactory.

If was just only about a week, after she took over as warden. She was shocked to see children not fully eating. She investigated and found out tasteless watery gravy (dal) and similarly low-quality other items. But she remembered that the sample thali brought to her table was OK and she has passed it.

She went directly to the kitchen staff, and asked how come?

Straightforward innocent cooks said : "How can we send the same stuff given to children to senior officers like you?"

Asha was about to shout "Idiots" but controlled herself.

Next day, she got her bowls filled directly from the big vessels meant for all and tasted it in front of them. Of course she had to explain the purpose of sample thali sent for approval.

From then onwards she was careful about the quality of everything (water, milk, tea).

Fortunately for her, there was no scam or swindling, perhaps due to already low budget items.

Swapna: Do you think this is a story worth telling you.

Elizabeth: Certainly, everyday our local newspapers come out with –hostel inmates complaints, food poisoning of -persons etc. There will be less of every complaint if every warden was as responsible as Asha.

Swapna: For me, it was worth telling you because; the experience with food spread to every aspect of her duties. Checking and personally going through bathroom and washing places, cleanliness of the kitchen and utensils, Storing and handling of materials.

Next was just living for a day with and under the same conditions as, the residents.

So , bedding and floor,

Study and sleeping hours,

Facilities for washing, drying, storing etc.

One woman Even now netas make home-stay in villages for a day or two. I have seen photos and news.

Elizabeth: This story was when Asha was the warden of a government remand home. It helped her later to make her own ashram better than many similar ones.

First step was to split into smaller units ‘houses’ with the Didi or the head literally ‘staying’ with the residents. Asha had to train and sensitize them to aspects of responsible living; also what to check for.

One woman My friend travels a lot. She checks hotels for staying with respect to cleanliness of toilets., leaking

of faucets and taps, working of heating and electrical items.

,She also looks for cobwebs in the ceiling overflowing dustbin. dust on furniture items. foul smell or strong hospital smell.

Elizabeth: Swapnaji, we all can qualify for 'health inspector' certificate.

Swapna: All of you, homemakers, are in fact health inspectors and hygiene providers.

1. "Yes, every mother tests the milk in her feeding bottle on the back of her hand, before putting into the mouth of the infant".

2. A cook is the best home-maker. Tastes every item, especially the vegetables for salt and spice, before taking to the dining table. Like the old woman Shabri of the Ramayana.

3. "Nurse in ICU checks the mask".

4. "Ayah or orderly sits on the wheel chair and tests.

5. "Mike tester before a conference.

6. Security persons before a big event.

7. Safety and road worthiness of vehicles by test driving.

8. Like any maintenance engineer.

Swapna: See how all of us were carried away by the concept. Come back to our meeting and see if we are all thirsty or hungry.

12 . PAPER GUZZLER, Asha

[All children keep diary . selected items go to newsletter and magazine]

Two box files for all to see (i) Ashram-Administration (ii) Ashram-Information

Example;

a). Names, photos, and details of children (for the year) will be in administration. Only the name of children in information

b). Names and addresses of donors in Information. Donated items, amounts only in Administration. Information file was full because it contained notices, news reports etc.

Paper consumption in the ashram was unbelievable. It can be easily 2 to 4 times the consumption of other similar ashrams.

While usually institutions complain about the amount of paperwork demanded by government and others. Asha's Ashram voluntarily increased their paperwork.

One example was given by Swapna – Every child maintained a scrapbook and diary. Every house had a common diary.

Unused pages of notebooks, test answer sheets, one side blanks like notices question paper etc. were used for many purposes.

Today's inbuilt computer - secretary helps you with answers to mail like Thank you, received etc.

In the ashram 3" x4" [i.e. notebook sheet cut into 4 equal pieces]" were generously used. It was a practice to ask orally and supported by these chits.

Example: for a request:

| | |
|--|---------|
| I need, Please give, <i>Malaa paahije, Kripakaroon dhyaa,</i> <i>Mujhe chahiye; Kripya dena.</i> | Details |
|--|---------|

In any language politely ask for a favour orally, supported by the chit.

Any favours received is acknowledged

| |
|--|
| Thank you for ----- _____ <i>satthi dhanyavad.</i> _____ <i>keliye shukriya.</i> |
|--|

[note for foreigners - the same as in English: Marathi and Hindi]

According to Asha, this practice helps not only in the ashram, later in their life.

Any creative thinking gets recorded some of them worth showing to the public.

This is how the paper consuming project of Asha came about. Ashram published a monthly newsletter for anyone to see. Certainly, a copy in each 'house' was provided, many were sent out to AA Kalpana, AKA Mangala and others.

A typical newsletter had:

Editor's page. Thanks for help by, names of donors, volunteers welcome to join us in:

Activities during the month of

Other pages contained essays, poems, jokes, drawings etc. by the ashramites.

Selection from the monthly newsletter were published as Ashram Magazine (annually).

In fact, loose sheets (before binding) of the article were given to the author-child for putting into her own personal file. It may be already there in the child's handwriting. This was the published copy.

Asha was a firm believer in motivation by self for oneself and by other well-wishers. According to her one's diary and file were self-motivators in one's life.

Friends, as in our time, in Asha's time also school and college magazines were common. So-called bright students were encouraged to contribute. How about now?

One person: Now many inter-city, interstate, international schools have come up. They certainly will have their annual magazines.

Elizabeth: Only 'prestigious' schools and colleges. Our ordinary, government supported schools and colleges do not have. Not very common. My school does not have.

Woman (II) that is because no government employed teacher wants to do extra unpaid labour. If it was part of their duties, they would also have done that.

Woman (IV) So you are transferring the blame to the education department and government administration.

Swapna: I am not good in the modern digital age. Someone can find out, search the web or phone and ask... just how many have publications.

Jabeena: Science communication is a hot subject of Journalism & mass communication. Some can find that content also.

13. Neat and Great

[All ashramites including didis (house- mothers) must wear clean and neat clothes . They should look like any others in their society.]

Swapna told her audience, neighbours friends, and of course 'open house' entrants, about the ashram of Asha. Though it was for destitutes the ashram was like a street or a big complex of many houses. Not just halls and room, but homes; family-like being collectively managed with guidance from Asha.

In her time and much before, there were many institutions, mostly religious. One priest-like leader or group of them managed every aspect of the institution. In government institutions, strict government guidelines were followed; almost like military barracks. Common food for all; fixed menu; time schedules (like ringing a bell for each session). Even a guruji – controlled places, similar routines were there with special emphasis on discipline, behaviour etc.

Asha managed all the above good aspects by gently influencing the home - heads called didis. (Here Swapna said 'didi' = 'akka,' elder sister. Others may call her 'mother' but Asha had very high regard for the word 'mother' not to be misused).

Swapna : One of the homely ways, as we have seen earlier, was use of materials, items to be prepared, work etc. were done co-operatively.

One item provided to each 'kutir' [home] was an iron-box. Every dress which is worn for going out of the ashram, including uniforms, should be clean. (washed) and neat (ironed). Even didis should wear ironed sarees and blouses.

Asha says; “It gives them an awareness of self; both satisfaction and importance.”

*Swapna said : Suppose our homemakers wear such neat (ironed) and clean dress (may be saree - blouse or salwar kameez) they can tell themselves” **I am on a job; of value. It is no less than a profession or career**’.*

Young children’s dresses were managed (washed and ironed) by elders. But the young ones see the process. Everyone participates in cooking, cleaning, arranging etc.

Asha used to say: True, we ARE orphans and destitute. But we NEED NOT LOOK like the same or beggars.

Elizabeth: The proverb says: Cleanliness is godliness.

Jabeena: In Urdu (or Hindi) it is said: Apparel makes for half of a man.

One person said: In Tamil, the saying is ‘Even if tattered, let your clothes be clean.

Swapna: In our time ironing clothes was done by giving them to a laundry, paying dear money.

Jabeena: Or done by housewives for their office going menfolk.

Elizabeth: Some houses never had any iron box since using it with charcoal shoals was cumbersome.

Swapna: That is when “Electric iron box came to the market and Asha quickly caught on to the phenomenon.

14. Free day ?.... Never

[Reading habit from a young age for children a must- adults must help Saturday evenings for reading and listening]

In her ashram, ASHA had a free day and that was Saturday. For two reasons: after five and half days of school and next day being a holiday, no one was in a mood to study or do homework. Second, some time if allotted to non-curricular activities, it is good for children of all ages.

Thus Saturday afternoon was for games. In the place where ASHA worked real evening was only after 5 p.m. Until then, almost all year except monsoon, it was hot. So outdoor games were advisable only in the real evening. The afternoons of Saturdays were for indoor games, activities. The evenings were for outdoor games.....

Did Asha allow the night time before bed free for the residents? It was pre- television days. Roaming in the streets is a strict “no-no” according to Asha, either for male or female, young or old.

Since many students shunned homework at least on Saturdays, it was notionally free. Children always found ways to engage themselves in a group.

When alone very few were happy reading, humming, or whatever. This Asha found, was because reading as habit or hobby was never in our culture. According to Asha this habit is surely to be cultivated. So, Saturday the time late evening before and after food was for reading.

READ ALOUD was a great event. Asha managed to bring some persons to read to children. At that time taped matter (even CDs were not there) was available. This or even radio dramas were impersonal.

Young children became drowsy or start doing silent mischief. (Radio Ceylon in those days was the exception – Asha appreciated classical, light or cine music – but making children (all) do that looked odd). Hence inviting guest readers.

This (gentleman or) lady would read to *ashramites* (loud speaker and ordered sitting appeared formal) in small groups. Usually Asha selected ladies, need not be celebrities or famous; just educated housewives.

So, children would crowd around the reader. If it happened to be a poem or a famous passage already available in anyone's textbook, copies would be brought. The guest reader reads. Others repeat.

After that reading (a few sentences or a paragraph) one child at a time would read. Asha thought this would create in children an interest in reading and listening.

At this stage of telling Asha stories, Swapna turned around to her group and said, "We have mentioned 4 methods of reading aloud in one of our AA stories". Here it is the 5th, read and repeat. One reads, others repeat.

Of course, selection of readable material was left to the guest. Usually it is something like Panchatantra, Aesops, Jataka, Ramayana, Mahabharata etc... Sometimes Buddha, Paramahansa. Some dared to include Akbar- Birbal, Tenali Rama and even Mulla Nasruddin. Whenever Asha could manage, she suggested to guest readers, books and subjects like, the famous Tarzan, Jungle book, Red Riding Hood, Sleeping beauty, etc. Even comics.

She found that older students in the ashram were hearing these for the first time. On many occasions Mangala and Kalpana were the guest readers.

Even otherwise they were with the children on Saturdays.

Once Mangala wondered if this program can be done with other subjects. Not just stories or literature. Her experiments in school had to wait for Asha ajji and Kalpana to work out the basics. Kalpana found that in smaller classes, this was the well known and age-old practice. But not like story telling. Kalpana and Mangala's experience is another story.

Swapna turned to her listeners: You have heard reading to children in Asha's ashram, what do you think?

Elizabeth said we have religious tradition. Priest (or Guru) saying usually an old text and all the parishioners repeating. Among Sanskrit scholars, I hear, that this was the only method of learning for thousand years]

Teacher (Kannada) said even those did not help to create 'reading habit'. All of us chant shlokas and we have never read any modern short stories.

Even in mother tongue journals (weekly, monthly) are sold in small numbers; meaning extra (unnecessary) reading is not done by our adult population. Any reading is only "serials". Buying books is not the common man's habit. Some houses will not know where to keep books.

Swapna said: We are drifting into sociology or economics. Let us go back to Asha.

Asha brought picture books, comic books, standard story books, etc and kept in a library: Children then learnt to do 'silent' reading.'

Headmistress said, I have heard of NGO's doing a similar job (in the present time). They are given in the form of lectures or seminars. science clubs, consumer organizations, Sahitya Sangha etc... They do this for their own already educated persons.

Swapna: That is why Asha said some should have children as target group for all these efforts.

Asha was a success because study hour was compulsory - one corner was reserved for those who have finished their homework or those who do not have any homework. Sometimes higher class students read out to lower class students.

15 . IRANI RESTAURANT

[Eating etiquette- take only what and how much you want – do not waste- Asha shows by example.]

Swapna the narrator, as our readers know, was an impersonal person. That is, she never asked or gave personal information about herself or any other person present. That is why today, everyone was a bit surprised when she asked: “How many of you go to hotels?” Liz even expressed her surprise. Swapna said, not that I am curious about any of you but the question is relevant to today’s story.

After this explanation answers came. It was seen that most of the listeners have gone when they had guests or when they travelled. Only a few confessed that the habit is considered a luxury in the family. Some were strict with their food habits and for them there was no street food or outside food.

Liz the teacher and Jabeena the journalist were the two who not only knew about most of the well known restaurants in the city but also enjoyed some menu items. Jabeena said that when she planned to travel, she would find out (along with information on the places to visit) about good eating places.

Swapna: Thank you all. This discussion helps me to decide how to start my story. We are all aware of many kinds of hotels. Can you at least list by each type? .Jabeena said, in India, we have clear difference

between “Pure” vegetarian hotels and the others, even in their name boards. Others joined in.

Woman 1: Star hotels are only for tourists we all know.

Jabeena: You forgot our own local rajas and maharajas viz. chieftains of business heads, MD’s & CEO’s expenses debited to the company. And then real Maharaja’s – elected political people.

Woman2: It appears we are jealous of these lucky people.

Swapna: It is ok to be jealous or be critical in this matter but this greed should not lead to grief.

Liz: Never let our feelings descend down to our dependents – children and students.

Woman 2: Let me show off my little knowledge of the subject. First is the corner “ Darshini” another name for self-service.

Swapna: Sorry, I raised this question, It seems you are well informed about various eateries.

Liz: Also, tea-shops, messes, ice cream joints, juice centres, thanks to children we come across.

Swapna : Thanks to Asha, I came across another type of hotel called ‘Irani Hotels.’ They bring their menu on a plate and you can get served or serve yourself, instantly.

Jameela: I can understand since I have travelled, I dont know about others here.

Liz: Yes Swapanji, you have to say and also whether this is the story for today.

SW: No it is introduction or background to the story. Good question – Asha ajji’s episodes is our subject. She was a warden in an orphanage and not in hotel business. So your doubt is ok. But I thought an example will clarify the concept. But the example itself had to be explained here.

In Bombay Irani Hotels, menu, of course, is written on the walls or boards. Since they specialize in biscuits, cakes, pastries, a display shelf is there. In addition, when a party

is seated, a sample board containing the items available comes to the table.

Customers can see and decide which ones they want and order.

I call this “visual menu.” Thus, ordering by exotic name and then wasting it is not there in an Irani Restaurant. In spite of the “visual” selection if any item is left, the owners affably pack and give it to the customer. Asha was so impressed with this way of serving and eating, she wanted to adopt it in her hostel.

Jabeena came into the narration: “In starred hotels both in India and abroad, any left over of a costly item is packed. It used to be euphemistically (politely) called ‘doggiebag’. Server knows when the customer points to an unfinished bowl of a side dish.” Yes sir, a doggie bag: I’ll pack it”.

Swapna : Asha was impressed by the idea of selecting from the menu. She had been to a number of hostels (even paid ones) and free institutions to realise how meal time was just a job to be done away with. Irrespective of the so called weekly diet and items plan, in actual fact menu was just drab, tasteless’ while roti, puri, or rice was ok. other items were even wasted. Onion/garlic/hot pickle being available was the face - saver.

Secondly, in many hostels the inmates line up with their plates and ONCE served, that is the end. This was the basic difference between a home and a shelter home. Asha told herself that she will change this practice.

Standing in a line to receive food was banned even when any special treats were given. Children sit and get served. The server can be staff, the house ‘didi’ or one or two of the residents themselves. This Asha said was the ‘homely’ touch.

At this point of the narration Jabeena the journalist commented: Even in the hostels of institutions where rich persons' children are studying, the situation is no different.

Go see 'the dining' halls of these posh establishments. The food counter of course is big, neat and the items are many. They are also liberally served. But the students collect and eat in a group and leave.

Liz: And only in a few places a second or third serving happens. So I have seen so much food left on the plates and at washing places. Waste bins get filled after every meal.

Woman 1: I am reminded of a wedding meal or reception. Costly items served or taken and wasted.

Woman 2: 'Status' of some women is indicated by how little they eat and how much is left out in their plates.

Swapna : So, you all agree what Asha did as everyday rule was right – both for not wasting as well as the satisfaction.:

If on one day the single side dish is not liked by say, one child, for her pickle was the only support. Thank God it was a standard item

Here again there were comments.

Liz: Now I am able to explain the behavior of the hostelites of posh colleges. So many roadside eateries doing brisk business. It is due to this non-satisfaction during meal time.

Woman2: I thought most of them wasteful and arrogant, irresponsible etc. Now you are giving a valid reason for their behaviour.

Jabeena: Reason or not, they have money to spend. How about others living on charity like Asha's ashram ?

Woman3: At home also we are strict that no food should be wasted. But children or even adults can ask for alternatives and they will get.

Swapna continued her story. Asha must have known all the aspects you have discussed, I do not know. But the fact is, mealtime must be enjoyable is her motto. So she followed some guidelines made by herself. She followed the same.

- ☐ Choice of side dishes called 'sabji' or vegetable
- ☐ Menu seen in front and all the items not dumped on the plate.
- ☐ Eat course-wise as at any standard home.
- ☐ Take only as much as you can eat and nothing left on plate.

See I told you I would connect up with Irani Hotels. To emphasize a clean plate after finishing eating, Asha had a simple example: herself. She used to join the inmates on many evening snack and meals. Instead of drinking water from a glass, she would pour some on the just finished plate, rinse and drink away, she used to say, thus even last remnants are not wasted and demonstrates to anyone around that the eater had followed the practice.

Jabeena: When donors supply lavish food how do they manage?

Woman1: Like when we attend a marriage dinner or temple 'annadaanam'.

Swapna: As Asha had many times told her, lavish meals day was always a problem – not only in the ashram but also to our bellies. We have to give digestive syrups or 'kashayas'

Woman 3: When we were children, we used to collect sweets (during big meals) like laddus to carry home and eat later.

Swapna : Asha did the same. Each child had a box (numbered for identification) to collect and keep for later. The donors were also encouraged to serve only as much as the child can eat. Special items to be given in the box.

Swapna : Background information over I suppose. Shall I go to today's episode?

Liz: (obviously surprised) I thought we just discussed one episode.

Jabeena: Perhaps all the students visit an Irani Hotel.

Swapna : Let us cut out any jibes. There was an event which made Asha make important decisions and future guidelines about running a charity ashram.

Woman 1: Then why wait? In Hindi: Phir, der kis bath ki?' Swapnaji kindly start.

When an elderly man passed away, his relatives who were here, decided to skip many religious rituals and instead feed children in orphanages. The old man's children who were abroad gladly joined the lavish feast which was served to the inmates comfortably seated and the donors serving. Even extra food parcels were stored for children's individual boxes to be consumed later.

Disaster struck early in the evening. One by one children felt sick, the first ones being the youngest' The pattern of vomiting, diarrhea, indicated food poisoning.

Immediately Asha's medical contacts came to help. All boxes of food were to be discarded. That is when one of the doctors said, send some of them for testing. It will help to do any immediate medical help.

One didi said, and also tell us whether the donors supply was the cause.

Asha managed the situation and after almost all the residents losing one day's school. the story turned out this way. The local relatives had made everything ready but the well meaning children of the late gentlemen wanted to participate and they waited for them to arrive. Meanwhile food was stored in refrigerators.

Thus well-intentioned program turned out to be a disaster. No one imagined the power failure recently would affect, but it did.

In the next brain storming session with didi's and Mangala, Kalpana, Asha mentioned this incident. Many pointed out that many donors want their excess (or leftovers) to be given to charity. Star hotels, marriage halls, airlines etc want to donate instead of disposing off food as waste. Thus Asha decided two things:

1, no readymade items, only sponsorship.

2, only on days reserved for outside donors.

Jabeena : Even after 50 years from Asha's time, we have the same problem, like what to do if there is a prolonged power cut. Big hospitals will have their own generator or backup systems. Clinics, dispensaries including small time pharmacies are helpless. They just carry on as if nothing happened.

Liz: Problem stated. Asha had a solution. Do we have?

With such a negative mood, they left. But Jabeena and Liz stayed. Liz said I feel something is incomplete. It is unlike Asha to only take 'preventive' action by regulating edibles donation. In case of emergencies some 'remedial' actions should have been planned.

SW: I am sorry, I forgot to mention. In case of similar accidents

One: An emetic to be ready.

Two: Methods of locally making ORS was learnt by all didi's.(ORS-Oral rehydration solution).

You two could brief the others in the next meeting.

16. NO NOISE – BUT READ ALOUD

[Reading aloud vs silent reading – when and how]

Swapna in her friends' meeting, to narrate Asha stories, had brought, some books with her. Some were text books, some others light reading. She said, in our time, that is Asha's time two kinds of text books were there; 'detailed' and 'non-detailed'.

Elizabeth: Even today they are there. But we teachers do not distinguish.

Woman1: Why is that?

Elizabeth: Because in the final question paper, no difference between detailed and non-detailed.

Woman2: I guess, there should be. See non-detailed mostly will be stories. So asking questions from a story may be different from say, a grammar question.

Elizabeth: You are right. Not only that. In textbooks, some things may be very important and can be stressed. Perhaps names of persons and places may be necessary, for a serious study, If it is light reading they may not be.

Swapna: In Asha's time, perhaps the difference would have been maintained. Even I may not know. But Asha had her own methods.

Swapna said, AKA (Mangala) described how Asha looked at reading as a part of education. She thought Didi's i.e. the persons who managed a 'house' of 10 to 20 inmates should be guided and helped, so they were told:

For primary schools, reading is always loud reading - Letters one by one- and word- even maths has be read out and then written.

In middle school, silent reading starts- At that stage children should first read, either aloud or silently, then they can write down. At this point, light reading or reading for one's own happiness starts and that is always silent.

In contrast, in primary stage, light reading will be done by the elders for the sake of children. i.e. Didi's (or teachers or mentors) will read out stories (acting out will be even better).:

We all know this. But why tell the details to us.

Swapna: Because all will be reading; not silent like a library-But aloud, to one another. Isn't it a new concept?

Swapna: Remember a 'house 'by design will have a range (age-group) of children. A Didi may not have time to work individually with each child. So Asha put all the ideas above together in a day's schedule So, serious work-one reads-all others repeat-This works for:

ANY FORMULAS

ANY DEFINITIONS, PROVERBS.

ANY SHLOKAS, POEMS

ANY SONG.

The second method is 'reading for self'. This is essentially silent reading. If you are reading a book of jokes you can say, "see what it says here" and one can read out to another or a group.

Woman1: In our houses also this can be done.

Woman2: How can you? Some have to see 'weekly serials' On cricket days that is the only thing- Other times each member of the family will be seriously looking at his his/her mobile.

Elizabeth: Yes, even if I am willing to read, I have no audience.

17. TALKING BOOKS or READING BOOKS

[Talking books – home-made and used for curricular and general education]

Asha meeting this time was in Elizabeth's house. As our readers know by the time, the venue for the meeting shifts every week.

The member hosting the meeting usually displays her culinary skills (even though Swapna buys harmless, acceptable to all, non-oily snacks).

Elizabeth, the host this time, had arranged for recording the discussion, since many members who could not come wanted to know what happened.

Even though Swapna had caught on to all the modern gadgets; yet she had to tell her brain that this is post-2K age. Pre 2000 A D was an electronic age, fine, but not really consumer penetration digital set up. When Elizabeth said "recording set ready; shall we begin?" Swapna looked around for mikes, tape recorders...Only for a moment.. then it dawned on her that every person sitting here can record without any problem and erase it too. Then Swapna thought the proper subject will be talking books.

Swapna said to her relatively younger audience, now-a-days anything can talk. Just have a smart phone/TV,

laptop or a PC (personal computer) and download text to speech. Am I right Jameela?

Jameela said, madam you are an exception to your generation, we salute you. But you don't even use the simple voice recorder.

Swapna continued, "In Asha's time, as I told earlier 3-in-1 included a tape-recorder cum player. [The other two were One voice said don't worry madam we can guess] There were "talking books" in the market. Simple story books for children which can be silently read by you [i.e. the child]. The teacher and the reader can also hear some popular person reading out the text.

Jameela: Madam they were not tapes. They were CD's requiring a CD player. [CD-compact disc].

"Yes, see I go back in time too much. Stop me before I go to ice-age or wood-burning stoves" said Swapna smiling.

In Asha's ashram, a tape recorder was used because CD making (do they call it "cutting?") was not easy.

Asha used 'talking' books to initiate children into the reading habit. Of course, she had heard of I AA Kalpana and her band of teachers using 'following-by-finger' method.

Elizabeth: Sorry to interrupt, we have not heard (or you have not told us) about that method.

Swapna: Oh that is simple. From Grade I onwards (perhaps up to Grade V), this method in the class room was common not only in AA's schools, but in almost all the schools. Am I now talking of an ancient civilization? (Someone: not Mohanjodara?)

All the children open their books. Teacher announces page number. When she starts reading slowly word by word the child's finger moves.

Elizabeth: Madam this is called eye and ear coordination -Like seeing a video.

Swapna: Thanks Elizabeth for one good word about the age-old practices.

Swapna continued. After listening to the story, one child reads the same text while Asha records. This is replayed to the group, with strict warning against any laughing or teasing [*Hey, you come and read. Let us see how well you could do it*"] This is children mimicking Asha's warning to the erring child]. Similar exercise was done with textbooks, with stress on poetry. So, a clear recording could be preserved as 'talking' book (one poem) for all the others to hear.

Elizabeth: Is that all?

Swapna: Yes, if you want 'suspense' 'thrill' or 'newsworthiness' to this story, I can always add how the tape recorder refused to work one day and how a smart child repaired it.

Jameela: If you explore the world of imagination or fiction, the repair-man was none other than a technician from a movie-making studio. There was more 'swooning' 'Oh-ah' etc. (among the elder girls) when this good looking man told 'shooting stories'

Swapna: See as a narrator, how faithful to the events, I am, never mixing fiction and fact!.

Elizabeth: As a teacher of English, I can't help; I should say something about the title of this piece: namely "TALKING BOOKS AND READING BOOKS".

Jameela: "Shoot; don't follow with a test'.

Liz: In "talking books" the book talks. So, it is an adjective and book is the subject noun. In "reading books", a reader reads the book. So, the word is special; it is a derived verb, books is the object.

Jameela: I am sure Ashaji never bothered primary school children with such a grammar, or is it glamour, Elizabeth?

Woman 1: Were there not any 'talking books' available in the market?

Elizabeth: Yes, there were many for language learning and proper pronunciation, as I have heard. Today we have TV channels doing this job

Swapna: Asha made her own talking books relevant to the textbooks of children. They came in handy during preparation for examinations.

Elizabeth: What an idea? When the student is eating (or resting) instead of TV's noise exam portions can be read out. How nice!.

18. TALK IN THE DARK

[Power failure and games in the dark – many types of anthaksharies]

It was story telling day at Swapna's house. Readers know by this time that these sessions are called Asha Ajji stories. When Swapna was about to start, power went out. Swapna said please wait until I bring, and brought a few candles and a table - top model battery light.

Woman1: (surprised) don't you have UPS? (UPS – uninterrupted power supply).

Swapna: I didn't see the need for UPS. Unlike villages, here power does not go off for long. My style of living can be done with these (the lighting gadgets).

Jameela: And you are the only one in the house except occasions like this meeting. Woman1: For story telling, we do not need much light.

Swapna: Did you wonder what it was like in the Ashram on such eventualities?

Elizabeth: Big institutions traditionally used generators.

Woman2: Even shops activate generators quickly after any power failure.

Woman1: That is not only for business, for safety also.

Swapna: Let me tell you how Asha looked at these 'dark' times. Yes, she had generator – but for some short periods she preferred 'talk in the dark' which as Woman1 said it is fine.

With minimum lighting children did what all they can do.

Elizabeth: Friends, let us guess and spare Swapnaji some minutes of talking.

Woman2: Like what?

Woman1: Yes children can manage their things. Clean up a little. Woman 2: Sit quite and see if they can do so.

Woman3: Convert into a meditation hour. Woman1: Any 'didi' can tell a story.

Woman2: Or sing a song.

Woman3: Or recite devotional poems if they knew any.

Woman4: Why waste lung power; Switch on radio or tape recorder. I hope they had one, working on batteries.

Elizabeth: Swapnaji, we can imagine or practice one or other ideas Was there anything special in the Ashram?

Swapnaji said yes. They played 'word building' Will you accept it was innovative? Elizabeth: No. it is done for ages in any group.

Jameela: Why the very popular game of 'Anthakshari' also.

Swapna continued: 'word building' game traditionally used English and it tested one's 'SPELLING' skill. Anthakshari with English words was also popular. Everyone did this. What Asha suggested was; variation of the same. There were many.

(Elizabeth said: Swapnaji, if you remember tell us about a few more new ideas).

After a round of general game like

Apple → elephant → tiger → rose

Asha will restrict to one subject.

Example.

Science: Atom → molecule → electron → neutron.

This is both 'letter' based and subject based.

Next will be 'technical antakshari' Soon the game will saturate. Usually, these games worked well with English medium students. She thought of how to involve everyone including the not so well educated 'didi's. That is how '**content-antakshari**' was tried.

E.g Cow gives milk →milk has nutrients → nutrients are needed for us.

This again worked well with English and only if the sentence ends in a noun.

So, connected contents game was tried.

A: Copper a metal

B: Metals are electrical conductors'

C: Electricity is useful in modern life.

Here B can be in English or any other language. C can stay with the same or revert to English. Thus 'content connection' allowed all to participate.

There were many other games they could play in the dark. They is why, the title of today's story is "Talk in the dark'.

Jameela: Shall we try some of these?.

Swapna: Perhaps, sometime when truly it is dark and raining.

19 . REPAIR YOUR RAINCOATS, UMBRELLAS

[Monsoon coming- readiness for heavy rains]

Asha meeting on that day was in the house of a new host [let us call her Hema]

Swapna: who would usually be almost on the dot [neither too early nor too late] was quite late to arrive this time.

As she entered , folding her umbrella, she said, " I am sorry ladies I am late". She could have just said , " I am sorry, Hema I am late" since she was the only one there other than the host. Hema said, " such a heavy rain today. It ia a problem for everyone. I thought you too will not be there today.

Swapna: said, "No. Rain will and should be there in the rainy season. Unless roads are blocked we should go ahead with our usual routine.

As is usual in this city of so-called ' salubrious' climate rain lasted less than an hour and lo and behold, in about ten minutes many two wheelers deposited members of the group at Hema's door. Hema said we cannot expect

any more . let me make some ginger tea for us before we start. Swapna began another episode.

Asha was very strong in her motto viz. We should adjust ourselves to local [customary] weather and climate.

When English teacher Elizabeth tried to explain the two terms [weather and climate] someone shushed her .”We too have general knowledge, though not good English.”

Swapna: continued, “ Rain and monsoon were also to be considered as usual natural phenomena. Every didi [house mother] has to make sure all the raincoats, umbrellas are repaired , tested and kept ready. Any new ones to be bought should be informed well in time .

Liz: Do you mind if I interrupt ?

Hema: Are you the one to stop if anyone minds. So on behalf of swapnaji I say “shoot”

Liz; You once said Swapna believed in slight surplus principle. Was it done here also?

Hema: What is that? Liz looked at her triumphantly and said , you all need a little background info in Swapnaji’s stories, that is why we [pointing to Jameela] are here, to smarten you.

Swapna said , let me explain. It is called TEN PERCENT OR PLUS ONE PRINCIPLE. In our episode , if a kutir [house or ghar under a didi] needed ten umbrellas that didi keeps a stock of 11 or more. The extra is in case of an eventuality [guest or loss or forgetting or sudden malfunction.]. Yes, Elizabeth, precaution and readiness includes this principle of Asha’s.

Hema said , thanks to both of you for wizenning me . I hope all of us can adopt this principle in our houses . It will help.

One woman said, we observe this principle for any guest. We can always accommodate a guest during lunch or night food time. .This village practice comes down from our grandmother's time.

The title of this episode was pasted on the ashram noticeboard well before the expected monsoon time. Ashram invited the monsoon: terraces were swept and kept free of leaves, dirt . all pipes and drains were cleaned.

Each resident had place for keeping rainwear [raincoat, plastic shoes] along with their winter wear [sweaters, shawls, caps] packed and stored. Didis' menus were also varied as per the season. Being traditional women from a rustic background they had many customs which nicely blended with the seasons. Preparing powders, pickles dried vegetables etc, were made during the summer which was just before monsoon.

They also knew what kind of incense powders burnt indoors will be good. One expertise of the didis was not used in the ashram. That was their skill of kitchen garden and flowering plants. The little open space around the ashram were used for sand area, games courts, swimming pool, museum etc.

Jameela; we are not told about any of these.

Liz: What? A museum in an ashram .Was it a Sanskrit study centre with guru yogi asha presiding? Did they have ancient palm leaf manuscripts?

Sw: Elizabeth! No need for sarcasm. Is this our last meeting? Many members are absent today thanks to rain. So I thought rain related episode may interest you.

Liz; You can tell us how they get ready to 'enjoy' other seasons , especially our horrible summer.

Jameela; All over the world people get over even severe weather conditions. Ask your own relatives, sons and daughters living abroad. USA, Canada, Dubai. Even Sweden, Russia, then how does this episode become newsworthy? Shall we confront Ashaji?

Liz: She is anyway listening to us. Let us try to understand on our own like top grade students.

Woman1: Look around. Very few of us own or wear raincoat. Even when we ride on the pillion of a scooter we spread an umbrella for us i.e both the driver and the rider.

Jameela: Well said. You could have been a reporter or investigative journalist.

Swapna: I just wanted to point out that Asha urged her wards not only to adjust and endure the seasons but find ways of enjoying them.

One method was the ‘rain walk’ We will tell about it next time when hopefully the attendance will be better.

20. Rain – Welcome

[Children encouraged to enjoy the rain in monsoon time]

In ASHA's Ashram monsoon was a season as natural as the daily sun-shine. Being near India's western part of the coast, monsoon was almost sure and certain every year. This was not so in many arid parts of India. There the farmers (and others who would depend upon the rain) even prayed to Gods for a timely monsoon and good rain. In her place beginning of June, coinciding with the starting of schools for the new academic year, was also the month of onset of annual rainy season.

Usually, the respected rain God gives a warning called pre-monsoon shower, Even the eco scientists did not list

any one of the reasons for this pre-monsoon phenomena. But Asha knew, the god above gives you a chance to be ready before it brings the big ones down on you.

Then all the slopes stagnant pits, outlets, gutters were examined. Most important were leaks, loose structures (since heavy rain is accompanied by wind).

Another checking is children and staff being prepared for heavy and continuous rain, washable footwear [whose sale in shops and footpaths start early] for everyone; plastic overcoats also called 'raincoats' for everyone. A few umbrellas of different sizes, rain proof bags to carry books and papers, actually a lot of money allocation was needed, the funding for which was another task.

In rural settings, families including the young and the old, are customarily ready for this season of the year. Welcome to monsoon would have already started with preparing of agricultural land for sowing.

Everyone helps. Expensive footwear or rain cover, they could not afford. Barefoot, get wet, come back, dry up.

In this semi urban ashram ASHA replicated rural practice even during the early rainy days.

Barefoot, bare head, get wet, dry up voluntarily. Thus, getting into the rain was one of the preparation and practice for "RAIN -WELCOME".

The nursery rhyme of *rain rain go away* was not for her. She had her own.

Rain rain stay

Rani wants to play

Rain rain don't go

We are waiting so

for you to come and set
 showers for us to get wet
 Rain rain don't go away
 Little Rani wants to play
 With friends in the rain
 Sing,dance, make a train
 Rain rain stay
 Rani wants to play

[Dancing in the rain gives people a friendly attitude to nature, according to Asha, A trip to the nearby *ghats* was an annual affair. Reach the foot hills, walk-up to CATCH the clouds. { ghat – mountainous place}]

Child 1:” Did you catch any cloud?”

Child 2: “No. From a distance we could see them. When we go near, they disappear“.

Child 3: I thought I caught one, but those wily ones ganged up and surrounded me. It was very cold.

Child 4: “I also felt. I thought the naughty ones will pour buckets of water on me. But some spit (a few drops) and left.

In her urban neighborhood “taking a shower” was plumber-made. Hundreds together taking a shower for Asha and her troupe was natural and God-sent. Someone will ask:” Didn’t you all get cold, cough and fever?”

Asha: “No, not all, only some. And we were prepared. Even indoors we have to be prepared, don’t we?”

Another will ask: "Is this naturopathy or our ancient medical practice for good health?" Asha: I don't know. Let them dig and unearth any old work.

Asha further said, some elderly people say: in rural areas, monsoon time cold, cough and fever were only slightly higher than normal times. That too only in "shaded" individuals. Workers in the fields do not get.

I hope "exposure" will help us.

To another question, she answered she did not consult any medical researchers. "Wonder if they have any ready answers."

In the ashram, there was a permanent sign **"YOU ARE WELCOME"** In the rainy season she added **"RAIN"**.

To her teacher cum didis she explained: The English told us, there are 4 seasons in a year. Tell what they are.....See there is no monsoon. Our ancient writers had 6 seasons in a year.

In Maharashtra we have three : (made out of six) monsoon, winter, summer. Be ready for each one.

One didi said yes, in Marathi *"UNHALA, PAAVSALA, KANTHHALA"* Asha laughed. "For some persons it may be" *KANTHHALA* (boredom). It is really *HIRWALA*.

[note: *UNHALA, PAAVSALA, HIRWALA- SUMMER, MONSOON, WINTER*]

21. Rain Water Swimming Pool

[A locally assembled dismantlable seasonal swimming pool is used. Motto: every female must know swimming – save oneself from drowning]

In all their travels Swapna, Kalpana, Mangala have seen small and large waterfalls well known for their grandeur

and they had famous names too. Usually they will be on the rivers i.e. while the rivers flow down. These waterfalls were formed (thousands of years ago). In hilly regions, seasonal waterfalls can be seen. Some do not have any names or location identification. Some known by their spot. Invariably there will be a pool at their foot. Large waterfalls were only for adventurers. The seasonal ones were mostly safe. But one has to be very careful.

Asha also in her time, must have seen the same phenomenon. This gave her an idea. Asha was always for the empowerment of women – education, skill training, jobs, self-employment were in her mind.

At the same time health, hygiene, strength, physical fitness were also equally important in her opinion. Jogging, cycling, swimming, karate etc for women were not so easily available for women. Even though she lived in those times she certainly would provide an exposure to ALL these to ALL the girls. In her mind, these skills gave the girl-child mental fitness [viz self-confidence] also.

She had tried to give every girl child, swimming for saving one's own life. She tried to get the help of pools and coaches. Why she could not get success is ANOTHER STORY.

Rainy season for almost 3 months in a year seemed to ask her, in her sleep or waking up time, "When I pour so much water why don't you use ?"

In villages this aspect of women empowerment was not a problem. Existing ponds and lakes any time of the year and free roaming of girls, were enough. Some places had rivers and canals in which rural folks washed themselves, clothes, utensils, and cattle. During these sessions every boy learnt swimming and diving from high tree branches, so also did young girls.

Such opportunities were lacking in Asha's semi urban area – Any permanent lakes or rivers were too polluted and unsafe. Temporary monsoon ponds formed in low lying areas were necessarily filthy.

“What a shame!” Asha thought, **“Water, water everywhere, but I have nowhere to swim.”** “Or even take a dip,” moaned Mangala, the Headmistress of a high school and friend of Asha.

It was a time when huge dams across major rivers were being planned and constructed. Check dams in streams were being made. In these mega programs ancient lakes and small ponds (thousands of them) were left with no one to care for. Some got dried up too.

For Asha and group these national problems are great things to do and better left to others. Their concern was the immediate care of girls, mostly destitute and groom them ready to ‘man’ these projects when they come up. That is their vision.

But job on hand was a small thing called “make every girl save herself in water.” Slogan is already ready,” Mangala : **“Swim; even if you can't, do not drown”** and the same content in many other languages. Swapna and Kalpana wondered “How many [languages] does she know !”

It was raining cats and dogs nonstop, incessant. Water from the front portico and window sills was falling and making dot pits and tiny ponds, before following the slope. Swapna said why do we not collect some out of so much. From this was born: monsoon activity called **“let us float, let us swim.”**

Let us plan to collect water. Even if we build a swimming pool, who will give us so much water; that too daily. We somehow manage cooking and drinking water.

Water flows down the road and in storm water drains; and also in gutters. We cannot use them; no question. So we should catch the falling water BEFORE it gets dirty; and that too catch in a clean container.

Swapna in her narration stopped here and looked around. She had her listeners still with her . Swapna said: Eco people - may have new names: like RWH-rain water harvesting. But the idea was born with a simple and selfish purpose – in the minds of Asha, Kalpana and Mangala.

They knew collecting ALL the water falling around their ashram will be foolish. It is equivalent to plugging all the outlets around. Kalpana said, even our dullest child knows it will flood and submerge our building. They have seen how some dirt in the bath room creates hell. Any block in the drainage needed immediate calling municipality or a plumber.

They came to the simple concept: collect what you can and what you want, and let the rest overflow.

As usual the meticulous Kalpana started calculating average and total rainfall in their area. “Why do you want all those meteorology data?” asked Mangala.

“To find how many days we should collect to fill a swimming pool.” Asha laughed: It may even be one day’s heavy rain.

No calculations. Don’t you see water running like mad and if the storm water drains were not cleared, we have to have boats on the roads.

Mangala said: Let us first decide where and how we will make a pool. Now the detailed thinking of Kalpana came to the fore. We do not have any space for a permanent swimming pool. Even if we find Asha is not going to run a pool business. The best we can have is like a bath tub.

Aha, everyone laughed. We could have had one with water level adjustable. Then one by one our girls may learn survival techniques. In this case, floating. Let us have a big (really bee...g) bath tub.”

Even in those days, rich persons in Europe or America had home swimming pools. We can contact them. So, the session ended with the job of contacting some relatives in USA, to Mangala.

After rain water collection, there was dew drop collection. Just observe: go before sunrise, grass and smooth leaves wait till sun comes up and dew disappears. See if you can overnight dewdrops on a clean surface and collect in clean glasses – measure, taste etc.

Mangala started - but it stopped due to parents complaining. Not real health problem but getting out before sunrise. But ASHA could do on a small scale - Different seasons.

In those days also phone facilities were there. No cell phones. Only landlines. You book a call (usually in a major post office), no phone booths with STD facilities - Even for inside India it cost a lot of waiting time and money too. Common people never thought of international phoning even though one can do. So Mangala wrote a long letter explaining their discussion and the purpose. It turned out that one of her relatives was a great dreamer who returned to India to do social work and made a U turn back frustrated.

He had worked out options, Filling a pool itself will cost money and no municipality will give you so much potable water. Draining a pool itself and keeping it clean etc. is tough. So, he suggested a PORTABLE pool with inflatable plastic, a small one used in those countries in camping sites. He suggested he can send one but also

said local is better since any small repair or maintenance will be possible. He having invested his time for social work suggested water level to be adjusted: one height for wading only and enjoy water: dip, jump whatever. Next is deeper for floating, learning swimming.

Next discussion session was short: A pool either 20' x 20' or a circular one of 10 m diameter. Once decided details were easier. It can be on the terrace itself. Asha said it will be on the ground since rainwater from the terrace has to be collected to fill the pool.

Other details were easy once they found a plastic dealer and a mason to have an even smooth surface on the terrace with gentle slope.

Swapna stopped here. "Has anyone of you constructed a RWH at your home?" Some said they were thinking about it. Many said they were in a rented house.

Swapna, "Nowadays ready items are there and people to install it. I'll tell you briefly how Asha had a storage device.

Kapana said, "Instead of building anything, we can opt for a used or discarded tank. Old railway steam engines, Municipal lorry-loaded water distributors, milk or oil tankers were mentioned. Someone said they become old and start leaking at the tap points. So they were discarded.

Let us get such a junk, seal off joints and outlets and put it below terrace and above ground. "How shall we get from the tank, when we want water, there will be no tap."

Mangala said, "think science teacher !"

Swapna asked, "Can anyone tell? Any science teacher here."

Yes madam , you are right . siphoning system.

22. SCRAP FILE

[Collection and storing of some items create problems – the hobby of scrap notebook for children]

Swapna in her next meeting threw a challenge to her listeners. Have any of you visited any anathaashrama (hostel for destitute) in this town or elsewhere in India? There was mixed response.

Swapna: Next question to those who said yes.

Did you see what kind of books or records they maintained?

One: How can we? It is their administrative affair. Even if we ask, they may not show.

Two: Some even dodge when we ask for admission norms.

Swapna: According to what I have heard, it was much worse in those days, True documents, certificates will be ready only near the discharge date. That is on the 18th date of birth of the inmate. She said every student left with only personal belongings. Books, notes, were considered property of the ashram and retained.

Headmistress; In government ashrams even now it happens due to some vague office orders or rule.

Swapna: Let me now see Asha's role in making life interesting in the ashram- We already know each child has a notebook (called creative diary) to record events and feelings.

Another is a 'scrap book.' It can be for anything the child liked. Didi's were asked to help. Here it was "scrap file" because loose sheets are filed neatly with the help of Gruha Didi.

A scrap file typically contained peacock feather, butterfly wings, crushed flower, peepal leaf, (or) photo clippings from newspapers, one's own or friend's photos, pictures of cinema, cricket etc stars, postage stamps etc(or) sketches made by the children or their friends, (or) stylish lettering, own name written 10 times in different ways.

Whatever it was Asha thought it gave a child something to show or be proud of. According to her, destitute in the absence of parents or relatives, need constant wah-wah's (encouragement) and some self-confidence.

A scrap file helped in this.

A personal diary to induce own writing about a few lines around an event;

A scrap file to keep up one's interests. Do you think even fortunate children have?

Headmistress; Some may have; but very rare; parents' appreciation I have rarely seen, unless it was a prize winning essay or art.

23. Not Blood She Said

[Herbarium by children creates problems – scrap book scrapped]

Scrap book had all kind of things. One item common to all children was pressed leaves from various trees.

This was the time when an active ecologist drew attention to trees being indiscriminately cut- He and his admirers hugged one tree each.

Asha knew the member of an ecology group active and knowledgeable – The group had professors who were willing to give time and effort. So the program 'one for one' was started (about these program later).

One of the activities was collecting plant parts called ARBARIUM or HERBARIUM.

Spring and summer was the great time for the group.

In those days smart phones were not even seen as a possibility. Photograph was very costly, time consuming. So they made outline sketches or drawings and to show colours they used water colours, leaves etc were copied in the scrap book.

This book was very impressive; when made of 'drawing sheets. Asha used previous year's drawing notebooks for this year's scrapbook.

The drawing master was of great help. One day he thought, why not use the same specimen (ie, leaf etc.) for colouring the diagram of the same leaf.

Teacher (crafts) who was among the listeners : Did it work?

Swapna: I have only vague memory. Asha also had not kept the details. But some should have worked.

Headmistress: It has to work. Traditional saree makers made a lot of dyeing, printing work on fabrics certainly on cotton cloth with which they worked.

Elizabeth: There is a sericulture institute somewhere in this district. A friend used to say, silk yarn is dyed and then woven into cloth. Costly silk sarees, she says used natural dyes.

Asha had to abandon any actual application – because of the following incident:

One day a lady got down from a costly car with a servant in tow. She angrily walked up to Asha and told the servant to untie a bundle. What was inside was shocking. All kinds of clothes all stained with blood.

It turned out that during her last visit, ashram children had proudly showed their collection. She had also congratulated them. Happily children had made a bundle of assorted flowers and leaves, Gulmohr, being the major species [it was during one of the summer camps the lady was a guest guide -Gulmohr is also called “May Flower”] [sometimes wrongly “Forest fire”].

Obviously, this got mixed up with a pack of clothes in the car resulting the above incident.

Child 1 said “not blood; no murder!”

Asha said: “It is just colour. No one injured. Wash it off”

The lady said “That is exactly what I did. See what had happened ? It had spread all over.”

One of the Didi’s also said “Yes madam, children put in their pockets or carry in their dresses. If we forget to take them out before washing, it spreads out like this.”

Asha decided it is sensible to stop the project. *Jabeena- The journalist said: In many parts of India “Tie and Dye” techniques are used and they give ‘fast colour’ also.*

Elizabeth: It is also called “Bandhini” I think.

24. LITERACY

[Children surely can contribute to adult literacy' – good for both the young and elderly. 'one-on-one' method helps.]

Asha was a great believer in adult education. Her ideas of adult education never matched with those of officials, 'experts' and consultants.

Swapna: I will tell you why by a small experiment here. Tell me your mother tongue. We are sitting in Mysore. Only those whose mother tongue is other than Kannada. Woman –Hindi. Where are you from?. Rajasthan.

Woman (Telugu) -I am from Vizag.

Woman (Tamil) – I am from Madurai.

Woman (Malayalam) – I am from Palakkad.

Woman (Bengali) – I am from Kolkotta, but my grandparents belonged to Karnataka.

You are all highly educated persons talking in English, reading newspapers and what not.

What I suggest is adult education for you. In one week's time learn the alphabet of any one language.

Hindi and Bengali persons can choose one of Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, not Kannada because you are living here surrounded by Kannada. Others can choose Hindi, Bengali because your friends are here.

Get from me or shops or from Web, alphabet of any of the Indian languages – you will all know Hindi writing already -Try Gujarati, Bengali, Odiya.

Some very confident people can try Urdu or Kashmiri.

Your aim will be: To write your own name and one more in the new language. One very long one like Thiruvananthapuram or Abdulla-yusuf-ali, or Sundaralingaswami. in that language which you are learning,It is not an exam. Tell me how you feel.

Next Time

The subject came up again after two weeks-

Swapna collected all the observations:

It helps if someone reads it out for you.

Seeing someone writing makes it easier.

Some help is needed to split very long words, at the proper spots. Swapna said; You all realise that even though you already know 2 or more languages, some personal help (a teacher, companion) helps.

Swapna returned to her story. Asha knew this. For adult education, a class of 30 or 40 with one teacher was OK as planned in her time by the government. But it was not enough. One-to-one was better, any day. Asha arranged for exactly the idea – For her it is an exercise of self-confidence and purpose for her children – and social work from the others' point of view.

“Was it such a great problem? I though only some did not know reading and writing in their own language”.

Swapna: “It was at that time”

One woman : Even today you can see some sellers/vendors, shop assistants talk (basic) words in many languages. They may not know reading and writing in any one of them.

Another woman: My grandmother had lived on her own and under children's care- in many places, both north and south- and managed very well. She was a total illiterate.

Elizabeth: Today's class-divide in education is also the same- even if one can get admission in a prestigious school, the social and educational status of the parents becomes an important factor.

Swapna: Don't you think the 'great' schools make the parents work harder than the students. One: Yes, more than the teachers also.

Asha knew that a village, hamlet and small town's poor women may be illiterates or forgotten what little they knew. Men were no better except that they had been to schools (mostly to partake of free food served by the government).

Asha's team of ashram inmates camped in one place during summer months. Which were vacation for schools and the time post-harvest and waiting for monsoon for the village. One-to-one oral and written literacy was attempted.

One woman : Was it successful?. Another: What could they have in a month? Just attempted.

Swapna: As I have heard from Asha and Mangala (Aa Kaala Aji) the methods used were simple and effective. So, two camps could make most of the population interested in reading signboards or headlines of newspapers.

Elizabeth: So, the camps continued, right?

Swapna: No, it came to a stop.

You may ask why. Usually for reasons of money; a camp away from the ashram needs finance, Asha would have managed. But....

One woman : Locals resisted- caste and religion problem.

Swapna: No... government departments... great literacy programs were launched by the government. They had their 'trained' teachers and books with pictures and classes with blackboards and expected the villagers to come and attend the classes.

Asha's method was to reach house by house and one-by-one. These two methods did not match. So, Asha quietly withdrew.

Elizabeth: No; she should have continued in another place where there was no 'well-intentioned' interference.

*Swapna: That is why these discussions and storytelling is happening. Some of you can start with **computer literacy. One-on-one, fingers-on-button. Start with me.***

25. TRAIN AND TRAINING

[Exhibition train enjoyed by children and also a catalyst for career choice. Viz. Journalism]

Swapna asked her friends a general question: "Have any of you seen an exhibition train?"

Ex-journalist (Let us call her Jameela): I have seen a news item about a train dedicated to environmental education.

Woman1: I have visited it. Very well done. Charts, slideshows, hands-on items very good. But...

Elizabeth: I can imagine. We take a lot of trouble making the exhibits, training students for days to explain properly. What happens on the opening day?

Jameela: I can easily guess. The Chief guest comes surrounded by 'Yes-men' - All of them followed by or surrounded by eager journalists like me, with a cameraman each. No chief guest has time or interest to see the many classrooms converted to fancy places. He or she rushes through, crowd follows.

Elizabeth: Similarly, the crowd is impatient and uninterested, just pushes through. A few truly interested students also miss out.

Woman 1: When I went to the train of almost 12 interconnected compartments, an exhibition on environment, neither education nor awareness.

Swapna: All due to lack of crowd management. Right?

Jameela: And lack of imagination – With one entry and one exit at the end of 12 compartments, how can anybody control-There should have been exits (call it 'by request' or 'emergency') at each level. In my case I wanted to report in detail one item – Members of the public there were of three kinds.

1). Just quickly see, follow the line. These never created any problem

2). Too much interested in on item etc blocking the progress of the line.

3). Too much in a hurry - Neither could they leave, nor would they slow down.

Not to have thought of such a public was the organiser's fault.

Swapna: My story today just says how much an exhibition train had helped Asha's own psychology and at least the whole life and career of two of her wards.

There was an exhibition on rails (I forget on what theme it was, but that is immaterial for my story) stationed for a few days in her town. Her ashram was not far from a railway yard and the exhibition train was parked in the yard. Asha could see and hear the din and clamour. She sent her journalism-aspirants (from her residents) to go and find out timings and other details. True to their aspiration, they brought more data, like who was the chief coordinator, how many are employees of the railways and how many volunteers etc.

They also reported that the chief coordinator was a well-known professor from a university, contributing her time and knowledge. She had asked about them (the students from the ashram). After learning about them and their purpose; she (the chief of the exhibition) would like to meet or talk to Asha.

So it happened that the ashramites were shown the exhibition just after the closing time; All except security

staff and Railway police shared the dinner at the ashram. (Of course, food packets were sent for the security); Journalism-aspirants (students) were allowed (shall we say invited) to be part of the volunteer force during the period.

This experience (and Asha's 'so-called' 'connection' with the professor) helped in becoming part of many awareness programs of the government. Thus, Asha says: **"Be a volunteer, you can learn a lot"**.

In those days, the subject "science communication" was not borne. It was practised, of course, by

(a). Scientist (professors and researchers) themselves through a few science magazines.

(b) Reporters who just interviewed and repeated what the experts said.

The latter category's writing reached newspapers and so the reports lacked depth and were vague.

Jameela: Excuse me Swapnaji. Do you think the reporters' articles were bad.

Swapna: No, they were selected "quotes" or question and answer formats and so lacked the depth.

Even a summary or the 'abstract' of the important paper by the scientists would have been more authentic.

About the other, even now it is happening. But people want to know more, so some one gives a broader picture like a 'survey'.

Swapna: Let me finish my story. That year's ashram journal had an additional booklet on the railway exhibition; obviously authored by journalism students and checked by the professor.

Jameela: How come you did not mention the name of the professor.

Swapna: Sorry. She quietly retired. I think to be with her grandchildren. When the government woke up to establish PG course on Science communication they were so busy 'with buildings and equipment that who would be the director, was left to administration and politicians. [PG – post graduate]

Jameela: But that person, (she named) was also very good.

Swapna: Asha is not listed in any social worker list. Always we have others in our society, mostly related to politicians.

26. RAIL GADI-CHUK,CHUK

*[Children visit railway station and a long distance train
For some it is a new experience]*

This title, written on a slate, was in the hands of Swapna, the narrator.

Host of the day asked "This may be a mistake. This title may be meant for your pre-school and primary children, you have absent mindedly brought here, Swapanji.

Swapna said it will go to AA alright. But first here, because this title really relates to Asha's time and place. We saw how a train exhibition led to training the journalist.

Elizabeth: Yes, I was reminded of an age-old pun.

Can anyone guess it except Swapanji. No one could.

Elizabeth said. A station master minds the trains.

Jameela finished it. A good teacher trains the mind.

Swapna: Shall we now go to Asha. Before today's story, let me ask. Answer honestly. I have travelled by airplane. How many have?

Jameela: I did once.

A few others raised their hands.

How many would like to just be inside one, for fun? All raised their hands.

Asha visited the exhibition in a train with children. She found some children awed by the length or by connection between compartments inside and outside.

Student 1: This is not like a bus. This is different.

Student 2: They have fans. Buses also must have.

Student 3: Hey, come here, you see, here is a room . I opened and saw it was a toilet (washroom, restroom, latrine).

Student 1: No need to stop the train if one wants to make "su-su".[for foreign readers: su-su- passing urine]

Student 2: Where will the passengers sit?

Asha: There were seats, exhibition people have removed them. They have put the items which you see.

Another student said: I have gone to Nagpur once. There are even nice sleeping sofas. They call it berths.

Another student said Mala Didi and myself have gone to Delhi to take part in Republic Day Celebration. They give nice bed with pillows and blankets. You can sleep at night. They will take away next day.

Swapna: You have heard the story. What do you think Asha will do?

Jameela: Asha came to know that the children had travelled by buses- Only a few had been in a train.

Elizabeth: Like many of us about airplanes.

Jameela: Did she buy tickets for so many just to see how train travel is?

Swapna: Yes, that idea crossed her mind. Then she argued within herself how to go about the idea, and time, money. Most of all the purpose.

Elizabeth: Is this the end of the story?

Swapna: No. A little more is there. She went to the station master and explained the concept. He had heard about Asha and her ashram, since he was a native of that town. So, special permission was given and a time allotted when the station will be less busy.

Now let me tell you briefly.

Children were awed by the simple fact of huge dimensions of the station length of the platform and the number of them. Facilities on the platform, overbridge to reach the platforms. One lady clad in a khaki saree had to control and stop children from getting down on the tracks.

There was a stationary train. A few railway employees were busy washing and cleaning.

“Hey, come here, see these seats like benches in own school but longer and wider.”

“We can even lie down on”

Railway Employee: This is I class. Wooden benches are III class compartment. Tickets for I class is more than III class. *(Note 4 kinds of classes were there at that time)*

Then he showed the linkages between compartments. Even he was not familiar with the word “vestibule” but he could explain.

Student 1: "When the train moves, also we can move up and run" Some very young ones already were running back and forth.

Railway employee: But you should never open the door when the train is moving.

The engine stationed there was the prize exhibit.

"See how big."

"Yeah: Very black."

"Looks like a huge elephant."

"One engine can pull so many boxes and with so many people,"

One senior student: Our science book has a picture. It is called steam engine. Steam has such power.

One Didi asked: "Who discovered that ?" Answer, of course, came. Asha cut in. Show what can be seen and felt and explain. But who can stop children singing the song "Rail Gaadi Chuk chuk chuk." [*At that time this Hindi movie song sung by a veteran actor was a hit*].

Jameela: A Railway engine cannot be started and stopped as we do with a scooter.

Elizabeth: Or moved like a car or bus.

Woman 1: Children saw a great deal. But missed the 'chuk chuk' aspect.

By this time another lady in brown sari and blouse joined the group, escorted them through the overbridge. Student Journalist observed and asked: Both of you are wearing similar dress; Is it a uniform?

"Yes; we are railway police persons; there are many more men in our police."

One child: Girls also can become police?

Asha told a Didi to remember this question and we can invite someone.

Didi asked: "Can you two come to our ashram on the Sunday of the next month."

"Sorry, madam, we are here for investigating a case. Tomorrow we would be leaving for our postings."

Swapna: Asha made a note in a small pocket dairy which she always carried. "**Career Counselling; Police/ Forces/ Pilots for women.**"

A lively discussion took place after this story.

Jameela: It is great that the children got to see for themselves.

Woman 1: Even today when our car is stopped at the railway gate, our children get excited. Each one counts the number of compartments as they cross the gate.

Woman 2: Some children wave at the passengers standing near the open doors of the compartments.

Swapna: My story is not yet complete.

Woman 2: Did the children get to go on a train journey.

Swapna: No, But the station master showed them a train in motion. He provided the children with snacks in the railway canteen on platform no 1 and was showing them how he uses "red and green flags he carried with him and other details until a train was nearing platform No 1.

No one could have stopped the children aping the whistle of the approaching train.

The station master requested the guard to delay the train a few minutes and show the engine at work.

Swapna added: This was many years ago; remember most of the engines were coal-powered; shoveling of coal into the furnace by men in overall, fully smeared in patterns of black, was exactly like what the children have seen in the movies.

The guard of the train explained his function.

Noise made by the excited children got added to the din and bustle of the train: Vendors selling,
Getting in, getting out Luggage and porters
Trolleys with materials dragged along. Dozens of voices chanting “Rail Gaadi Chuk chuk chuk” mingled with the whistle and rhythmic sound of the moving train.

One child saw: “Hey, here is a post office in the train.”
Station master said, let the train go; I will tell you about that. Someone asked,

Who will arrange a visit to an airport, for our group?

27. EXCHANGE EXPERIENCE

[Urbanites go to villages (hamlets) – rural folk given a city visit .]

Swapna told her friends: “In today’s meeting I will just point out some items which Asha liked.”

I have already told all of you how in the summer vacation, the ashramites with nowhere to go, could use the time. One of them was to join the then-popular “Sakshartha Abhiyan”(=literacy mission)

Most of the ashram moved to temporary camps and sheds in villages. Those were near their town or slightly remote and many of them were not even villages. They were padas (=settlements)’. mostly connected with civilization courtesy Government Bus Company, usually, one each in the evening and morning. Since Asha knew, even elders in the padas would not have been in a train and the excitement of her own children when they were inside one (even if it is stationed in a yard) thought villagers could visit Railway station. The station master was glad to be of help.

Thus, the summer camp in the next year was held in the ashram itself with village elders and children accommodated. A visit to railway station was one of the items.

Jameela: If I were Asha, I would include ALL the aspects of urban living.

Woman 1: Water supply; Electrical facilities, posh houses, gadgets, internal furniture and decorations, schools, colleges, big stores and shops.

Elizabeth: You forgot cinema theatre.

Jameela: If it was Bombay, I would include a cinema Studio;

Woman 2: How about a hospital? Zoo, museum.

Swapna: Whatever would have been of educational or experience or /information or eye opening was listed by Asha. Then actual arrangements and details decided a program.

Woman 3 : How about a dip in the sea which is free?

Swapna : I know for sure this was in the program even if a trip to a beach needed some transportation.

28 . SAND PIT OR BEACH

[A mini beach for fun and fitness-barefoot walking and jogging – jumping for juniors - long jump for seniors]

Swapna: I have not seen Asha's ashram. I have only heard about it from my friends Kalpana and Mangala. My stories are reported -as Elizabeth in English grammar would say 'reported speech' – As we all already heard Asha gave the thrill of a safe swimming pool in the Ashram itself by Rain water collection into a makeshift inflatable shallow pool. Today I'll report on a beach at her place.

Any KG or primary school is characterized by a slide and a sandpit. Young children enjoy. When they are older, parks don't allow them on a swing, schools do not let them go into the sandpit. The only lucky ones are those who train to do long jump; let them jump and fall on the sand.

This is the one reason why beaches are so popular both for the young and the others.

Swapna said "Sorry, sisters! I get carried away by my own thoughts when I try to tell about beach, sand, land, water. Oh! How I wish we can all wade in water and roll on sand.

All her friends could see how emotional their guru, Swapna, can be when talking of younger days and fun and adventure.

Jameela even joked, Swapnaji!, now we know you are also human with memories and emotions. Don't we, my friends?

Elizabeth said, let me bring something to munch so that our story teller can come back from her memories to tell us Asha's story on sand.

Did I tell you my guru Asha was an athlete? She didn't get any medals because she never was part of any competition. With reference to fitness and exercise we used to call her PT Asha. PT for physical training or physically fit. Certainly, she must be hailing from a coastal region, seeing her enthusiasm for sand, beach, water swimming. Many respected bai's and thai's of Maharashtra are from Konkan Coast. Asha and her sister [let us call her Lata] reach the beach. First day it would be walking. Walking together on the relatively hard and wet part of the water-front. Walk 1000 steps and stop and turn back. Wade in knee deep water for equal time.

The next day will be 1000 steps together in the dry, saggy yielding part of sand. Those who have trained at the beach will know it is twice difficult. In other words your speed can only be half of the previous. Enough to state that the Asha sisters had enjoyed their younger days on the seashore cycling, throw ball, throw into the sea, and retrieve when the waves bring them back, lie supine and let the ebbing wave roll you into the sea, dodge the waves and swim etc. Sunbathing, picnic on the beach, frisbee, or any water sport were not common, limited only to those Indians who lived abroad and came for vacation to India. *[notes for foreigners: P.T.Usha was a well-known track runner at that time.*

bai, thai- younger and older female respectively, Marathi language]

Jameela: Include surfing also.

Elizabeth: When are you going to start the story? Chips are almost over. Shall I bring something else to munch?

Swapna: Sorry. I get carried away by the mental images. To think that some women in this small town have never seen the sea and go to mutts and temples and do not go beyond the wall to the sea shore, how sad !.

Jameela: Sadder, to go beyond and see a filthy sea front

Asha being so fond of water and beach, wanted to give a glimpse of that experience to her wards. So her Ashram had large (shall I say 10m x 10m) pit filled with 1 m depth of sand. Swapna said I will not bother you with the calculations. It required many lorry loads of sand.

She just waited for a large construction near her Ashram and begged and got both labour and material.

Along with a 'sand pit' she got made sand track 2 m wide 200 m length, enough to tire an amateur runner.

In trying to rehabilitate some ex-circus girls, she found a PT madam for her ashram. Through her Asha could prepare athletes. [*PT- physical training*]

For Asha everyone can do and must do everything. Gymnastics, sure. Acrobatics if possible. So she could expose ALL the students to as many opportunities as possible.

Strict rules about use of sand track and sand square: no eatables, no shoes, chappal, no sticks or stones or matter harmful for bare feet, no throwing about or outside, no carrying off sand anywhere for fun.

Obviously, sand-track was used for barefoot walking and running practice, certainly for long jumps. Somehow Asha did not like high jump or pole vault.

One important use was done with the help of the ex-circus artiste, who became PT madam for the ashram. That was flip and somersault. According to Asha that was as good as doing shirshasan but more of a booster of self-confidence.

Jameela: Where is the time for all these?

Swapna: I think Asha somehow managed. I think swimming pool was only during monsoon. Summer was for all the others and of course evenings.

[Calculate = $10 \times 10 \times 1 = 100 \text{ m}^3$. $1 \text{ m}^3 = 100 \times 100 \times 100 = 10^3$ litres. If for a rough estimate 1000 litre = 1 ton (for sand it is $\times 2$) $1 \text{ m}^3 = 1$ ton $100 \text{ m}^3 = 100$ tons. So, many lorry loads].

29. SONG BOOK

[ABCS anybody can sing alone or together - keep your own book of songs - lyrics]

Swapna told her friends, you all have heard how Asha was a paper guzzler; everything written done, displayed on notice boards etc.,

She used to say; with so many children spending 24 hours per day in our ashram, am I not acting as both the parents?

Yes, I do. Really with didi's in charge of houses we all do act as parents.

So, we should do what every home does. Maintain discipline, good manners, education etc. What we lack is religious or spiritual experience. We try.

Then Asha confessed: "I really do not believe in any God or religion. Man had created them. Genius and clever men put lots of wisdom into them."

Mangala asked: "Why ignore them?"

Asha: Because I don't know how. My expertise is not enough to go in a middle path.

Mangala: "You wanted to show a song book."

Asha: That was my solution to my 'spiritual problem'.

Every child had a song book.

Its thickness grows along with the child. Children's songs which the singing child understands is written by an elder in the book. This too if the child had reached reading stage. Thus nursery rhymes are in the mind. (as they say locally, 'in the mouth') same with some shlokas or other 'godly' songs or sayings.

Mangala said, it is great; a non-singer also will have songs written in the notebook Asha: By age 15, every child would have a good collection of songs whose tunes and meanings the owner of the book will know.

Mangala: Say something about common contents.

Asha: National Anthem; patriotic songs; Mahatma Gandhiji's some Bhajans; Fully secular shlokas Hit Hindi movie songs with a message.

Mangala: Wonderful; we have NCC (National Cadet Corps). NSS (National Social Service) camps. Different states, towns, sometimes foreigners stay and work together (almost a month).

As you know, we have a campfire daily, mainly to foster friendship. Sometimes the program is left to the students who do not know what to do; sometimes teachers bore them again; sometimes wild dancing or some moron jokes.

Asha: Do you think our song book will help?

Mangla: Sure. Why not? Music has a mesmerizing effect on the mind.

Asha: I'll tell a didi to give you the best book; you can copy and return.

Mangala: Not only that. I will add on some more, like Meera bhajans, abhangs and Purandhara Dasa poems.

Jameela: Do you have a book, or copy?

Swapna: No; but I've some tunes in my head; Like "Saare Jahaan se achcha" which everyone knows.

Elizabeth: With modern digital world, we can download everything; lyric (i.e. words of the song), tune, meaning.

Swapna: One caution; we have to cut out extra background music or orchestra.

Jameela: I know, you have told us the principle viz. anyone or any group should be able to start and sing.

One woman: Like "Govinda, Govinda" or "Har Har Mahadev".

30. LPG, Long Ago

[Asha and ashramites learn a practical lesson from a service group. – learning is everywhere, even with a van driver]

Cooking gas was new at that time. Asha got LPG stoves and gas for the whole ashram. All children know old fashioned wood burning stove, coal and charcoal stoves. The next one called kerosene stove was interesting. The young ones liked to pump air into it and see flames coming up.

Younger children touched and felt the rubber pipe connecting LPG cylinder and the stove. It was not hot. They wondered how a pipe of rubber did not get burnt. Somehow Asha explained (without the physics, chemistry of liquid, gas, pressure etc.). She need not have attempted, because when safety experts came to explain do's and don'ts, the doubts got cleared.

Once, the van came with LPG cylinders. Many empty ones to be taken away, new ones connected. It took some time. All the time the van was making harsh 'tuk-tuk' sound since the engine was on.

Small children said “no good; noise.” Even elders wondered: fuel waste; noise pollution.

Swapna said, In spite of my admiration of Asha she was a good human being. But not expert in one and ALL subjects.

Swapna said, ‘Let us go back to the story.’

Asha said, ‘I don’t know why they keep the engine on. Let us ask the driver’. The driver simply said during working hours we never switch off. If we park somewhere or have to wait for long time like 30 minutes we can switch off. If we do also, it will take time to start.

Poor fellow. This neat explanation itself was beyond other helpers.

There were two senior residents of the ashram studying in engineering college. They explained the mechanism of the diesel engine and the petrol engine. Heavy duty vans, trucks used diesel as fuel. Now Asha was satisfied. Even the driver thanked us; he said “Now I can politely reply to those who ask me to switch off the engine.”

One child asked. “He has so much stuff he can use one of the cylinders to run his van – right ?” Asha asked, “Innocent question. How will we explain ?”

Swapna continued the story. The engineering students said. “Yes, he should. But the machine (called engine) inside the van should like LPG. It is not like our stove, which is happy with LPG. Scientist and engineers are all doing work”.

Swapna told her audience that that was in Asha's time. Now not only gas, other energy sources were available as you know.

Cooking gas (LPG cylinder) delivery is usually a two stage process. The driver brings in the cylinder, takes the old empty one and goes back to the van. In the meantime, the engine is on and the special goods auto's (loud) sound is heard.

Once a visitor to the ashram was upset and egged on by her friends wanted to call the driver – their own office assistants also came:

Man 1 : I was also a truck driver – I know it is better to leave the engine on.

Man 2: I am a student of automobile engineering. Diesel engines work on a non-spark plug principle – starting is not easy. He went on to add more explanation.

The visitor said 'I stand corrected' . Asha ajji came and told the friends of the visitor that we should not apply even good general principles (here avoiding noise pollution) to ALL the situations . Some may not be applicable to every situation.

31. “INNER VOICE.”

STUDENTS WRITE, SPEAK - WE READ, HEAR.

[All children are encouraged to read aloud , recite, speak loud and clear. Also to discuss with guest speakers.]

Asha was the head of a hostel for destitutes. Swapna's ASHA series of stories about Asha, refer to mid-20th century. The place was a small town.

As usual, Swapna was the narrator and her audience were free to join at any stage, with their own comments, questions etc We saw that there were a few students in the ashram interested in journalism. Swapna said as you all know that in Asha's time many new educational institutions were coming up, thanks to the efforts of new government of India. Institutes for drama, films (movies) were the new ones in which Asha was interested. To many families she knew, she recommended. In her own ashram she could only groom them for their later careers or work or study on hobbies.

Elizabeth (English teacher) Swapnaji! You said you will tell us about creative writing.

Swapna: Sorry friends I had digressed. Thank you Elizabeth.. Let me focus on the topic.

We learnt that everybody liked to write and they did. Let me recall

Daily diary – about their study

‘Monthly’ diary -a notebook containing student's observations and ideas.

Once aJ1 (aspiring journalist – ashramite) asked Ashaji – we find some honest doubts in the diaries; shall I show you one? When Ashaji saw it was true.

“Snake in the ashram – Snake catching Uncle took it away in a bag – what will he do with it? If uncle could not come, what should we have done?”

Swapna said “My friend, what do you think Asha would have done? If you were Asha, what would you have done?”

Elizabeth: I know he would have released it into snake’s natural habitat.

Host : I did not know, or if I was not sure, I will telephone snake uncle and ask the child’s question.

Another: I would have called the child and told “Why do you worry? Snake has gone, no?”

Swapna: Do you hear the last one? That sounds a little harsh. I can imagine this. The child guessed Didi may say like that. So, she only wrote in the diary, her question. Nobody wants to be rebuked.

Swapna said If I were a cartoonist, I could have made a picture. AJ1 (aspiring journalist) telling “a doubt” Asha with wide eyes; above her head there will be a light bulb (glowing).

Elizabeth said: I know you want to say AJ1’s doubt gave Ashaji a great new idea. Swapna: Exactly.

Asha said next Saturday, I would request snake uncle to come and talk to us. All of you come. So it was that the child who had written in her diary, asked her questions to the Snake Uncle. Not only she, many others it seemed, had similar doubts. One by one they got replies.

Snake uncle was not only a snake catcher. He was an ecologist. Hence the children had a great time with him. He had brought true photographs of catching snakes and a few things.

Ashaji said, while introducing the Uncle, “This uncle is not a snake charmer- He does not make snakes dance to his music – He is a scientist. So, you can ask your doubts.”

We saw earlier that one Sunday in a month was a special day for the ashram like common birthday and donor’s day. Similarly the previous Saturday was “**discussion Day**” – The input to the discussion came from the diaries and aJ1 to aJ4 (aspiring journalists).

Swapna said, if I were a cartoonist, I would draw another shining bulb above Ashaji’s head (i.e. idea!) She instituted a box for questions. Already there was a post box for incoming letters. In her office there was another box called suggestion box. The question box was given a name “INNER VOICE.”

Contents of this box, along with the diaries, became the resource for the next Discussion Saturday”

Swapna: What do you think of the story?

Woman 1: Source for the meeting is a great idea. Did she give a “subject” or “topic” for discussion?

Swapna: I do not have that much memory for details.... She must have done. If I knew her well, I would guess: an announcement:

“Discussion on..... Topic..... Question and doubts write and give to.....

Another: Your guru, Asha, liked to record everything worth a thought.

Swapna: Sure you guessed it. Not me. Each discussion with the topic was neatly labelled and kept. If you go there today, you will find a lengthy index indicating the pages on which the topic occurs.

Headmistress: I was once Headmistress of a school. It was so tough to get to any academic data. Accounts were fine because MONEY MATTERS and auditors were there. But compiling information and academic matters was always done haphazardly.

Elizabeth: Did you struggle every time or did you do anything about it?

Headmistress: I saw to it that our staff wrote accounts on previously page-numbered notebooks. The vouchers or receipts had serial numbers and dates on them. So, I made a single data bank of continuous page number of one fat book for one academic year.

Elizabeth: How about indexing?

Headmistress: Our staff did not have any idea of indexing. They had never used an encyclopedia or a serious textbook. So, I insisted on 'contents' which will be equal to "Topic of Discussion"

Swapna: Continuous page numbering is a good idea – I would say you had copied the idea from Asha – Since you never knew about her; I'd say: GREAT minds think alike

Headmistress: Thank you, Swapnaji !.

Someone asked: What is new in this. We always had lectures from guest speakers on special occasions.

Headmistress: The one problem is most of the time the speaker will have content and diction, going over much above the heads of the listeners (see experts cannot come down). The audience will be ready to clap for the end of the lecture and run away.

Swapna: Elizabeth, what about Asha's discussion in your opinion?

Elizabeth: There is a basic difference. After headmistress's talks usually there won't be any time for doubts, Even if it was there, no one will ask any doubts.

In Asha's method the topic arose from the students' question and if the speaker is good, he can keep the curiosity level up all along.

Swapna: Friends! Do you see the difference? As Elizabeth said once curiosity breeds; if the speaker is good, he can induce more curiosity among his audience.

Headmistress: Were these Saturdays just a waste of time? Or, did they help in improving academic performance?

From the 'inner voice' question box, some questions which were directly related to textbook contents were answered where the teachers were invited to participate. Just one comes to my mind. The child had written in her diary:

"Today we were in the garden helping Aunty. She cut some 'sticks' from a plant, and we planted them in pots and watered. She said these flower plants will grow to be full, so we should water them. She also said in her village sugarcane is grown in this way? How ? Why not in other beings or animals?"

Headmistress: This doubt led to topics as high as in M.Sc. Biology or MBBS surgery.

Simple answer also can be given.

Elizabeth : Now about academics i.e. of marks in exams, we may not be able to judge.

Swapna: As one candle lights another, one idea leads to another. If I were a cartoonist Swapna, I would have drawn another bulb above Asha's head, What will it be?

Elizabeth: Tell aspiring journalists to write a synopsis or summary report of discussions.

One womann: Next day would be special Birthday Sunday. So, Birthday children can go and invite the speaker to that function.

Another: Equally good idea given.

Swapna: I can just repeat.:

Great minds think alike. But my two bulbs were:

A monthly 'newsletter' for the ashram.

An annual "magazine" for the ashram.

The content matter was already there from discussion reports and monthly diaries. For annual magazine, new matter also were welcomed.

Now let me ask you. You are all here voluntarily, regularly, why? How?

Elizabeth: Some food for thought; certainly snacks.

Headmistress; minds open, friendly feeling. Thanks to Swapnaji and friends.

Swapna: Why did I ask you that question. Your answers have given why and how discussion days were interesting.

32. See... Write... Only Facts

[Newspapers and other media were biased as seen by a journalist due to which she quit a good career and became a free lancer]

Swapna had a loyal group of listeners, mostly in the weekends and holidays. Some were of the same age group, retired from various levels of subjects, status and responsibility.

Swapna never encouraged or stopped anyone from attending these sessions. But it so happened that the meetings had only women and mostly senior in age. The good thing in this group is that persons other than Swapna were also interested in telling the stories they knew.

I (this writer) opted to report about Asha stories only; that too selected, assuming that the readers would be interested in the topic, so many years later. If I give one example, the reader would understand.

(What was omitted from my stories ;)

Some topics like how even when wheat and rice had to be from "ration shops" only (no open market) how they had to thoroughly clean before use, how milk was rare even if you can pay; difficulties of long distance telephoning..... were favourite topics (gossip!) since all the women of those days had gone through these.)

Recently a retired writer had joined (who is a 'retired' writer?). "I thought a writer never retires or made to retire" one person wondered. Someone said, "let us ask her." They sure asked.

The retired writer explained: As all of you know, only the exceptions, make the news. Swapnaji had been kind and generous to hundreds of children. That will not be news. But one day she was angry, and hit a child.

That will be news. It is the same with newspapers and the society. That did not bother me.

I have written a poem about it. It was never published.

Shall I read it out to you? Someone said, "What was there in the poem? Why reject a work from their own staff? We are curious"

***The retired writer read her poem:
I have written as if my boss speaks to me***

Was there a dispute?

Was there violence?

Was there arson or loot

Crime committed or offence?

Then why do they come to me?

Usual or routine they may be

I am a broadcaster of the bad

Not for me fine folklore or ballad

Don't you know yet

What is newsworthy?

Items which will get

Public outrage or sympathy.

Fires, fraud, famine, fights, flood

Gory scenes of death and blood

Illegal acts, insults, innuendos

Bring them to me as befits pros

We know our society has all kinds of divisions. When I reported, I reported only facts. A mob is a mob. A victim is a victim, etc. Of late among many news vendors (I call them vendors or sellers – news channel, print media, etc....) a practice. If an aggression happens to a victim belonging to one religion, group, caste or any such

category – he/she will be unidentified with it/or fully screened.

Let us say X is one group, Y another. If some houses were burnt and they are in a locality of X, news will be houses of group X were torched by a gang of Y.

If the opposite had happened, it will be, there was some tussle between two groups (not identified).

I said I would not label anybody. I treat all these as children fighting or doing mischief. The media, information merchants, would colour even my reports under my name. That is why I never wanted a name tag.

One person wondered: "For such a small thing you left a job and profession !" Another asked, "Is it a small cause ? It's very important in our country dominated, ruled, looted, marauded by....."

It was unusual for Swapna to intervene. This time she did. No politics or religion in our discussions – not even linguistic chauvinism. Don't we all agree we, as educated women, are above all these.

The writer, new comer was extremely sorry. I do not mean to favour or hate any side. I wanted the media to be the same way. I thought I did not belong to that place and time. So I quit.

Swapna said to the host member (for, the meetings were held in different members' houses each time): "Do you have tea or buttermilk for us.?"

Everyone knew this interval was to cool down tempers.

After the interval, Swapna asked "Do you want to know what Asha felt about journalism ?"

The new member (retired journalist) asked who Asha was.

W 1 (woman one), “You have come to this group, do not know about Asha?”

Swapna: We should apologies. We have not formally welcomed the writer to this group. Will you (woman 1) do it for us?

W 1 (woman one) then said how Swapna and others once formed a team. AA Kalpana was very much involved in primary education. AKA – Mangala-Headmistress in all aspects of education and ASHA - Ashrama Aiji in charge of destitute children.

Swapna said, “Perhaps we should start the story next time.”

33 . Diary – Write, Report

[Home- made

calendars and diaries galore in the ashram]

Swapna straightaway got into the narrator’s mood.

Swapna: “We said a very important thing about diary keeping and Asha’s ashram. Of course, there was a calendar of events in the general hall of the ashram.

By this time, you all would have guessed how any ashram will be run. Allotted eating time, compulsory study time etc. Asha had a system different from the other ‘strict’ hostels. Children were not confined to a hall, lined up with books, with a few ‘supervisors’ overseeing each student.

Her ashram had a study hour. But students could do their study anywhere in the premises. Even small groups were allowed if they were for the purpose of learning.

One person: "How can a group study silently? It will always be jokes, giggling, and teasing one another."

Another: I was also wondering, even in the school, a group is always counter-productive.

Swapna: I also wondered. But knowing Asha, she would have trained them like she did for diary writing.

Kalpana: Are you going to tell us about it? Even our senior children could not write on their own, even one page, in any language. We had to give short essay, even on topics like "My ideal leader, Festivals of India, Unity in Diversity," etc. and then they will write 5 times (equal to memorizing).

Swapna: You have come to the last line of my story viz. enabling children to write in whichever language or style they can and on any topic of their cognizance or experience.

Elizabeth: I am waiting for details, madam.

Swapna: Quickly a short account of diaries in Asha's ashram.

Public calendar showing dates (and time) of planned events in the ashram.

Asha's own detailed diary for her own memory.

A diary with each didi, containing a page for each child under her care.

Let us call this Didi's Diary. Didi's diary will note down pages and chapters (and such small details) which the student had studied on that day.

Somebody wondered why, since the notebooks, homework checked by teachers at school would have been okay.

I had also asked this question to Asha. I received some lengthy explanation; which I am summarizing for you:

Diary entry will be an indirect control and supervision by Didi. When Didi herself (or senior students) meets the child (whose diary is being seen) she would know where the child needs help.

Other than the above,

Individual diary with each person in the ashram. This is for jotting down events, persons, things whichever was interesting. Entries can be daily or anytime occasionally when thoughts come.

The last one need not be a regular diary, which is any time costly. It can be just a notebook.

Asha told us, very seriously, that no one should laugh, quote, or belittle any child's writing, even if they happen to see it.

Each young student's diary will be seen by a '**mentor**' who would be a senior student. This mentor also will show how to write. But freedom to the child, was also taken care of by encouraging expressions as they come. Grammar was given a go- bye.

Asha used to say that some words are often found, For something they liked 'good,' 'very good,' 'super', in any language including English. For describing what they did not like, usually local language was used like 'cheating,' 'stinks,' 'mud-like,' 'tasteless', etc. Even if these referred to personalities, Asha strictly instructed mentors, no remarks, or comments to the writer or to ANYBODY because according to Asha, clear and honest recording is the purpose of the diary.

Elizabeth: Do you have any child's diary with you now?

Swapna: Not now, not even 40 years ago.

Elizabeth: But children would have shown their diaries to you. Did you not keep some good ones with you?

Swapna: My friends, how should I answer Elizabeth's question.

One: As teachers, we retain some good notebooks to show to future students as examples.

Swapna: That is because they were just writing what is EXPECTED of the student.

In other words, they were copies or reflections of the teachers' [your] thoughts.

Elizabeth: When we conduct essay or story writing competitions, it was known, from the start, that the work is for making it public. So, the prize winning work can be kept, published and the author will be happy.

Swapna: According to Asha diary contents are personal –

Host 1: Then why a 'mentor' another student should see it?

Elizabeth: I got the idea since I could imagine the original purpose. It was to improve or just to bring out the "COMPOSITION SKILL" of the children.

SEE / HEAR / DO something. Write about it.

Swapna: Elizabeth is a teacher - she could see this side of it i.e. COMMUNICATION SKILL DEVELOPMENT.

One person (Woman 1) said, "I am not a psychologist but I have worked in domestic violence unit of the police – If the victim could have TOLD someone about their problems many crimes could have been prevented.

Host (1): When the child writes about something BAD happened (according to their immature mind) it increases their sorrow, I thought.

Swapna: Now we are getting into deep waters i.e. too serious for me to judge.

Elizabeth: We are too theoretical – ‘ Ashatai had long ago done some real practical experiment.

Woman (1) – Yes, even statistically relevant, because it was an ashram.

All age groups – quite a few in each age group - total double blind experiment i.e. no one knew what another would write.

Swapna: Exactly, the RESULT (i.e. the aim of doing this) is never revealed.

Host (1): All that you are talking goes above my head.

Child feels; writes about it. You give laddu to someone; she says it is sweet - all will say the same. You give lemon - it will be sour. Instead of saying, they write.

Swapna: Simply stated; you are right. Your eyes look for a well-known, tested, EXPECTED response – Life's experiences, even that of a child, are never black or white.

To summarize Ashatai used diary writing to another purpose – Helping students of JOURNALISM.

Another day I can tell you briefly about that.

APPENDIX

Going back to her story Swapna described how Asha managed her anxieties. She thought that each child should be given opportunities to have two important basic qualities: Self-confidence, self-reliance

As a team Asha, her assistants and friends prepared a check list. ,

List to be ticked [details in office files]

1. *Travel local - going with 1 or 2 inmates by local bus, train etc. Tickets, stop or station names to be noted and reported.*
2. *1 above alone and with a job assignment*
3. *A day- time travel to a given place and address and back the same day just as 1 and 2 above*
4. *Same as 3 but travel overnight.*
5. *Go as a group for lunch/ snacks to a friendly 'standard' house. Go alone to a house for helping someone sick or prepare for a function or festival – join for a weekend with a 'standard' family.*
6. *Make a fully imaginary bio data- also make a real one with one's own name*
7. *While in the ashram complete an apprentice program for a short period – do the above staying outside*

Asha very much stressed the last item of the above list.

For this she had to work hard, convincing companies to accept her candidate not yet 18, or just 18. On many occasions it was without any appointment, posting or remuneration. The common purpose of the employer as well as Asha was to observe whether the candidate could manage the stress of 8 hour work, travel and also discipline and punctuality. Any technical skill is only a bonus. Many NGO's, social workers, university departments were useful since they could resonate with Asha.

A small challenge was to find “decent’ persons and “standard’ families

PRESENT TIME

Swapna stopped here. She looked around and curious [doubtful] faces around her.

Woman1: These seem to be ‘cooked-up’ situations or ‘mock’ drama scenes. Do they help real life situations.?

Swapna: Asha believed these ‘make-believe’ experiences help a teenager. Remember these inmates had never seen parents or relatives or separated or run away from them.

Woman2: Two cheers for the great ideas of work experience and managing on one’s own . Even we, the home people fail to give this kind of exposure to our children. Many learn anew and

on their own if and when they become independent.

Woman3: Some never do. Like in some rich families or business households.

Woman4: Why, even in poor families the same thing for financial reasons.

Jabeena , the journalist , said that she had a doubt . Was Asha preparing her wards for modern urban living? Many of the items on the list were irrelevant for a rural agrarian setting.

Swapna: Excellent observation! They [the trio of aa, aka, asha] discussed this before making a checklist. They thought the rural scene had its own ways of absorbing and assisting any newcomer. It is only the urban complicated lifestyle which needs preparedness.

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