

ASHRAM STORIES

Tales told by and about grandmas



Asha ajji stories- part 2

Titles 34 to 60

M.D . Swapna

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1 to 106 pages A 5 size

Feb. 2024

Typeset images alignment - amhpsys@gmail.com.

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Suggestions are welcome

PREFACE

In the preface to part 1 of Asha ajji stories we wrote “Mundane matters such as building a personality, adopting practices aimed at shaping humane and rational human beings need to be recorded and remembered. Hence this booklet.”

This is part 2 containing more of such ‘stories’. Swapna the narrator becomes more vocal here explaining and commenting on very serious subjects such as higher education, competitive world, prayer, religion, marriage, love. Towards the end of the booklet the irrelevance of individual and small attempts by even intelligent and dedicated persons like Asha is palpable both to the readers as well as the actors [viz, ajjis] .

In Shakespearian parlance this series will not come under either a comedy or history. Then what is left is “THE TRAGEDY”. With a heavy heart we the writer and the readers have to accept the reality.

As they say in Bengaluru, South India , all of us have to “ADJUST” and proceed, Proceed to where? Another traffic jam of selfishness, rat-race, be one up by hook or crook and as ‘motivational speakers’ say towards personal SUCCESS. WISH YOU A HAPPY READING.

Normal font - story, past time . place : ashram, children, Asha, other ajjis 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

Proof reading is a practical art that needs more patience and skill than composing prose or poetry. This fact, the author found the hard way.

*This booklet is the black and white proof
That shows green proof readers can goof.*

Readers please 'cooperate'

Asha – both for ajji and ashram

Sw - Swapna , the narrator

L, Liz, Elizabeth- same person, the English teacher

J, Jameela, Jabeena – same person, journalist

W1, W2 Woman 1, woman 2 - listeners

Using correct punctuation marks is our weak point. Kindly mentally supply wherever necessary

. fullstops , period

“ ” - quotation symbols, speaker's words

A, a, b , *b* – CAPITAL [upper case] , small [lower case]

Normal font , *italics*

We recommend that any interested reader may kindly read both the parts of ashram stories [parts 1 and 2] to form an opinion. We request also that such persons kindly share their impressions [both positive and negative] with the authors. Please see emails given

M.D.Swapna

Feb 2024

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34. EVERYONE A REPORTER?

[Asha selects future journalists by her own guest lecture method]

Swapna and her friends assembled at the place of ex-writer. We may need this person's name (Asha 18)).

Let us call her Jameela

Last time we talked about how Asha encouraged (insisted/helped) everyone to write diaries. One for recording what was studied. This is written daily and seen by Didi, or some mentor.

The other diary was a notebook in which events and associated thoughts by the child is written by the child. This was done with the help of mentors. Shall I tell you how this was done or about the journalism students who inspired Asha to do this project?

No one had any opinion.

[This writer: For grown-ups decision making is tough; If the question is wide open It is more difficult.

God comes and asks: Tell one item which you want. A beggar may ask for a non-breakable begging bowl." Any other adult will take time to decide; by the time God may have disappeared. Ask a child: the answer will be quick. Ice-cream for all those who are here"]

Jameela : (ex-writer): Sure. Tell us about Asha and journalism.

A few students wanted to be journalists. It was a time when mass communication etc .. was in a nascent state. Any good writer was a 'product' of a newspaper – starting from a proof-reading to junior reporter and slowly climb up, if the Editor encouraged.

Instead of discouraging, Asha thought “let us groom them to be true communicators”.

Though young, these students had one clear advantage. They could STATE what they want clearly.

Swapna: Clearly when I say, let me explain. If Jabeena asks you if you want idli or just biscuits, and tea. Let us try here. You just answer this imaginary question:

Woman 1: Just tea please. Woman 2, Woman 3 followed.

Woman5: I am hungry: Idli and tea if you don't mind.

Swapna: Tea and biscuits....

Now assume the same question is asked to our aspiring journalists. AJ1, aJ2, aJ3,..... Let me also give an imagined answer (by them).

aJ1: Just strong tea with less sugar, please.

aJ2: I am hungry. Idli with chutney and Sambar, if you have both. I don't drink tea.

aJ3: Tea and biscuits please, Rusk if available.

Many assembled said Swapnaji you are ascribing too much maturity to the young ones.

Swapnaji: Yes that is what Asha found as told to us.

Now I'll go back to the story]

Asha invited some of her friends to give a lecture on what is writing and related ideas.

Swapna said: Let me not give a lecture here. I'll only summarize”.

Journalist 1: Just reporting. Like writing down a “press briefing” given or a “police report.” It will be the same irrespective of who the reporter is.

Journalist 2: Add a few comments by the writer. Like” This is the first time in 10 years.

a). Such a thing had happened here.” Comments with no responsibility:

b). The same “according to a senior citizen here.”

Journalist 3: Analytical reporting.

a) Such an event could have been due toor..... or..... opinions of the local persons vary.

b). Opinioned reporting

“such an event is usually induced by _____ party or _____ persons.

The guest lecturer knew that her talk was boring because it went beyond the heads of most of the ashramites. After the lecture, and quickly almost all left with some relief, a few students remained.

They were shy but asked Asha if they could clarify some doubts with the speaker.

Asha told us that she was the most satisfied person on that day. A boring lecture was preplanned by her with the speaker. That was to find if the aspiring journalists were truly interested. Now it turned out, “yes they were.”

Swapna: “What do you think about this method”.

One: “No need to bother 100 others just to find a few”

Second: “Speaker could have called those special four and discussed.”

Third: “Even these four might have left. Then your Asha will have zero result.”

Elizabeth: "On the other hand, There could have been a few more new ones (other than aJ1 to aJ4)"

Swapna: Asha thought exactly like Elizabeth. Now to the story.

These four students became mentors for the notebook-diary writing by the students. Swapna said, as Asha told me, I will illustrate with an example:

Event: "Snake in the ashram"

aJ1 to aJ4 looked at the diaries of the students, who had written about this event.

Report 1 -Today there was a snake in our ashram.

Report 2 Today there was a snake in our ashram. We were all frightened. Didi said: "Do not go near. I will call the snake-catching uncle."

Report 3 Today there was a snake in our ashram. We were all frightened. Didi said do not go near. I will call the snake-catching uncle. Do not try to hit it. No killing "Didi said "just watch where it goes"

Report 4 Do not try to hit it. No killing "Didi said "just watch where it goes" Snake- catching uncle came and with a 'V' like stick caught it and put it in a bag he brought with him.

Report 5 Snake catching uncle came and with a 'V' like stick caught it and put it in a bag he brought with him. We asked him "will you kill it". "NO" "what will you do with the snake?" We will release it into a forest".

Asha was so glad that her notebook keeping idea worked and aJ's had done field work. Perhaps they had a 'field day' doing 'field work.'

35. HOUSE JOURNAL

[what can be written in a house journal]

ASHA found that when people write their own inner grief, anguish, deep-seated aversions, or any number of psychological conditions, it certainly, helps the writer- It is so, even if it is never published or never read by anybody-Just the process of writing is therapy in itself.

Main idea is one's own relief.

Additional benefits of creativity, authorship prose, poetry, narrative ability etc. Best of all is a new look at journalism, data reporting, separation of facts and opinion/comments ----- this by the reporter herself or by the public or the character actors themselves, mostly victims.

A had a trauma-written in admission sheet 10 years ago and the memory still gives her night mare.

B is the new entrant-similar case sheet.

ASHA called A and asked if she could help to make case reports and other administrative work for her - Gave B's case. Here story goes differently. Then journalism idea was born. 'A' was the co-editor of a house journal. Law requires total privacy of data of residents unless she becomes 18.

Jameela, the ex-journalist, asked: what is so new in this? A Calcutta daily is over 100 years old; Even a Bombay magazine and newspaper are equally old.

Elizabeth: Every old-time freedom fighter was also a journalist, including Mahatma Gandhi. All political parties have their mouth piece journals.

Woman 1: My collection of parallel proverbs was published in my college magazine.

Woman 2: We had handwritten magazines kept for any visitor to see.

Woman 3: In all art schools a neat album of original drawings of students can be seen.

Swapna: I agree with all of you. I am happy to see you are all listening carefully to my narration. Now let me continue.

Asha knew that there were many methods of internal communication - like workers in a government department, or a nation-wide bank, like circulars, information sheets, reports etc.

Some reputed companies had in addition to internal notices and circulars, a house journal to be shared with outsiders. It varied from monthly, quarterly or annual. Usually, an editor well versed in advertisement techniques was given this responsibility.

Asha did not like or need any over claim or 'advertisement', But she thought writing about even small innovations will be informative and so, useful to others.

Now Jameelaji, can you finish the story?

Jameela: Yes, she had no trouble starting or running an annual magazine like we reporters protect the identify of persons we interview, she can always change the names and write about the 'cases'.

Elizabeth: Of like our Swapnaji does, make all data of place, persons and time fictitious and imaginary. (All women including Swapna laughed).

Correct. Asha did exactly the same. In this job, the residents who wanted to be journalists were of great help. Though young (remember all inmates were less than 18) they had the 'maturity' to omit 'so called'

objectionable details. They never went into the details of any child's trauma. Simply say 'unfortunate or bad experience' 'grief' etc.

The contributions to the journal were from the 'diaries' and 'scrap books' of the inmates.

[Here, Jameela said didi's impressions also could have been included]

Swapna said, yes, they were. I forgot. I just remember. There was an epidemic of a strange 'flu' of unknown origin. Didi's together gave a report to Asha how they managed, including boiling and cooling all drinking water and also water for brushing teeth, avoiding any uncooked items such as salad or '*Kochumbi*'. This Asha decided could be written about.

36. SCRAPPING THE SCRAP BOOK (Asha style)

[Strange story of a man and his niece and their albums]

On this day, there was a long talk among the listeners before the beginning of the story

Swapna asked her friends: "How many of you write diaries and keep?"

Only two: Elizabeth and Jameela.

Woman 1: Diaries are for executives and their secretaries, to keep appointments

Woman 2: Dentists, definitely.

These are professional tools. Same with you two, Elizabeth and Jameela?"

Elizabeth: Not exactly. I write down some things worth remembering. Like, when I was enjoying the movie 'MARY POPPINS' I wrote down the jokes.

Jameela: Mine is similar. Important dates and events are written like 11/7 of USA and similar terrorist attack on the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay.

Swapna: Before I start singing in praise of writing diaries, let me say Kalpana, Mangala, and Asha also wanted everyone to keep diary.

In Kalpana's case, i.e. primary school age, it was called scrap book and it contained whatever fascinated the student.

Elizabeth: It was discontinued due to some vague notions of childhood trauma.

Swapna: Yes, the scrapbook idea was scrapped by Kalpana, probably anxiety and trauma of the parents.

Jameela: I remember Swapnaji saying Asha's children maintained two diaries?

Swapna: Yes, one like a logbook of homework done and studying schedule shown to Didi and hence like a more detailed attendance register.

The other was the scrapbook - from which imaginative output of children was used for the house magazine. As I have been told by Asha; the second one had contributed to self-confidence, creativity, and goal formation.

Elizabeth: Those are big words. Let me tell you a page from old diary which is still in my memory.

Jameela: (teasing) No lecture on literature, please.

Elizabeth: Very brief.

All of you know the famous poem "THE RAINBOW". I used to tell my students, particularly that it was a grammar poem. It says

**The poet liked to look at the rainbow:
In his younger days,
Likes in the present time,
Will like in the future (or "let me die")**

Swapna: Shall we give Elizabeth the credit of making English poetry enjoyable.

Elizabeth: Thanks, But I have not told my note:

**I used to like *gulab jamun* and I ate it
I still like *gulab jamun* and cannot eat it.
I will always like *gulab jamun* but I will not be given.
Thanks to my sugar level.**

Swapna: Today I would like to tell you a story which completely squashed Asha's enthusiasm.

Let us call this woman DW, distraught woman. Distraught woman was introduced to Asha by a common friend. Distraught woman, making sure that only three of them were around, took out from her a carefully bound and preserved book. See this and tell me what I should do.

In those days these there used to be published a weekly English magazine, which had pages for the readers. Happy birthdays with photos of birthday children, Art work done by children etc. There was also a prominent page of congratulations with a photo of a married couple. What distraught woman brought was an album of all these wedding photographs.

Asha asked: Is it yours? A collection of wedding photographs. fine you have your hobby. You could have attached invitations also.

Distraught woman: No. Certainly not mine. I would never do such a silly thing. See carefully. Asha then realized in all the news items one man's face or bust was seen while the girls were all different.

Asha: Cut and paste job; why would anyone take the trouble?

Distraught woman: Silly self-image; bloated ego and arrogance.

Asha: If you feel it is bad, why take trouble to bring and show it to me or to anybody.

Distraught woman: I will kill myself before I show such a filthy stuff to anyone. But I want your advice.

Asha: Each to his own/or her own taste.

Distraught woman: Please look again madam.

Asha then looked at the pictures. In each picture the bridegroom was neatly cut off and in its place was properly placed photo of one and the same individual.

Asha: Who is this? Is he a problem for you?

Distraught woman: No madam. This one in the picture is the old (decades) photos of none other than my husband. What do you think I'd do?

Asha: I was a student of psychology, also sociology student. But I never really counselled. What can I say?

Distraught woman: Everything was fine, as normal as any household until I found this in some old junk. Should I confront him with this?

Asha: Are you willing to leave this thing here with me. Do you mind if I consult some of my friends.

Distraught woman: Please do something. But I don't want me or this husband of mine, exposed.

Asha: I'll keep the identities a secret.

Asha: If he misses it, what I say is, if he asks you whether you found an old album of his, please telephone me immediately.

Distraught woman: Ok madam. Fortunately, he is not a violent type.

Jameela: Is this the end of the story?

Some others: If there was no problem, the book could have been burnt. No one will regret it.

Elizabeth: If it was bachelor's hobby and he is OK after marriage, why worry?

Jameela: It shows his psyche; why would he keep it until that day, years later.

Swapna: Until this event, it was an unfinished story. We all discuss this as third person, theoretically in a psychology class. Shall I now go to further events.

Jameela: If there is more, please tell now only. [‘now only’ without delay etc. our literal translations of phrases in Indian languages].

There was no telephone call from distraught woman for almost a week and suddenly one day she turned up, at the ashram.

Distraught woman: Madam, I need urgent advice.

Asha: I thought everyone (you and your husband) have ignored old follies and let bygones be bygones.

Swapna: Yes, madam. He never mentioned the album. I pretended ignorance. Now there is a new issue.

Asha: Do you want the album back? According to my friends, it should vanish and not even you should know where it is.

Distraught woman: Ok, let it be with you. Now tell me what to do. A relative of his from the village wants to go to college. Her family thinks she can do so staying in our house.

Asha: Very nice, you can help a girl child to become a graduate. I hope you can afford, financially.

Distraught woman: But look at this madam.

[She looked around to see no one else was there in the room and took out a notebook from her bag].

It was an old drawing notebook with cardboard wrapper around. Asha opened it. First few pages were full of one girl’s name in different sizes and art form and also in two languages].

Asha thought this was quite usual for any teenager and even 5 to 10 year old. Some psychologists even say a pride in one's own name is a part of building up self-confidence.

Swapna: Asha even had a program of given names and its significance, That will be another day.

Jameela: Swapnaji you stop your story at odd places. Do you want some suspense, like serials these days?

Swapna: I am sorry. I never thought of these as mysteries. I just call them stories instead of 'reporting of events'.

Asha turned the pages. Next few pages were full of cinema stars of those days. Asha was about to return the book to distraught woman, the latter said, please see further madam.

Asha turned the pages. It was a repeat of what she had seen a week before. The ladies in many photos were neatly cut off and in its place was this girl's figure.

Distraught woman: See how clever she is madam. She has simply cut off the faces and in its place, she has her face. Many of the dresses and poses will not be allowed in our families.

Asha: Perhaps this is the fantasy. You said she is from a village. So, the fancy is even more.

Distraught woman: So just like her uncle's case. I should ignore this also.

Asha: If she finds out that this book is missing one of three things may happen:

- 1). Just being Ashamed, she would keep quiet.

2). Even though she is embarrassed, she would ask if you found it.

3). She would like to go to her village for a day or two (presumably to search for this book).

Distraught woman: So, what should I do?

Asha: Just like the earlier book, leave this here. The book as well as the information will be safe with me and will go no further.

Jameela: I was a journalist. Can I give a title to this short story?

Elizabeth: Jameela, do you think this is the end of the story. If so, why would Swapnaji take the trouble of telling us the event?

Jameela: Probably Swapnaji wanted to say all the people of this world need not follow a societal norm. Some harmless deviations can be accommodated.

One woman: All girls have dreams like Cinderella and her nieces.

Another woman: In olden days a tall dark handsome prince was a dream man. Now-a-days cinema stars are dream men .

Elizabeth: More recently cricket heroes.

Jameela: Do you all want to know the title I have given to this story?

Elizabeth: I know you will not let us disperse without knowing your wit.

Jameela: In spite of your jibe, Elizabeth, I will announce the title:

“FANCY OR KINKINESS, IT RUNS IN ONE’S BLOOD’

Elizabeth: Jameela, your age shows. More apt title for these days:

“DREAMS GO WITH YOUR DNA”

Swapna: I agree. In our time DNA was a discovery. Today it has become a password.

Host of the day got up and asked shall I prepare coffee?

Swapna said, “Sit down madam. Don’t you want to hear the end of the story?”

All: Is there more? Please tell.

Swapna continued the story. Asha was surprised to see distraught woman again after a week or so. This time she was accompanied by a man and a girl. Asha guessed the man was her husband and the other was the one who wanted to go to college.

Distraught woman said we brought sweets to only you today. Another day we’ll bring for all the children. Asha said: “Come in. I can ask you the reason more comfortably.”

It is almost the end of the story.

Elizabeth: Yes, the girl got admission in a prestigious college, which was the occasion.

Jameela: To make it more of an intrigue. The husband knew that his wife had discovered his diary [as in popular Hindi movies or serials] and does not mind.

Swapna: As always you are all very clever, but let me finish my narration.

Welcome over and introduction done. Asha suggested that they go around the ashram before tea or coffee. Asha quickly showed things, stressing more on museum and art and craft ideas. It was obvious that the girl was

keenly interested in the last one and even tried some herself.

She looked like a small girl half her age when she tried on finger fitting faces and gloved dolls. She almost jumped with joy.

After coming to her room, Asha asked the girl, if she could go to the kitchen and tell them to bring 3 teas and one cup of milk. The girl even said, 'Of course tea for elders and milk for me' and left.

At that time, distraught woman said, she is a nice girl; we have no problem having her, but I've applied for a job. If it comes through there won't be anyone at home when she comes from college. Asha asked if her job will require travel. Distraught woman said: "Certainly. I will be HRD and Marketing Executive. That is if I get it."

The husband said, "I will manage, no problem."

The girl came in carrying her cup of milk and followed by the kitchen staff carrying the rest of the stuff on a tray.

Asha said 'please sit down' and suddenly realized there were only two chairs other than her seat. "Ah, I have to call my staff". The girl said "no problem' and jumped and sat on the lap of her uncle.

After a lot of mutual consultations regarding HRD (Asha said: I am no good at marketing either as a buyer or as a seller). Asha advised. (Swapnaji added here, for the sake of her listeners," remember this advice was decades ago). If the job requires travelling and staying away anywhere here or abroad, please do not hesitate. Women should be equal or better than men."

Before departing, she addressed the couple "we can accommodate one more girl in our ashram. Think about it."

When goodbyes were made Asha called each of them by name and said goodbye. To the student she said “Goodbye Anni” with a stress on the last word. As expected, a flash could be seen on the faces of both the females, while the woman never realized anything other than goodbye.

Asha again said, to her friend “you can any time bring Anni here. This place is open for her.”

Swapna: Stopped here.

Jameela: Is this the end of the story.?

Swapna: For us, it is the end. For them it is a beginning of shaping an adolescent.

Elizabeth: I missed the punch line.

Jameela: I know the punch line since it is the last line in a good short story. It is in the good byes:

Swapna: I am sorry. I kept it to the end. Remember Asha saw pages full of the same name (the girl's). Her real name was: ANNAPURNESHWARI BAI.

She (the girl) had shortened it to Anni.

Elizabeth: Now I get it. Asha knew the short form and used it for saying goodbye.

Jameela: Not only that. It told the girl that her secret (viz. the picture book) was known to Asha.

Swapna: And to distraught woman that Anni needed some counseling which Asha was willing to give by allowing her into her ashram.

I am sorry it has taken too long today. The story is not over yet. The rest, some other time.

37. NEWS DIGEST OF DIGESTIBLE NEWS

[Weekly new digest prepared [by adults and displayed]]

Swapna told her listener friends in one 'ASHA meeting' about weekly meeting of 'managers'.

Manager means a team of Asha herself with all the didi's and anyone else who had taken interest in activities. To one such meeting Asha had invited Kalpana and Mangala.

Asha wanted to tell them about "news digest" made for the ashramites.

Mangala and Kalpana had brought them a number of their friends and volunteers to the meeting. Looking at the crowd Asha's usually brief meeting became very lengthy.

Swapna turned to her audience: Can you guess why or what happened later?

Elizabeth: Instead of discussion, she made it into a lecture.

Jameela: Elizabeth your superior teacher attitude shows. From Swapna's title which says 'news digest', Asha would have explained the term.

Woman 1: She showed off- took them around the ashram.

Woman 2: She asked the volunteers in which areas they could help.

Woman 3: Asha, though great, was by nature humble, she gave the stage to one of the didi's and left.

Swapna: What wild imagination? Why not this way? Children shouting.

There was snake or fire in one part of the ashram. Everyone went there and that was the end of the meeting.

Jameela: Swapnaji; Do you realize you are making fun of our imagination. You forget that is the beginning of curiosity or inquiry.

Elizabeth: Swapnaji. You asked us to guess.

Swapna: Yes, I am sorry.

Let me go to the story.

As some of you suggested she gave a lecture on Ashram and its responsibilities.

Swapna said "Don't worry; I won't give that lecture here. Actually I don't know how to".

Asha said, a HOME is a store house of information, knowledge, practice, perception; all involuntarily effortlessly obtained. But we have to purposefully think of each aim. One of them is news and general knowledge.

Swapna continued: The gist of what Asha said was,

a). Newspapers in English and the local language were available to all.

b). Some 'good' and 'informative' weekly and monthly magazines were available. A library corner was created only for these.

News in a nutshell from headlines were made and that was put on the notice board. Didi's carry this sheet and read it out while food was being shared in round table method of dining. Since this is only once a week (and during dinner) it did not disturb other events..

Now about the news -Usual ministers' boasts, opposition parties complaints were all ignored; so was local thefts, murders, affairs, cine stars tantrums etc.

Important natural phenomena, economic, and social news were included. Anything about education too.

Elizabeth: Was it not wasted on very young children?

Jameela: Older ones can read the papers.

Swapna: So, you think the idea was unnecessary. This makes me think, why would Asha feel bad that she (they) could not really substitute for parents.

To answer your questions, at home everyone gets information without any effort. Call it talking, arguing, or gossiping. They get the news. The kind of news depends on the I.Q. of the parents.

In the ashram, such 'natural' processes are missing. So, one has to make efforts.

Jameela: Now I can imagine. If there is a news item about Chernobyl and war, someone should say about nuclear reactor. If UN, NATO etc are headlines, it is necessary to expand and explain.

Elizabeth: Sometimes it can be tough or embarrassing. "Thousands of students from our places going to one country to study one subject" requires background information.

That is why only news that is digestible, not that of one father killing his own son to get some hidden treasure or some tantric curing thousands of cancer patients with ash or fish.

Elizabeth: So, you agree some 'sanitizing' is needed.

Jameela: But the 'news digest' can be as bland as tasteless as boiled vegetables or a salad.

Swapna: That was the problem perceived by Asha. But she refused to add masala. i.e. opinions on bare news.

38. MENTAL TOUR

[Elder children plan for a trip with all details once a year]

Swapna: The question I'm going to ask you may be personal. Don't get embarrassed. In our group, no judgments are made.

Elizabeth: Why such a preface?

Swapna: Question is: How often do you go just for travel and how do you plan?

Elizabeth: So today's topic is vacationing, touring etc. What can we do with our lower middle-class life?.

One person: We cannot afford even one day trip to (mentioned a place like nearby Shivaji fort)

Jameela: I plan for a trip every year, during school vacation. I usually look for a 'package tour' offered by tourism organisations.

Woman (1): There are 'pilgrimage tours' to places at the proper time of the year. I just join them.

Swapna: What I am going to tell you will be of interest to most of you. Today the story is about how Asha planned a tour.

Let us remember we are talking of a time when travelling was not easy. 'Air-travel' was meant only for the super-rich, or politicians or business travelers. Most long distance travel was by train. Short distances were by bus. At that time, schools (i.e. education department) declared a mid-year vacation of short duration and a long summer vacation.

[Elizabeth: Yes, nowadays also. Midyear can be, Deepavali or Christmas].

Asha drew up a tour plan for the summer vacation. Planning and details were done during the mid-year vacation.

[Elizabeth: Why so early?

Swapna: That is the theme of today's story].

Asha called them 'MENTAL TOURS' Let the students think of where to go and how.

That decides destination and routes.

To help this out she had brought many brochures and pamphlets from the tourism department.

[Elizabeth: Of course, she made the children go and get. She must have informed the department by telephone about their coming.

Swapna: Yes. That is also an aspect of personality development]

Team A gets to work on one destination. Team B another etc. Of course Railway Time Table (a book) was provided. Asha spent a good amount of money. (Rs 10-20 per piece at that time) to buy detailed survey of India maps of each region. They gave road maps also, so bus availability. Students collected the following data. They were free to consult didis for more info like weather local foods or any other special items.

Destination

Important places to visit

Points of stay.

Internal Travel.

Train numbers.

Cost of tickets.

Number of days.

All were done by groups A, B, C, D.
They all get together with their Didi's and Asha to decide.
Thereafter money, materials, reservations etc. would be taken over by the elders.

Elizabeth: Where is the 'mental tour'? What you say appears to be just detailed nitty-gritty planning.

Swapna: Yes. So far it was maps and railway timetable. But before finalizing, each team decides where to halt, what to see. This is where tourist department's books and pamphlets help. The students study them, mentally visit the monuments., museums, and any other important aspects. These imaginations tell' them how long the trip will last].

Only one of the 'imagined tour' will take place. Even that may not be fully as imagined due to time and money considerations. But all the teams would have mentally visited all the four tours.

This was the benefit Asha expected. Of course, after coming back, details would be shared with those who could not go.

WOMAN 2: All cannot go. No ashram can be fully shut down.

Swapna: Yes, only a small group; never more than a minibus load. (at that time 30 I think). The rest again in small groups would go next year.

Swapna asked her friends collectively, "How many of you plan like this and include even children in planning".

Woman 3: None. Most of us just pack and go or join a guided package tour.

Swapna: So you all miss out on mental images.

39. RAT RACE

*[Asha politely refuses to accept sponsorship of a few select students
– her motto : all must get equal opportunity]*

In the matter of rehabilitation Asha was a highly dissatisfied person. She would like all her wards to be educated, employed, married, settled in life. All parents want the same, don't they?

But then, this aim is the greatest challenge in life, isn't it? Running about, working overtime, saving money, worrying most of one's adult life; in short, everything that anyone does is for this purpose only.

Perhaps this aim motivates every action, decision, behavior of each individual from the day he/she became a parent.

At the same time the same desire namely, see your children settled in life is a reason for many of the evils rampant in society, no matter whether one's actions are undesirable, unethical or even unlawful.

Asha never wanted to be either the first kind, unduly distressed and distraught group; or of the later kind highly corrupt and manipulative type.

To remain sane is a challenge,

Asha used to say, I am neither here nor there.

Swapna asked the small group of her friends, 'What do you think should be the norm in Asha's Ashram?'

Elizabeth: "It could be like any other anathashram (= orphanage) essentially frugal and without luxuries.

Swapna:: Could she afford to admit her wards in a so-called posh school , also called "private English medium schools"?

Elizabeth: Certainly not.

Woman: Why not? English medium and private schools for the supe-rich. Government schools and vernacular medium for the poor. Is there a rule like that?

Elizabeth: We won't discuss here about schools and money. To answer you , there is no rule. But that is the reality.

Jameela: Not only now, it was the reality, years ago from the British times. But one small positive item was government and other private scholarships.

Woman 1: That is how my cousins could even enter colleges.

Woman 2: Some religious institutions here fully take care of 'brilliant' students

Elizabeth: You all see a silver lining in a dark cloud. I know persons who opted to become 'fathers' and 'sisters' either for a hunger-free life or to get their academic ambitions fulfilled.

Jameela: Providing equal opportunities for all is an unsolved problem.

One of Asha's friend's, a college mate, now married and well placed in life came to the ashram with her husband. They were impressed by the neatness and orderliness of the children there, and told Asha, too.

Asha: "What did you expect? Dirty ragged clothes and a 'poor child's face as in prize-winning photos of the third world? Here we are like any other family, perhaps you can call middle class family.

One of the didi's (caretakers of children) said: 'Yes madam, our children when they go out wear only ironed clothes.'

See we, the workers here also wear washed and ironed clothes.

Upper class college friend (let us call her UC): What happens to those who leave the ashram?

Asha asked the Didi to answer this question.

“Madam, until their age is 18’

[Local Hindi may be of interest to non-Hindi knowing people: The phrase is ‘Until the ashramites’s age does not cross 18’]

they remain with us. Everyone studies in regular schools until SSC. Later some technical qualification.

Asha classification

Greater than 15 Senior teen

12-15 Junior teen

10-15 middle aged child

5-10 child young.

3-5 Senior baby

1-3 Junior baby

Less than 1 babe.

Asha: After 18, the girl goes to an ‘after-care centre’. It is their responsibility to find an avocation in life for this person.

Upper class colleague: What kind of qualification they get?

Didi: Most of them join a certificate diploma courses in a professional or technical subject..

Asha: Based on this certificate she has to seek a job. This is where I am unable to help.

Upper class colleague: No one wants to become an engineer or doctor or a lawyer. Is it?

Asha: Our girls are not exposed to the ambitions or dreams of upper class persons like you. We try to tell them that they should plan for their future. As a matter of fact every year, in the beginning of the academic sessions, I invite 'career counselling' students and professors.

Upper class colleague: You know talking won't do. You have to send them to 'coaching classes' from middle school itself.

Didi: We know, but we can't afford . Secondly, Madam (reference to Asha tai) hates the word 'coaching'.

Upper class colleague: There is the lacuna. How could you stick to such a notion, while the whole world outside is following another pattern?

Asha: Yes such a class of society brought up by coaching classes, which imparts questions and answers memorizing rather than true knowledge and skill.

During this visit, the upper-class couple, discussed with Asha about the life during the period the children were there in the Ashram.

Elizabeth: Is that the story for the day?

Jameela: Swapnaji has left us in a dilemma. Was the upper-class couple right or Asha's view.?

Swapna: My story is not over yet.

After the visit during which a detailed discussion took place, upper class couple must have thought that they must help, in some way.

A donation according to them, was necessary, but not enough. They came back with a proposition. They would sponsor one bright child from the 8th standard onwards for special coaching so that she could pass entrance test of medical or engineering courses.

Asha asked, What will you do after that? You have to support until the end of the course. Did you think of that? How about your own children? Your or their feelings in case they don't get admission, but ashram girl gets.

Upper class Couple: Only financially we can support that too one or two. Whether it is ours or from the ashram, coming up is their own effort.

Asha: How about me; I can't choose. All are equal to me. I hate to label children 'intelligent' or 'dull'

Secondly opportunities to our children have to be equal.

Upper class couple: Do you want us to worry about the future of so many children? Do we have the skill or money?

Asha: So I have to say 'no thanks' to your offer. Our children may just join the honest, hardworking mainstream.

Swapna: Ladies, this is the story. Also a reason for Asha leaving everything and herself becoming an inmate of another institution.

40 .ANNUAL ACTIVITIES

[Tensionless preparations for the ashram day and annual magazine]

The ashram supported destitute children for going to school and studying. Naturally the ashram's activities were just like a school's. Admission time, vacation time etc were not there since almost all had nowhere to go and no one to call as relatives. But preparations to go to school in June was as hectic as in a family: checking for uniforms, school bags, shoes. Hence all the didi's were busy.

One Annual Ashram Day was held just after exams and before summer activities began.

Unlike in other places, here hectic preparation was not necessary. Stage activities were taken from monthly programs and repeated. Mass singing was always there; because every child can sing, if one agrees that voice in a chorus is OK as singing.

Asha did not believe in competition - So no prize distribution – But certainly mention of merits and achievements was part of the program – example:

A1 -Could run 100 m. in 12 sec. A2, A3 - - - An could also do in about 15 sec.

B – took part in 21 km marathon held by - - - -. B2, B3 also ran 5 km nonstop.

C and team were good in - - - games. Similar listings were done for academic based activities.

Example: A, B, C etc (by name) have solved and shown to us all the problems in Maths text of standard -----

D, E, F, could recite all the poems in English language textbook.

G,H,JI are all players of chess etc ----

Releasing the Annual Magazine was an item for the annual day. This also is a selection of children's diaries, scrap books, and monthly newsletter of each 'house'. Alumni Association Day coincided with Annual Day - -- Donors, volunteers, and well-wishers also were invited.

For the benefit of these invited persons, a report was made and regular events were reported. To avoid a laborious reading in front of the mike, Asha used another method.

The report (perhaps a page or two) was printed and given to each outsider;

Asha used to announce thus: :All of our activities is given to you. Take it back with you. Do not leave it here to fly in the breeze. If you do not need give it back to us.

One person, knowledgeable about the services of ALL the volunteers ,spoke on their contributions.

One didi listed the next year's activities and where volunteers could contribute.

After the annual day, one day was allotted as 'MUSEUM DAY' – No stage no mike. Just visit the museum, attached to the ashram, the details of which was given in one Asha story.

The same day was also 'LIBRARY DAY' The creative work of the residents including that of Didi's were on show. With one or many volumes of previous years, this can be called a 'Our own library'.

Vacation for schools and colleges were usually in April and May. These were the hottest months in most places in India, not in Switzerland or Alaska. So Asha had no apologies for making summer camps in the ashram itself.

Swapna told her audience, that if many want to know about museum or summer camps, she (Swapna) could describe, since she personally had seen and helped too. Since those were summer days no risk of rain – so ‘outdoor museum’ was also possible.

41. MAY DAY(1)

[brain-storming for analysing the past year and planning for the new year]

Swapna the narrator of these stories was a volunteer for any cause, she is interested in. So, she would be busy when the concerned institution would be working. Thus, daytime of most of the days will be busy time for her. The same is true for any person on regular employment. Thus, even for a casual informal meeting like Swapna's, week ends or holidays are the best. Aavuru Ajji (AA) and Aakaala Ajji story telling have to be necessarily on working days since they involve students or teachers and school staff. Asha stories are told to a select and willing group of friends of Swapna. Hence they , the meetings, were on weekends and holidays.

When Asha wished to involve others in her plans and work, she chose holidays. Asha chose 1, May as an important day to call all her friends for a private meeting. This date was a holiday declared since it is "Labour Day". Additionally, it is a state holiday in Maharashtra.

[Jabeena the journalist said: it must be in Gujarat also. Since the old Bombay was clearly divided into two states with Bombay going to Maharashtra – a kind of vainglory for them.

Swapna said my memory is not very sharp. Let us also avoid personalized or caustic comments on anyone or any community]

:Swapna: As we have read in this series, children who reach the age of 18, leave the ashram. If strictly done by date of birth, it will be on many (various) dates and months of the year.

Even if clubbed to a month (as they make for retirement date of government or organized institutions), it would be

a few persons and almost in every month. Asha wanted to make that day as a memorable one.

To this end, she did what she, if possible, usually avoids, i.e. approaching government department officials for a favor.

Swapna: Can anyone guess what it was?

Elizabeth: Swapnaji, like a school teacher you are testing us, if we are sleeping in the class.

Jabeena: What else Swapnaji? Your title to this episode says it. She wanted to keep the inmates until the end of April.

Some others... so that ONE DAY for all in a year.

Jabeena: Feast-function-shamiana-mike-journalist-dignitaries-officials-garlands- speeches.

Swapna: Perhaps they were all there But a few essential items were on the agenda.

Jabeena: Let me guess and list it out:

A nice-looking lockable box containing personal clothes and stuff.

An official folder of identity card and all certificates.

Another folder of diaries and creative writing of the person

A separate bag for sportswear shoes etc.

Woman 1 remarked "... Like sending off a daughter to her new home"

Woman 2: said: Now a days children look after their own belongings. In our grandparents' time, when a girl was leaving the parental house her mother used to pack things (also advice).

Swapna continued the STORY

After the festivities and elaborate meal and departure of guests was the important “May DAY” meeting.

[Swapna: ‘May Day’ also means an alarm signal- In the case of Asha also it meant the same only w.r.t. an item of advice]

The ‘May Day’ meeting group consisted of the trio of ladies, ‘didi’s of the ashram; the group sent off PLUS ex-ashramites who have shown interest.

[Jabeena: “Swapnaji, you never told me there was an alumni association” Swapna: Yes, there was I thought of mentioning it when the story needed]

During the function, Asha gave a ‘brief’ message to the departees:

“REMEMBER THIS MAY DAY. IF ANY TIME YOU NEED OUR HELP REMEMBER TO SEND “MAYDAY” MESSAGE TO US. (EMERGENCY).

This was the first occasion for the departees to interact with the ex-ashramites.. Even the shy ones had something to ask to the seniors, and Asha and ‘didi’s let them have their privacy.

Asha suggested to the alumni, to say the following (in their own way).

Ashram had failed to give them clear-cut and fool proof ideas about two very important aspects of life. That is because the Ashram (meaning Asha herself) was not sure.

They were: Love and sex in life and therefore marriage, family, children and all related questions of affection. Secondly, God, religion, and spirituality in life and therefore peace of mind.

Each one has to learn on her own and life itself is a great teacher.

The real 'May-Day' meeting was after the hubbub and festivities were over. They discussed what could not be decided one way or the other.

Swapna: The first few May Day meetings were important from Asha's point of view. They acted as 'sounding board' for some policy decisions to be taken... such as whether to celebrate religious or any functions.

Jabeena: Did they decide to celebrate all. That will be too many per year, including important or holy persons' birthdays.

Elizabeth: Add on local habits, languages, caste customs it will be quite a burden.

Swapna: Perhaps we can talk about it another time.

42. MAY DAY (2)

Swapna: This is about the discussion the three sisters had on religion For AA and AKA this question was not important because their wards namely school students had their homes. For Asha's wards the ashram was home. Asha always thought this namely religion as a challenge – starting from her own life in her family.

Swapna added with a shy smile: An account of the discussions will be too long and complicated and above all too boring. So, only the main ideas I am able or care to remember, I give you here.

Each religion thrives on two main contributions: A mass worship or prayer; and a personal prayer or protocol.

According to Asha the latter namely 'personal' religion does not need any religion.

i.e. it can only be based on rational and perhaps moral or ethical way of life. If faith, belief, superstition etc... get into that, then it will cease to be 'personal', instead it will be parrot-like spoon-fed prose or just noise.

About mass worship Asha had many bad words to say, I won't repeat them here, even if I vaguely remember. You can imagine and discuss.

May women's faces showed they agree with this statement.

Jabeena: About mass prayer or common worship, I think it is pure manipulation of the believers.

Woman 1: Too general a statement you are making. Be specific.

Jabeena: We all talk about what we know or see around. I can't know or talk of what they do in a small east-African country. I can't pin-point a place near my house, since it will be unnecessarily specific and unfair.

Elizabeth: Our discussion is getting academic. I bet the others will get bored.

Jabeena: Any discussion is based on opinion and impressions. So it can only be general.

Swapna: Turning to woman1; Let us know if you want a discussion or not, since you make a negative comment before the point is made. Many listeners agreed and said we are not in parliament or going to the media.

Elizabeth: A discussion on whether to have a discussion, is funny.

Swapna: Our remarks may be relevant to the remark maker herself only or to the others. So shall we skip all of them? OK let me tell in Asha's own words

Asha: I considered one person as the greatest philosopher of the time. I asked him if he could recommend a 'non-religion' or 'neutral religion.'

Guruji: What is your religion?

I (Asha): By birth I am a Hindu. So I have to write everywhere the same, even if I am agnostic.

Guruji: Society wants to put an individual into a box which can be labeled with terms it can understand. 'Nationality' is also one of them.

Asha: I abhor the day when they will make 'caste', 'mother tongue' 'religion' also mandatory. Add to it 'veg' or 'non-veg'. Thank God (if he exists). He gave us 'gender'. Otherwise, that also will be under social or government control.

Guruji: You have hit the bulls-eye. Answer to your question is : Religion is irrelevant to a person's individual life and conduct. Society wants to label; so it is necessary for outside world.

Asha continued: After this clarification, I decided that for our children, religion is irrelevant. Good habits, moral values, generally considered as desirable 'human' qualities or values are necessary, which I will try to inculcate in the children. When they face the society, they will learn, hopefully it will not be too late.

Elizabeth: I hope Asha at least told them about cruelty, unethical practices, sinful behavior or evil.

Jabeena: I hope she did. Take our family. We eat animal flesh, But we will never wantonly hurt animals.

Swapna: This is why Asha went for universally (or commonly) acceptable behavior. In other words, LOWEST COMMON PRINCIPLE.

Elizabeth: It is like our grand functions, say birthday celebrations or marriage reception. When we invite everyone, we make it all vegetarian.

Jabeena: It is unique for our country. Elsewhere you have to ask or specify as they ask in air-travel.

Woman1: I wonder, Asha and her children would never have visited the great temples of this country.

Woman2: Or dargas, famous churches, great monasteries. Woman3: Or mantras, prayers, mass synchronous hymns etc.

Swapna: I have to intervene here. They did not practice. But it does not mean they were not aware or ignorant of these, I will tell you how Asha achieved this, another time. It is called 'exposure visits'.

The final outcome of May Day discussion was the following: Asha gave, everyone who is leaving the Ashram a short note:

I am sorry to confess that we let you go into the wide world without telling you.

How to pray in a house or place of worship.

How to celebrate a festival or event – dress, ritual, cuisine....

Good and bad habits related to faith and religion.

People may try to sell hatred in the name of religion.

They may propagate superstition in the name of science.

They may deceive you in the name of fate or destiny.

I can only say, beware. Make your own rational analysis.

Jabeena said: We should also have a MayDay or 'confession day' to clarify our doubts and to identify our faults.

43. You Sit..... We Come.... We Serve

[Donors are made to come and serve- not make children line up]

In the ashram some 'donor days' were allotted, noted in the local calendar and ALL the staff were requested to be present. This may be for mutual convenience or for practical reasons (i.e. feasibility).'

In other institutions or in earlier days two categories of donors were easily identifiable. "Birthday Babies" -usually for children (including babies and toddlers whose parents want to do something to society and do not KNOW how), they choose to come to 'orphanages'. Some donate money, some food but all would like to be with their child among the 'orphans'. Naturally they would like to be on **DoB** (date of birth) of the child. Asha asked them to adjust the date to the nearest 'DONATION DAY'.

The second category is 'Remembrance Days'. Just like birth days (DOB), this category observing **DoD** (date of death) went beyond religion (or even rich/poor social status). Particularly for Hindus, sometimes called 'the day (*divasa*) or '*shraddha*' (duty or responsibility), DoD of elders was as per local Hindu calendar (*tithi*).

Asha herself was surprised when she found that date of death donation was from widows, sisters or other female relatives of the deceased. It was much later she realized (was told) that widows or female relatives were not the right persons (allowed?) to do cremation rites or other annual rituals. Yet many women (out of their affection or respect for the departed) would like to observe DoD.

Asha instinctively did not like eatables or food given/taken in memory of the dead. So when the donors opted for cash donation exactly on the date of death, she was not only relieved but quite glad too.

Swapna said, 'All these aspects most of us know, right ?'

Elizabeth said, ‘Yes I know many friends of mine who do it at the present time.’

Another teacher said, ‘Among Jains it need not be date of birth or date of death or any holy day. They like to do ‘dhana’ (specially annadhana) [giving food distribution]

Headmistress said: ‘Yes money and material donation any time is fine. Anything like even sweets distribution which needs children to be present will dislocate the system. Even in our school. We all understood.

Swapna: ‘Going back to the story, Asha had another chip on her shoulder. True, her children were orphans and destitute, but they need not be TREATED like one.

But they have or must be brought up to have self-respect. So the distribution system in the ashram – be it food, snacks, toys, anything to wear - was strictly followed with instruction to staff. It is based on ‘we come, we serve’. No lining up for alms. Children in their natural groups (whatever divisions in which they live) will sit (of course quietly). Donors will come to them and give. If the donor(s) are not in enough number or elderly or not quite able, the staff will take over and serve.

Swapna said: This episode then should be titled: “Receivers sit...Givers come and serve”. Of course Asha never forgot to thank the giver.

Swapna confessed that they had a two-line thanks slogan which she forgot.

Swapna told the teachers: More popular “Annadaata Sukhibhava” is heard everywhere. It is natural I forgot the Asha song.

Elizabeth : ‘Yes, it is like every one saying English “happy birthday”. The old equivalents are forgotten (In Sanskrit and local languages).

44 . Special Sunday or Sunday Special

[Monthly birthday for the ashramites- celebration, anticipation]

Asha meetings, as our readers know, is a group of Swapna's friends and fans and anyone of friends of those friends. Of course all were women. There was always some snacks and tea at the end of or along with the discussion.

One woman said one day, "Swapnaji! You are not young anymore and should not tire yourself making all these things. One of us will come early and help you."

So it went on next time. On that day another said, "Next week we have a function in the morning. Can we have the meeting in our house?"

It turned out to be great with various snacks being served. One positive point was children were there, with whom the elders joined before the meeting to taste the snacks.

Swapna's logic was when snacks are there children should not be made to wait, while the elders delay; Swapna had seen religious functions drag on delaying everything certainly lunch; Swapna said "our meeting should not be one like that". So all had snacks and children asked to go and play elsewhere.

It had become a practice to hold meetings at the house of different hosts.

It was host (1)'s turn. Swapna and group arrived sharp at the appointed time,... only to see host (1) with disheveled hair and the house in a similar condition. When she was offering profuse apologies, the others tidied up her house.

When the meeting started, Swapnaji said today's Asha story is pertinent here, to host (1).

Swapna: See, we all women do not have a habit of maintaining diaries. Some working in the administration side of your office may keep for yourself or for your boss. But personally I don't see any diary.

Host (1): "Yes, we agree. What will I write? Made kichadi or pulao today. As usual so and so complained about his/her health. If healthy about my cooking. There is nothing in my life madam worth writing about or worth planning for. Functions, etc are seen in the calendars. This meeting also I'll note down in the calendar.

From the body language of all the listeners, it was obvious that they agreed.

Before I tell about Asha's diaries (remember all my ideals Kalpana, Mangala, Asha) kept diaries. As you say also calendars. The latter is for all to see; public. Diary is personal, close.

Let me first say about myself. There is a calendar on the wall in my house. In my bag there is a diary. Calendar shows meeting day and time. My diary shows -

(a) factual - what was done in AA, AKA and these meetings - a brief note so that I need not repeat.

(b) personal – like what thoughts I had, for example from one of our AKA meeting I noted down: I should learn some common proverbs in your language.

Some women said they also have. A few women said they had a notebook to write.

Swapna said; "Fine. Is Elizabeth here ?" When Elisabeth responded Swapna asked. "What do you think ?"

*Elizabeth said, "one need not become famous or publish your dairy like **"Anne Franks"** or **"Pepys."** but keep one. We women keep all data in our heads and manage. Because of this our brain is full of mundane data."*

Host (1) added, "Yes, order for gas, last date for paying, EMI, what to prepare for tonight or breakfast tomorrow....."

Elizabeth continued, "That is what I wanted to say: Thank you Host (1). Occasionally some flashes come, like an old poem suddenly remembered; or a few lines like Swapnaji said about rain"

One asked "What are those famous diaries you mentioned?"

Another asked, "What is the rain poem?"

Swapna said, "Elizabeth, another time about them."

Elizabeth continued "You just keep a notebook just for yourself. No one need see it, unless you wish it."

Swapna: I thought of special Sundays. We women with a large number of mouths to feed think of making Sunday, special. Late breakfast, good menu."

Host (1) said: "Why family people working women also. With family or alone, for working women Sunday is special."

Swapna: "Yes, we all agree. Asha in her ashram had every Sunday some special food and also some program. But one Sunday in a month is called 'Special Sunday'.

Host (1): Do they all go out and eat?"

Swapna: That is one luxury they never had. Her children had no chance to stay or dine in a five star hotel or restaurant. But one Sunday was donors' day and also monthly birthday program. Donors wanting to serve personally snacks to children were called to come on that day. Some were encouraged to bring cakes for all children.

Elizabeth: "Asha did cake cutting for birthdays? I thought she was a staunch nationalist!"

Swapna: "Who said cake was not Indian. Asha never said, why not anyone wear pants and shirts, even women. Asha never thought they were not Indian."

Host (1): "Yes, this was almost a generation ago, even today some persons have odd notions."

Swapna: Not only cake. Asha had "Happy birthday to you" She searched for any customary practice, by asking her mentors. She got only blessings, or wishing. – not suitable for a group of children of all ages and pure merry making. So it was Happy birthday to you"

Host (1): Like mass marriages, mass birthdays?

Swapna: Yes, it makes it easier, time and moneywise. Anyone's schedule is not affected.

Swapna: I am willing to call it as 'economics of time, resources, energy, anxiety.' Even for the child the last 'anxiety' is about getting the thing done right. We all teachers know; any happy function will be spoiled if one guest speaker is miffed. Right?

Elizabeth: They say that the anxiety factor is good for the psychology of children. It is 'anticipating' 'expecting' something good.

One person: It increases 'self-importance' which in turn increases 'confidence' We have been taught in our teachers' training classes.

Another person: Yes, I remember. Always announce in advance any good thing coming. Children participating in a program. Some enjoyable function like school exhibition.

Elizabeth: We announce exam days in advance so that they can prepare well.

Swapna: There are two views about it. The difference between 'anxiety' with a negative feeling and 'anticipation' with a positive expectation.

Host (1) From a story, this is going into theory.

Swapna: Sorry. Let me get back to the story. Getting a birthday special is one item. Recording the date of birth and year and certification is another serious matter, where destitute are cared for. Some children never remember the place they came from – All these items are done and kept in a file.

Elizabeth: Our Headmistress says by the time the child nears a 'board' exam [school leaving class] correct name with spelling, date of birth, father's name are important, since it will be a base document for the person.

Swapna: Asha knew that and that is a reason to display a file on the child for everyone to see and to show that the concerned officials are doing the needful.

Host(1): I'll keep a diary and write in there about the importance of date of birth, etc.

45 . It Is Sunday - not for everybody

[Visit to important places in and near the town – planning briefing]

Swapna in her ASHA meeting took a slate on which the above title was written. As soon as they arrived at that day's host's house (call her Host (2)) she handed over to host 2 for display. [Readers may remember that the ASHA meetings were held in the house of each member by rotation].

Swapna's purpose was to kindle the audience's curiosity and it did.

Swapna: This is our topic. In Asha's ashram we saw one Sunday (let us call it the first Sunday) in a month was a special day. [Donor's day and month's birthdates]. The other Sundays were also special for some groups of children.

Asha's ashram as we know was a huge family, with Didi's (akkaa's) (elder single woman) arranging each group of children, the huge home was split into a number of houses (I think around 10 or in each house around 10 children).

[I vaguely remember they were called by some name: 'ghar', 'kutir', 'nivas' Let us call them 'houses' and its head as 'Didi'. [No 'mother' or any pompous titles].

Once Asha called a meeting of all the 'didi's and discussed about the inputs expected of them. Mundane things like cooking, menu, upkeep as it is OK were discussed and didi's doubts cleared. Then Asha sprang an unexpected question: "Have all of you seen Fort (in the city)"

Swapna said, it is like asking you "Have you seen the Mysore Palace?" Swapna also added "Remember, these women were also 'single' women as destitute as the children under their care.

Swapna continued the story: when Asha asked if the in-charge Didi's have visited an important tourist spot, only a few nodded. Majority has not seen at all perhaps seen in pictures and newspapers only. One of the Didi's said "I was quite small at that time."

Do you want to visit now? Most nodded. One said "what is there left for us to do in life. Those days are gone with nothing, only surviving," The others did not 'say' that but sure 'felt' the same way.

"Don't you think someone should have taken you for a visit?

Nodding was 'yes'

Asha's next question was not expected by the women'.

"Don't you think your (house) children should be taken for a visit?"

Surprised, Didi 1 (the anguished) (D for Didi) asked:

"How can we?"

Asha: "Don't you think your children should?"

Everyone said, "yes, but how? We are too many."

Didi said "rupees....for ticket; rupees for bus." No no it will be more than one day's expenditure here."

Another said: It will be almost equal to our salary.

Then Asha said: "I will worry about those aspects. You will have to do some extra work, will you do?"

Someone asked: "What kind of extra work?"

Asha: This is the question I wanted. Getting up earlier than usual, packing food and water for all and such things, I know, you will do. But you have to take care of so many problems in traffic, crowds,

Didi 1 asked: “We will manage, won’t we, sisters?” Then added, “you meaning Asha will be with us, won’t you?”

Asha: ‘No perhaps I will be there on the first occasion, you have to learn to manage later. That is the purpose of the meeting.’”

Swapna said, today’s title is Sunday. Each Sunday was special for one ‘house’ They will visit the famous place along with their didi’. Food outside was costly and donors may not like the idea. Even for Asha own food can be carried, and the money can be used otherwise.

Details like dress, names tags is old story for all of you who have conducted many tours. One aspect is worth discussing here:

Saturday evening, previous to the special Sunday was a busy day for the Didi of the house.

She collects pictures, information sheets of the place; gets ready to tell about what they would see the next day. Get a few children and didi’s who have visited the place earlier.

Asha comes and gives a mental tour of the visit. Earlier visitors add their experience, (One said) Take a big towel or bedsheet or plastic sheet, you all may like to sit on the lawn and eat.

Another said: wear a cap. It is too hot this time of the year”

Swapna asked: “Will anybody summarize?”

*Elizabeth: “**Planning; briefing; anticipation**”.*

46. ALUMNI – DO COME BACK

[Alumni association members do help in many ways – mostly as mentors]

Swapna and friends reached the house of the host for the day. Let us call her Host (1) or Heera. Perhaps they all arrived early or Heera kept it on – for the TV was ‘on’

Heera welcomed them and said, “I kept the TV on to show you” It was a crime and detection program.

Then she showed the headline of a newspaper.

Swapna asked, Heera, we all like detective stories, fine. Is that the topic you want today?

Elizabeth: In the literary world, crime fiction was always popular and best seller.

In London, the fictional address of the famous detective, Sherlock Holmes is a place to visit. Agatha Christie’s novels were great and one was a hit Hollywood movie also. Swapnaji, was Asha a fan of these?

Heera: No, no... That is not the topic. See in fiction (i.e. TV, serial) and in reality (newspaper) the police look for ‘cases’ – old cases – that means jail or anything does not ‘cure’ a person –

So should they not be permanently monitored?

Swapna: My friend Asha was very much concerned in this respect when she was a junior warden in a ‘remand home’

Elizabeth: (Looking at a newcomer), Do you want to know what a ‘remand home’ is? It is a ‘correctional institution.’

Swapna said she would tell the story. Asha in her work at the remand home had to be quite brave. Many were young children, not delinquents. Some were lost in big crowds. Some ran away from home. Some were made orphans by natural disasters.

A few were brought by Police as they were caught in minor crimes. Government correctional facilities appointed 'psychologists' or 'counsellors' during the period of stay of the inmates. At that time it was 18 years of age for boys.

What Asha learnt by trying to find out their life after they were 'released' from the correctional facility would have given an imaginative writer, many plots for crime and detection stories. Then only she decided that 'after-care facilities' were as important as correctional facilities themselves..

Heera, the host intervened, It is in the crime series. There is a record of all crimes and the history of criminals which CID regularly used.

Elizabeth: Thanks to computers and modern communication facilities.

Swapna: You are right. Many years ago, mutual exchange of information was very poor.

Swapna continued, Asha was frustrated by the apathy of the officers concerned. So she thought 'rehabilitation' is not only for refugees' who were forced out of their homes in Sindh, Lahore and other places, but also for inmates of such institutions.

This was very much in the mind of Asha when she became the director of her 'ashram'.

One fortunate aspect was that there was no 'cut-off' date for the residents of her ashram. Not only Asha but all the Didi's, helped in rehabilitating: First, finding the means of support, other than getting married. Helping to create a circle of friends and well-wishers since many did not have any relatives.

"Include the ex-ashramites in the invited persons' list", said Asha to her staff managing any public functions -

Automatically the current address, and hence the status of the person, is known.

Thus, the importance of 'Alumni Association'. Many ex-ashramites now financially better were ready to come and donate. Others would share their life experiences. Some others who were academically successful were ready to teach and or motivate youngsters. Thus, association or not, the ashram got inputs from ex-ashramites. Asha's concept of Alumni Association was to make INTERACTION among the ex-ashramites [and the current ones also separately] happen.

This kind of interaction helped in many ways:

Mutual help. Identification of common problems and therefore think about solutions with or without the help of Asha and Didi's

Consolidation of small contributions by individuals into a substantive help.

Asha's idea of "after care" or "post-institution rehabilitation" could be done with the help of Alumni Association- It will automatically be a check or information on any ill-treatment, or violence on the persons. This was necessary and very useful in case of those who get married.

Asha thought it would help also to 'arrange' or 'facilitate' marriages. Once the marriage is agreed upon, 'wedding' which in India is an expensive affair, can be handled, by the Association.

This is where Asha got a shock.

.Swapna: Can anyone guess why?

HEERA: I can. One's past may give rise to unjustified bias or prejudice.

Woman (1) : I can understand, A movie star, or politician may not like to disclose his/her origin. A filthy rich person

does not like his sources known. Some criminals changed their names and place of living.

Swapna: You have hit the head of the nail. Many thought it was a 'shame' to be brought up by an ashram.

Elizabeth: madam, it is 'hitting the nail on its head'.

Woman (1) No English lessons here, please.

*Woman (2): Even now '**khan-dhan**' (one's family status) is considered important. If you don't belong to one, you are considered low in 'decent' society.*

Women (3): This affects even selection of a partner. It is impossible in "arranged" marriage, 'Boys' are not mature enough (at any age!) to ignore the past of the girl. The past here is having been in a charity institution,

Swapna went back to the story. Asha discussed these problems with so called "successful" persons of the Alumni Association.

One person explained it clearly to Asha: "Madam, as it is, women are at a disadvantage in finding jobs; Some jobs were ruled out for women like in the armed forces or security or the police. Many private companies boldly declared, only males, because the position involved travelling or working in three shifts.

If the woman is not from a "respectable" family (sometimes indicated by the permanent "address" of the applicant) she has no chance of recruitment.

[*Swapna: "You mean even today. Imagine in Asha's time!"*]

So, she sought the help of former residents who had 'made it' to create small pools of pure water around them. i.e remove the biases from small groups known to them. It worked. Some ex-ashramites started companies where preference was given to ex-ashramites. In her own lifetime Asha could see some of them rise up to respectable positions in the society.

Elizabeth: I think we, in our school, should start an Alumni Association.

47 . SPECIAL SUNDAYS

No siesta for anyone

[Every Sunday all the three friends [ajjis] discuss]

Swapna announced that that day's meeting will be brief, so that they can test, taste, share etc. of the common culinary skills.

Any dish needing many hours of time for preparation was ruled out.

Swapna said that Asha's ideas were only partly her (Asha's) own – It was the outcome of discussions – some may call it BRAINSTORMING.

As we know the first Sunday of the month was the birth day celebration of ALL the persons whose birthday falls in that month. As we know the actual donors for the day would be there. In addition, ALL The past donors and well-wishers were invited. Some would turn up.

From the time Alumni Association was formed, they were also invited on the same day. Of-course all the invitees were free to bring along, others.

In those days, even TV was not there. Radio was the only mass media. With youngsters Radio Ceylon and Vividh Bharathi were very popular. Though not every-day, Sundays, ashramites and didis were allowed to tune to either of them .

On the special Sunday, Asha arranged to show films on 16 mm projector. For doing such events on a regular basis, Asha had identified a few 'program sponsors'.

That event was for children. What I want to report, Swapna said, is the parallel event for the elders. That was the report of the Alumni Association. That report was mainly those about ex-ashramites .

These events generated

Problem solving ideas from the donors.

Inducing sympathizers about the current and ex-ashramites .

Job opportunities.

Some ‘match-making’.

Asha’s idea was ‘brain-storm’ with good ideas or just sit and talk, would generate good will and so ‘something would turn up’.

Elizabeth: So, following Asha, are we going to make something or just talk about how to make ‘paavbhaji’?

Woman 2: Turn on the You Tube, you get what you want. For that should we disturb Swapnaji?

Swapna: I am glad to be disturbed. I refer to U tube, recipe books when I want to learn. Today is the day of showing off. Somebody show me how to make your favourite dish. Others find a student (I call her ‘bakra’- the victim) to see your skill, It is immaterial whether she knows and prepares better than you or not. I call it “See how “Dalal or Kapoor” [two well-known chefs and writers].will comment.

As Asha said: “Every female wants to be proud”

I agree with her. Nobody will give you that chance.

Asha invented such opportunity. We have to create for ourselves.

48 .No, Not Me, Not My Name, Face

[Asha helped in every activity except presiding over fictions]

Jameela asked Swapna "If your gurus Kalpana, Mangala, and Asha were so great as you want us to imagine, how come we have not heard of them?"

Elizabeth: One reason for the whole of India and its culture being forgotten is lack of historical recording.

Jameela: I agree. Our tradition forgotten, ignored, downplayed or simply credit transferred.

Elizabeth: If Bhaskar Sir were here, he would have told us how 'Arabic' or 'Indo-Arabic' for number system is a misnomer.

Swapna: You are all too much. Who said they were not known? I know such individuals existed, exist among us.

Elizabeth: There are many words in any language for this attitude, such as 'humility'

I call it 'self-effacing'.

Swapna: That is what I want to tell you today. Asha was 'self-effacing. Was she self-less? Perhaps, but certainly 'self-effacing.

Ashrama Ajji never used to show her face in any of her institutions, public functions, [neither at residents' performances here or anywhere].

Of course, public functions were very few in her ashram; the so-called 'open events'. Asha considered as informal local affairs not needing any publicity. But she was always present and active at events prior to or leading to a performance or display. Asha considered some things as crucial; such as,

briefing before an examination
planning for an event.
Final rehearsals of a function

Review of earlier events before another.

She never missed these because her motto was:

“if i am there, i have to contribute, positively”.

She thought anyone present should be having the same aim; for Asha, even any criticism or pointing out mistakes was a positive contribution.

[Jameela: In Journalism it is called

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM.

Elizabeth: as opposed to malicious mudslinging].

Swapna continued:

After a significant meeting, there was always an informal meeting of the ‘actors’ i.e. persons who contributed to the event. She used to include all the didi’s of the ashram, and Kalpana, and Mangala if they could attend. Summary as points were recorded in the respective Didi’s diary.

Jameela: Were these always negative comments as all ‘analysis’ media of today do? Or were good things also noted?

Elizabeth: Your question implies that you would like one way, and not another.

Woman 1: Jameela and Elizabeth are the only attentive persons here. Is this correct, Swapnaji? We too listen

Jameela: Please say something. Let Swapnaji also hear and say if you are right.

Woman 1: Why cry over split milk?

Woman 2: Why strike a dead snake?

Swapna: See my friends. A proverb says much more than the words in it. See these two have explained how

things that cannot be corrected now have to be only ignored.

Jameela: Or pardoned or forgotten.

Elizabeth: The proverbs remind me of another proverb in Kannada:

“Even if Vedas prove wrong

A proverb cannot be wrong.”

Swapna: “I should have said, lessons learnt were jotted down.

Kalpna and Mangala once asked Asha: “You are always there before and after and never during. Why?

[Woman 1: Too terse, Please explain the question, Swapnaji.]

Swapna: Asha was present during planning and rehearsal of an event. Example: drama. We know they had at least 3 plays in 3 languages from text books; and double the number made by residents themselves, to depict core subjects.

Planning and rehearsal is before.

Review meeting was after. During means the actual event].

Swapna continued.

Asha as usual made an analytical answer. Asha said: “My being there will result in one of these three:

1). I may just keep quiet and watch. [Elizabeth: As they say ‘like a sphinx’].

2). I may clap and show my appreciation (Jameela: Like a parent jumping on her seat)

3). I may show disapproval by my body language.

[Woman 1: Of course, she would not be found sleeping, or discussing with another or talking on telephone].

Swapna: Asha continued her explanation to Kalpana and Mangala

Any of my possible actions may not be fair or be useful. Sometimes the actors may become self-conscious by my presence.

These are reasons any student of psychology can list and get 3 to 5 marks for the answer, so said Swapna. I know (from very reliable sources) that Asha had much bigger and more serious reasons for 'self-effacing? Not that she had in her past committed some crime and run away from law.

Swapna said: Let me put it in Asha's own words.

"Listen Mangala, if I am found everywhere, imagine what will happen:

1). Didi or any teacher or any coordinator will do something and look at me for approval; or fully depend on me to take even a small decision. In my absence, they would be more responsible as well as creative.

2). Secondly, if the program gets praise just my being there would turn away the spotlight towards me, which is unfair.

3). When others are there (and I always work with others even if I can do it alone) why should I burden myself with anxiety? Will it be to gobble up full credit to myself.

Does this explain".

Swapna said I think Mangala would have argued this way.

“Your humility is fine. How about your contribution to the program? Also how about helping to improve the personality of your assistants”?

Swapna says, as I imagine, Asha’s reply will be:

I would be there even up to the last minute. If needed in the background like a ‘cuer’ in a play, behind the curtain”.

**“So I say: “No, not me, not my face, not my name”
But let the work be done.**

Let me be out of it whether it is a success or failure.

*Jameela: My title will not be “no face etc” it will be “**self-less self-effacing service.**”*

Woman1: Elizabeth! Can we now have the coffee which you make very well.

Elizabeth: Let us make it impersonal. Good coffee will be served.

You know grammar has a name for this! It is called ‘passive voice? (PV)

Passive voice conceals the person (ie doer)

Jameela: There is a joke

Boss: Did you finish the work?

Manager: Yes sir, it was done

Boss: You have done well.

Manager: Thank you sir.

Boss: But where is the summary report?

Manager: Call Gopal; Gopal ! Where is the report?”.

49 .WON'T BE JUDGEMENTAL

[No competitions, no judgments, no prizes]

Jameela was in the lead in the next Asha meeting, firstly, she was hosting it at her house; and secondly, she had not forgotten the topic of the last time. She asked Swapna "you said Asha would never be in any functions. "not my name, not my face." How about "send-off " day?

Swapna: See, I expected this question at the end of the last meeting. Let me explain as told to me by others.

Asha never held any competitions in her ashram; or sent anyone for competitions. Not even sports. Her aim was a true sportsman/or woman always improves upon his or her own past performance. Special training or coaching for an event is short lived glory according to her.

In classical music or dance or any other artistic talent, as per Asha, competing against one another is a misconception.

Jameela: So the ashramites would never get to IAS or any other jobs which required rank and (against thousands of others).

Elizabeth: Bright children would have cursed her.

I think questions like yours would have been asked, discussed. That is why Asha left such practical decisions to didi's of the ashram, and Kalpana and Mangala. Asha would never agree to be a judge in any kind of competitions

50. FOOD FADS

[Majority should consider the sensitivity of the others]

Elizabeth was invited to that day's ASHA meeting. Swapna's friends and fans were there as usual. Swapna said to others "We had a food problem with our new member recently, do you remember? Our friend Elizabeth has her own experience. Let us hear her."

Elizabeth: We had a birthday celebration in my close relative's house. She had heard about my friends and along with me they were also invited. After cutting cake all were given pieces. When her turn came, Vaidehi politely allowed it to pass. I knew Vaidehi was a pure vegetarian (no fish, no eggs). I told my host, I brought one for her and gave a small pack with a letter 'V' on it. My host offered it to Vaidehi. "Very thoughtful of you Elizabeth" two voices at the same time. One from my relative, another from Vaidehi. My relative said, "V for vegetarian or for Vaidehi, right?"

Vaidehi then said, perhaps I should carry my own box for such occasions.

Swapna said we too had a similar experience. Listeners were eager to know.

Swapna : Let us call her Helen.

One member took over the narration.. One day we had a newcomer to our group. I brought her here because she was my friend and I am an admirer of her. Obviously by physical appearance she was a 'westerner' though she was dressed like any of us. Same was her child.

Swapna said "Usually we do not have children in our Asha meeting. Reason is very simple. Discussions go in depth not comprehensible or interesting to children. With children around participants will be hesitant to discuss some subjects.

The narrator continued: On that day Swapnaji took a topic with no controversy. I think it was.....

Swapna filled in. "On birthday celebrations of children in the ashram.'

The new comer also joined. "In every religion the birthday of the founder or saints is celebrated !" she said. Swapna said, this is where ASHA Ajji was different. Children's birthday was celebrated to say 'we love them' and also to increase their confidence or 'self-importance'. Asha used to say, with elders it should be the opposite.

As usual, after the meeting we all had coffee or tea and some snacks.

My guest politely refused and said we (meaning herself and her child) belong to a class of pure vegetarians. "Here in our Asha meetings it was always no meat, no fish, not eggs either", one said.

My guest said "Your sweets, your coffee contain milk which we don't take. Pure vegetarian means, no products of animal origin."

"Then you don't even take badam milk or any drink."

"No, we take fruit juices; saps from trees; sometimes if we like tea or coffee, we use coconut milk."

Swapna: Next host please remember. To the newcomer, you have to find a place to engage the child. We could help by leaving in the house of our members.

She thought there is no PURE vegetarian in this town where her child can be left. Also, she thought it was a waste of time for herself where God and religion do not matter. She never turned up to the next meeting.

Elizabeth said, I think this croup calls itself VEGANS. But one person's one-time act should not be attributed to all time and all the group. Wisdom of Liz, Jameelaji?

51. FROM NOW ON , IT IS YOURS!

[Send-off day for the asramites- list of things to look for]

Swapna and her friends meet, which we call ASHA meeting, was in Swapna's house on that day. She requested Elizabeth to distribute one folder each to all the persons present. This is for your child who will be an adult, or already 18 and above. Many said I live by myself. Some said they are elsewhere.

Swapna asked, how about yourself? Can you show me your date of birth certificate, school leaving or degree.

Elizabeth added, aadhar, ration card, insurance, driving licence etc..

Many said, "I have kept them safe" A few said: "It is in the house. I have to look for them".

Swapna: Tomorrow, all of you put all your valuable papers in one file, one place. It helps yourself in a hurry and anyone who takes care of you.

Elizabeth: Please, put all your medical records in another folder. It helps when someone takes you to a doctor.

Jameela said: What a bad mouth you have!

Elizabeth: Sorry, even I have to be ready for any eventuality.

Jameela: See your pride in being the youngest here!

Asha was taking care of many children. At age 18 they are transferred to an 'after-care centre' as per rules. But Asha got special permission to extend their stay by 6 months to 1 year, presumably to care for completion of

their studies. But really the purpose was to give each a file like this one.

She included a character certificate as the head of the Ashram, just like the one from the school.

Swapna reminded her listeners about the time of her story. It was the time only a few upper middle-class possessed a motorbike or scooter. [3 makes of cars, 2 makes each of bike and scooter was the nation's asset].

In such a situation Asha saw to it that every girl who leaves her ashram knows 2-wheeler driving and has a driving licence legally issued. That was the new purpose of her extension after 18 years.

The second unusual job was to get a SB a/c in the name of the girl after she is 18. Asha preferred a Post Office SB a/c since it can be transferred to even a small town or village.

Swapna continued her story.

As you know Asha's ashram had a 'send-off' day. On that occasion a decent-looking suitcase of all the belongings, a handbag with a small purse, and a folder containing important document (as told above,) were given to each person leaving. Of course, with blessings and contact details of Asha, Didi, and other dignitaries who had volunteered to be mentors.

Asha's standard saying:

FROM NOW ON YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN!.

But we are there whenever you need.

These are yours. It is your responsibility to maintain.

Jameela: What a thoughtful person! We don't keep our own papers neatly.

Swapna: The last one was a 'Reply Post Card' with Ashram's address written. Like the one we used to send with each application form.

Elizabeth: What for?

One woman: I can guess. Any emergency information like need help.

Jameela: I would call it SOS card.

Swapna: Voting minimum age was 21 then. Now it is 18. So we could add a voter's card, right?

52. Reverse Logic ? – No, Reverence First

[Newly-weds must show reverence to elders and seek their blessings]

Swapna the narrator of these stories had a special flare for telling about Asha, Ashrama aiji. Sitting in this South Indian town and talking about ASHA gave her some amount of satisfaction. Her friends here had to imagine a place far away, (Maharashtra is way North.) and time ((long ago) of post-independence. Even in this time and age for those who had never travelled by train anywhere far away and anyone above 50 is old.

Swapna did not mind the lack of exposure to other places and other times on the part of her listeners since she was willing to explain whenever necessary. But some things were common irrespective of space and time. One of them is the ostentatious marriage and reception.

Swapna to her listeners, ‘See there is a Hindi hit song: “It was there 100 years ago, It is there now....It will be there in the future too.” She even hummed the tune simple and compact in Hindi (sau saal pehle.... tha, aaj bhi hai, kal bhi rahega).

Customary marriage reception irritated her. Supposed to be wished well by friends and blessed by elders had become an embarrassment. Asha had observed: the married couple arriving late for reception; Elderly people waiting for hours in rickety chairs, sudden formation of a long queue, the laborious task of each well wisher climbing the stage.

Whenever a marriage is arranged in the ashram, Asha saw to it that :

The couple with folded hands invite the elderly guests to their chairs.

Helpers and caterers offer water and drinks.

When all have entered, it was announced.

Then the couple bow down to all.

Then they go round to each person, get blessing and gifts if any.

Thus one by one the couple reaches all.

Kalpna asked: 'This looks like the reversal of the standard practice of everyone standing in a line'

Ajji replied, "I was pained to see respected elders standing in a line (like beggars, shall we say)' I just reversed the roles because respect and reverence to elders had to be there certainly in the new life the new couple is starting.

Swapna stopped here; Asha never attended any marriage functions, even those of her friends and relatives, for this reason. Of course she had other idiosyncrasies!

Elizabeth said, "It makes sense. I know a person who sends greetings and gifts through other persons or by post."

Since ASHA meetings were in Swapna's house or that of her friend, the young host couple said " We will go get coffee for each one of you."

53. A BRIGHT IDEA

[Friends from different strata of society opt for a common wedding ceremony]

In the next meeting, Swapna began another episode.

Asha arranged for marriage of orphan girls under her care. This she did with the help of didi's and her friends, other ajji's. This was usually in a temple nearby with basic expenses met by some sponsor. All the ASHRAMITES were invited for the special 'feast' [where else will they go?]

The teacher, the ex-journalist and many others almost simultaneously raised their hands. Swapnaji, you have not said anything about the ashram, how it was run etc... You have rushed to the last chapter.

Swapna: I am sorry. I got carried away by my old memories. Look at the photographs and reports in today's newspaper.

It was a report on 'mass marriage' arranged by a mutt for their poorer members. Almost a hundred pairs could be seen.

See even today such events are held. I remembered how Asha avoided going to such 'mass' events. One reason is how to involve the children (i.e. current residents of the ashram).

Elizabeth: We came to know she "arranges" marriages also to the residents. Woman 1: Did she do it even before they were 18, because as you said almost all of them left at 18?

Woman 2: Was she against 'love' and marriage. So that she could 'arrange'?

Jameela: Both the points appear to be illegal. Certainly, age factor. About the other did she who was no relation to the now adult, have any right to 'give' away in marriage?

Swapna: See I never asked her or myself all these questions. I know at 18 they were sent with blessings and documents to another 'shelter' or 'center'. Asha suggested 21 or above for any commitments. Then what I just said was when someone needed help in getting a partner.

Secondly, Asha was for a 'registered' marriage, quietly and with some witnesses who would be available when necessary. That amounts to a few persons like the didi's and 'ajji's. If the bride had already good friends and colleagues they could also be included. Asha was of the opinion that any 'lavish' wedding is a waste of money and effort. Instead, a few true well wishers having a simple

Jameela: Then why talk of temple and sponsor for food for all?

Some women: We had the same doubt.

Swapna: This was in case the groom's side insisted upon their relatives being invited.

Elizabeth: That makes sense, since a small requirement (only register marriage) should not estrange relatives. Even today 'court' marriage is considered 'elopement'.

[when Elizabeth was about to continue, Woman 1 said: We don't need any elaboration. We know estrangement and eloping. Is there a word such as elopement]. Elizabeth let the comment pass.

In this story, while two girls (A and B) went with ASHA to invite their classmates and good friends (from college), they learn that one (P) of their friends was also getting

married soon and that too ('love marriage') to a groom from the North, working in Mumbai.

ASHA got a new idea- Soon contacted parents of P and proposed a new kind of sponsorship. Namely, mass (or multiple) marriages and only one celebration and even the brand-new idea of bands, baraat, horse etc.

MMSC was multimarriage with single celebration. It was different from ashramas, or mutts, or gurus' mass-marriage idea.

A and B and their families cherish their albums of P's (and theirs) marriage even today.

A and B continue to visit the ashram, though they could not afford to donate- But any extra eatables etc they get from friends, they share with ashram.

P and her husband, sponsor events.

54. BACK TO BASICS

[Failure of common wedding celebrations leads to ‘back to basic simplicity’]

The next Asha meeting was in the house of the host (whom we may call H). She was one of the few friends (let us call her Hema) of the storyteller Swapna, who lived with her aged husband. The couple had a (large!) family of two sons and two daughters all married and settled. Unfortunately (or is it luckily!) no one lived in the same city. Hema herself gave all these personal details of her family to this group. This was unusual in the group, (as the readers already know neither gossip nor personal praise was there in the group’s sessions).

H (ie Hema the host) asked if her daughter who is now with her, may join the group. Swapna, as expected, said “sure, by all means.”

Before the sessions started the daughter came slowly and took a comfortable seat at a corner.

Hema said: “She is here for her first child. My question to Swapna is how did Asha manage such a situation?”

One woman wondered how an unmarried young woman could handle such a situation.

Swapna said all of you talk to the expecting mother and give whatever advice you want to give, while Hema and myself bring some snacks.

[Note for non-Indian readers: In India, daughter comes to mother’s house for her first delivery and many social functions are held heralding the arrival of the new].

Asha was a mother and mentor figure for all the residents. However some matters like finding a job or partner etc... were beyond her. She admitted to such. But she left those items to didi’s and other ladies much senior to her and more experienced in worldly matters.

Swapna said how Asha's bright idea spread.

MMSC ie. Multimarriage, single celebration was written about first in ASHA house journal with some photographs. Soon the story was caught on by the media. The girl we called P was from a well-to-do- family with a posh lifestyle. Girls A and B who were from ashram along with their husbands became quite friendly with P's entire family. Soon P's family became a donor for the ashram. Also they were sponsors of many other charity projects. All these data through media spread and reached Asha herself. She was interviewed. When someone asked: will Asha sponsor a social movement (*mohim, andolana* in local language Marathi) of this type, she said, "No, I won't. I may not even recommend any others to start one".

When Swapna stopped here, everyone wondered why. "It was a bright idea, wasn't it?" each one wondered.

Swapna encouraged them to guess.

Jameela the journalist suggested that it is difficult to find a family like that of P to fully be one with destitute girls.

Elizabeth said, unless one is already a friend, it is hard to change people's outlook and lifestyle.

One woman wondered how Asha missed out on these possibilities.

Then they asked Swapna if she could explain why Asha followed her 'bright' idea without much thought.

Swapna then did a very unusual (from her friends' assessment) action.

She said, sorry, friends, I am unable to tell about my idol, Asha's mistakes (as they say in vernacular, through my own mouth) I will tell Jameela who will tell you in her own way.

Swapna and Jabeela went out and the others wondered why a good idea could not be put into practice.

One woman said, must have been problems of gifts. Obviously, the higher class will be showered with costly gifts and cash while the ashram's poor one will have only good wishes.

Then the problem of whether to share the gifts. Even if the poor girl did not want any, the higher class would like to pretend. The unwillingness would have shown somehow, someday.

When Swapna and Jabeela returned the group told them about their guesses.

Jabeela said, it is almost like that.

Let me tell you the reason as told to me by Swapnaji.

It is learnt from reliable sources that a bright idea has grabbed the imagination of the rich and powerful in the society. The originator of the concept was neither a politician, government official, nor a guru, or spiritual leader.

The idea was that of an ordinary social worker, named Asha who cares for destitute girls. It may be recalled that some time ago, she was instrumental in a wedding ceremony of two ex-residents of her ashram at the same time and venue as the wedding of a high society family. Subsequent involvement of the rich family in many philanthropic activities are being praised by people who come to know about it. It is believed that this event will be a forerunner to many such functions.

Jabeela stopped here. Elizabeth got up and clapped. What a journalistic report! Wasn't my friends?

Everyone agreed.

Elizabeth, the English teacher, continued: Like a true report it was impersonal and written in PASSIVE VOICE Also told us in INDIRECT OR REPORTED SPEECH.

Hema, the host requested Swapna please tell Elizabeth in your DIRECT SPEECH not to make this a classroom for English grammar.

Elizabeth: I am sorry. I just wanted to pay compliments to our journalist.

Jabeela: Thank you Elizabeth. There is a follow-up story.

It has come to the notice of this reporter that Mrs and Mr..... of the prestigiousgroup of companies are planning to have their daughter's wedding in a 5-Star hotel. Inspired by Asha, the social worker's idea, they are looking for underprivileged persons to share the function. When it happens, it would be the talk of the town.

Some said: Claps! Applause! (Thaaliyaan -Hindi)

Jabeela continued undaunted. Now I tell you in Swapna's language.

The businessman's event was announced in a big way in newspapers. Photos of engagement ceremonies were published. No need to guess whether Asha was invited or not. But you have to guess whether she went or not.

Elizabeth: No guess. I am certain. She would not have gone, a self-effacing and humble person when you thinking of her Amre family, her own qualifications and experience and ideal thinking.

One woman asked, if Asha was not there why Jabeela is telling us this story.

Elizabeth: Let us ask her. Why, Jabeela?

Jabeela: Let me continue. Asha did not go. but waited for reports to come. It so happened one of her friends was

close to some party and attended. Thus, Asha came to know a few details.

(voice= what were they?)

Jabeela: Patience. Let me think how I can briefly tell without becoming personal.

Video coverage of the couple and line of gift-givers were only for the upper class. The lower class did not even have a reception since they did not want to embarrass them.

[Why embarrassed? Why not, There is a long line of silk sarees and suede suit with gift packets, on the one side. On the other a group of ill-clad bare-handed people just shaking hands. Imagine how it would be.]

Jabeela said. Ok if reception is skipped, how about other events? Why was there separate arrangements for food?. Why was there an enclosure for seating the poor group?

Jabeela said: Because, I say, nothing can erase the leopard's spots.

[Somebody said: You are stealing the English teacher's chance. Elizabeth stuck out her tongue at that somebody]

Having come to know so much, Asha regretted for her idea to be hastily executed. She returned to her old style of simple ceremony.

Swapna: So, this episode is called BACK TO BASICS.

55. SUMMARY REPORT

[Summary of all the earlier episodes]

Swapna the narrator of Ajji stories recalls Asha who was the warden of a girls' shelter around mid-20th century. Each event is called a story or episode. The first items appear biographical since they mention how Asha ended up as a warden. Coming from a well-to-do and well-educated family, she had no compulsive need to take up any job for a living. So, she tries different jobs to find out if any one of them would satisfy her ambition of being useful to the society.

She had already been a school teacher, refugee or slum rehabilitator, beggars home, child adoption centre, old age and palliative home and a few others. Nothing satisfied her. Perhaps her nature was to find fault with any set-up.

It was the time when half the world was 'colonised' by European countries. Naturally they carried with them the religious, sociological and educational view-point, (some call them "dogma's) and implemented them either by persuasion, coercion or by force.

In India too the English and the dominant European religious institutions flourished. Of course, the ancient establishment native to India were there. They too tended to be highly religion oriented.

So, she started her own small house called ASHA. Its original name was an acronym for Agnostic Shelter and Home for All. Her well-wishers did not want her to get into trouble due to the first word. So, they changed it Ashraya for all. The general public who were used to 'ashrama' rather than 'ashraya' continues to call it Ashrama and that stuck.

Swapna the narrator admits that her stories were neither chronological with respect to events nor classified

content-wise. Thus, each meeting was independent, though the audience was mostly the same.

One of the events described was about Asha's employees who were women and on 4 hours of work per day so that they can manage both the house and job easily. This was when she was a warden, accountant, cook, caretaker, all-in-one. When the inmates number increased, she thought of 'houses' within the home. A small group of children associated with an elderly (single) woman. Asha preferred to call this person-in-charge as 'didi' (= 'akka') meaning sister. For Asha 'mother' was too idealistic and she held the word in her mind with high respect (perhaps because she never knew her mother well enough).

The ashram was not just food and shelter. It was place for 'total' development of personality (with religion and philosophy exempted purposely) Thus there was a workshop for any small repair or simple gadgets, sewing, and textile etc.

Instead of complaining about the weather and seasons, Asha and her troupe enjoyed and used those. In monsoon there was a local swimming pool by collecting rain water. In summer all were involved in camping in rural areas to do literacy service. Other times were occupied by school and education.

Ashram was the place for intellectual extra-curricular activities not just for the top "A" rankers but for ALL. i.e. everyone gets a chance to try her hand.

Since rules require at 18 years of age children had to leave 'children's home' and be on their own or get into other 'centres', Asha set a goal that all the Ashramites will be 'ready' or 'prepared' to 'face' the world at large. For this purpose, she needed external help.

Each 'story' or episode narrated by Swapna is just a sample of Ashas' efforts.

56 .PT [PHYSICAL TRAINING] OR CIRCUS?

[A size-handicapped [SH] person [dwarf] helps the PT[physical training] teacher]

AA KAALA AJJI [AKA] Mangala specially invited Asha and her didis to her school one evening. The usually smartly dressed agile PT Madam [let us call her Usha] was there with some tens of students. Today she was not forming any lines or rows. Instead she introduced a new person. She said, “This person Mr, Baban has newly joined our department. Today he will demonstrate to you a few items he would like to introduce in our school.

Baban came forward and bowed to the dignitaries. On a single whistle some of his friends came in front. One showed flips [somersaults]. Another the same with a back flip. Another jumped up and made a half turn and landed on his feet.

Now Baban came to the front and said, these friends of mine are specially trained. In the school we will begin with simple steps. Now I will show you all the maneuvers which my friends did . Everyone was looking spell bound. Firstly because Baban finally made a round of the students on his two hands and came to the front , made a jump and a high flip, and landed on his feet. By this time his hands had come to the ‘namaste’ position. Secondly because Baban was less than four feet tall, much less than the height of his friends. Baban was a SH [size handicapped] person. [also called midget or dwarf]

Baban’s friends and a few students then demonstrated many items. Rope climbing, human pyramid making . how to cross a shallow river, were witnessed and appreciated by all. Mangala asked: Are you planning to train our students in these tricks?” Baban was clear in his reply: “All these need a lot of training and dedication and also time. But I can make anyone a little braver than before. Let me show you.”

He and his friends tightly held a blanket a few feet above the ground level. Baban asked for a volunteer to come and jump from a high stool on to the blanket. Naturally no one came forward. Then one by one he and his friends jumped, hit the net [blanket] and came out after a few bounces. Then, a few children came up and rewarded by applause .Baban explained: this is a make shift trampoline. This move will help in long jump, high jump, volley ball, basket ball etc. This school can have good team in many games.

Later Mangala told Asha the story of Baban. She found him in a circus company doing “ clownish” acts. He had never been sent to any school. When Mangala asked him if he would like to go now and get educated , he was not sure whether any school would admit him. Mangala told him about ‘open’ schools. later she thought of bringing him to her own school and be of mutual benefit. That is how he was here.

Mangala’s idea of inviting Asha was to discuss how they could use him and also support him. He could not be an employee since he had no papers [meaning any documents or certificates]. Asha suggested that they could all contribute, find a room etc.

But Asha’s ashram could not use him. Mangala asked “why?” Asha [surprised]: “Don’t you know anything extra-curricular has to be ‘offered’ to ALL the residents of the ashram. Continuing and going further depends on the individual’s capability and interest. So we need a fulltime lady P.T.[physical trainer] if available

Swapna said,: at that time Asha did not know that chance [call it good fortune] would land such a person into her institution.

Jameela: Are you going to tell us about it?

Swapna: Next time .

57 . FINDING A SISTER

[Asha investigates and finds that another SH person is the sister of the earlier Baban]

Finding Baban by Asha was by chance as our readers know. Finding a sister by Baban was much more of a chance.

Baban was now with HM Mangala and happily assisting the PT [physical training] madam . He shared simple circus tricks with the students. As Navaratri [a festival of nine days, also called dasara or devi pooja] approached he was visibly restless.

Navaratri literally means ‘nine ‘nights’. It is variously celebrated in India [as our Indian readers will know] the state of Gujarat [or any group of Gujaratis living anywhere in the world] celebrates this festival in its own unique way. Simply stated, for them, it is nine nights of piety and prayer and also dancing and delightful fun.

Baban missed Gujarat and dandiya ras. He wanted to go to Baroda because at that time his former circus company was camping at that town.

Baroda whose real name was Vadodara [vad- banyan tree] was an ancient city.

A voice from Swapna's audience could be heard: Which city in India is not ancient and famous? including this one where we sit and enjoy the fruits of this mud ? [-for non-indian readers- the phrase is common in many Indian languages and cultures].

Even at the time of Asha this town Vadodara or Baroda was both traditional and modern.

In one neighborhood highly religious prayer-like songs and music would be playing. Men and women could be seen following up the script and music with their own

singing since they knew the lyrics from their grandmothers' time. [for foreign readers: these lyrics were also known as shlokas, bajans ,godly songs..]

In another part of the town or in a posh locality in the same neighborhood one could hear loud orchestra and pop music . While in the earlier place sarees, salwars, kurtas and 'decent' dress was the norm, in the latter place unisex costumes , denims, leotard-like form fitting clothes and even minis could be seen . For unattached youngsters like the friends of Baban it was almost a game , hopping from one 'dandiya' centre to another.

In one of these Baban noticed a person just like himself . The person was one of the servants serving water or sherbets to the revelers. Baban let his friends go and join the dancing group while he had moved towards the serving group.[sherbet- local fruit juice]

Swapna said, "I am an Indian like any one of you .I am Ashamed to confess that I am not familiar with customs and habits of many parts of India. But Asha had been to most of the Indian states and through her I know a little.

In Gujarat all men were 'bhais' and all women were 'bens' or 'behens'[brothers, sisters]

For Baban it was fine to address them as 'bens' since most of the servant group were females The persons who brought them for help needed such assistance. During vigorous movements they helped in wipes for sweat, setting hair , tying back loosened dress items etc .The non-dancing group of helpers were one-to-one females.

The best way to join a group is to be useful and give help where it would be needed.

While his [normal-sized] friends edged into the revelers' [entry passes were checked only at the start of the program] Baban walked around to see what his special

sister's duties were. This 'sister' was a replica of himself .her short frame and quick movements among colourfully clothed dancing damsels , looked like a busy bee fluttering amidst flowers. She was doing the additional duty of serving snacks and drinks to many members of the group. This suited his nature so well that soon Baban was the carrier of trays, arranger of snacks , mixer of drinks and lifter of heavy vessels.

Jameela interrupted the flow of the narrative: She said: "swapnaji! You are carried away today by your own enthusiasm of story telling . You said 'mixer of drinks'""

*Swapna said, "yes Jameela! Perhaps I am in a descriptive mood today. But the description is true. You wonder about 'drinks' in **garba**. Do you also wonder about it, Liz?"*

Liz: sure, after Jameela mentioned it I also wondered.

Swapna: "About today's youngsters [even docile Gujeratis] I do not know. But I am describing those olden days when tradition was duly respected. At any time youngsters are a class apart from pious people. Even gujeratis are not immune to modern ways . but then they blend them in some ways. I have seen jean clad granddaughter touching the feet of her elders.

'Ddrinks' as you imagine was a 'no-no' in any of the gujerati public functions. Certainly not when the majority are females in any function. Not even thought of in 'navratri' events.

Liz: yes, the good Lord and Krishna would be watching , from a far podium at the end!

Swapna : [ignoring the wit] "Cool drinks and soft drinks were the craze at that time. Traditional fresh fruit juices, of lemon and amla [hogplum] were prepared and served. Just-opened fizzy drinks like colas were also popular. The favourite one with the ladies of all ages was

'mangola' [a bottled mango juice available at any time of the year]

One woman asked did the dwarf boy was attracted to the small girl? Was there instant romance?

Let us call this size handicapped girl as Babani [anticipating future data] I was about to tell how Babani and Baban came close. One of Babani's duties was to pour bubbly liquid in a glass without the bubbles gone. In this, Baban's expertise helped and he became the opener, pourer and mixer of drinks which Babani carefully carried away.

Soon the cooperative effort of the duo attracted the attention of the 'masters'. Information exchanged and Baban's story of going from circus show to a games instructor in nearby Maharashtra was told. Before Baban left for his new job in the school the kind household which was caring for Babani offered to lodge him in their house for a few days . In fact invited him to be with them. During these days stray childhood memories of the SH [size handicapped] duo and the recent account of the Bengali couple in Baroda yielded some data.

But our anecdote is about Asha and her ashram. Neither she nor HM Mangala was aware of Babani. It just happened that the Bengali gentleman from Baroda was planning to come to Asha's town for some official purpose. It also happened that he decided to bring along his wife and Babani.

Did I say it so happened? No, it was not. Behind this decision there was the hand of Babani. The moment she heard the name of the Maharashtra town in her household, her eyes widened. The already chubby face broadened. Like a child she started pestering.

“Can I go with you?” “ Master! Please take madam with you. Then I can come to help” “ I really want to go “
 “When are we starting.? “

Woman 1: see I told you, Swapnaji's story at last came to romance.

Woman 2: We don't know the full story yet. I wonder, do midgets marry?

Woman 3;:“How come no one had written a love story in dwarfland? “

Liz: The only famous fancy story about dwarfssomeone interrupted and said we all know about the girl and seven dwarfs.

Liz: All fairy tales have some good themes. This one is about the kind heartedness of usually ridiculed people,.

Swapna continued. “Before each one of you writes a different story with your imagination let me continue. Asha used her investigational experience to find the antecedents of the two SH [size handicapped] persons.

Swapna said, “I am sorry friends my memory is failing me. I never had any memory for names of persons and places but remembered events though not in sequence. In this case that also seems to fail. Suffice it to say that all the data matched with the notion that the two were twins born to a very respected [shall I say namboodri couple in Kerala?] approximately at a time matching with the notional age of the two SH [size-handicapped] persons. As we all know in the last century Kerala was known for circus companies offering amazing talents touring the whole of India. When one of them showed interest in using the two siblings in their shows , the parents gladly agreed

It was Asha who found out that these were the twins born to a namboodtri couple who were rather too willing to give them up when a circus friend of had offered to train them .

It was decided that Babani would be an employee of Asha and also a resident of the ahram. As the latter she would try to catch up her long dropped out school education. As an employee she would be helping ashramites in many physical techniques and a few games available.

58 . VISITORS' TOUR

[Unique unexpected items in Asha's ashram to be shown to any visitor]

Swapna on that day was in a conversational rather than in a narrative mood. She said to her audience: "How many of you have visited an orphanage or a free boarding house or a paid hostel?" Many said: "Yes I had been and seen ; I am sure all of would have , sometime."

Liz: I had been a hostelite for quite many years from high school to college. You would have too j ?

Jameela: "You are quite right Liz. My schooling and also early childhood was taken care of by our charity institutions. Perhaps ours might have been the most disciplined among such outfits. We had to listen twice a day 'azaan' [a brief Islamic prayer] and a strict code of clothing when we go into any public space. Was that your intention, Swapnaji?

SwapnaA: " No. It was not;but thank you for extra inputs. Let us ask the others."

Woman 1: My aunt runs such an orphanage well inside a small village. Once I have seen.

Woman 2: I know even this small town has many charitable institutions. At least one each of each religion has.

Woman 3 : Why? Each caste, sub-sect, language group runs such set-ups.

Liz: Every college will have hostels one each for boys and girls. Ours being a university town there may be hostels for international students.

Swapna : Then why are we talking about one ashram faraway and which closed decades ago?

Many voices: Why?

Liz: Is it because our guru Swapnaji was associated with that?

Swapna : You are on the dot. That is one main reason.

We can only talk about things about which we know and what we care for. Don't you agree?

Jameela : Otherwise it will be factually incorrect.

Liz: Or , dull and pedestrian ; like a blind person writing about Michelangelo or Ravivarma or a deaf person praising the music of Lata or Subbulakshmi. All hearsay or guesswork

Swapna: Let us as an exercise list the common things you will see in these institutions.

J: Morning mass prayer

W1: Dining hall

W2: Storeroom and cooking place [a large kitchen]

W 3: My aunty in her ashram has allotted special place [racks] for footwear, another for tableware [plates, glasses]

Sw: Ask yourselves why all of you remember all these items and mention here.

J : I can explain. These are needed if a large number of people live together.

Liz: In a normal household these are not mandatory [may or may not be there]

Thank you all for initiating me into narrating the story of the day. As my title says , if a visitor comes what will Asha show?

Answer: A visitor will not see any of these you mentioned . Not because they were not shown nor they were not in a condition to be shown.

Jameela: I know I have been through this. We were not allowed to talk to any stranger or visitor even if they were females; certainly not any media persons. The authorities were highly protective of us.

Sapna: Asha was known for her open-mindedness and free thinking.

Liz: Swapnaji! Let us come to the story

A visitor was not shown around a dining hall, store room, kitchen , prayer hall etc because they were not there. The ashram was a group of 'homes' with a small number of children [perhaps 10] under a 'mother. It was like a self-contained 'flat. The woman who was called didi[sister] could run the house with planning everything such as budget, menu, chores etc just like a home.

Liz: Is the class over for the day? Shall I sound the closing bell?

Jameela: Do it and we shall see whether all of you run out shouting- like children- with you first, Elizabeth.

Swapna : Sorry folks! It is just the beginning of the story

Jameela : Host of the day, Salma! Could you bring snacks for all?

Visitors were shown around by one or two of the didis while Asha sat in her office with those who didn't want or already seen.

Woman 1: Wait Swapnaji! Let us guess what can a hostel have to proudly show. Perhaps the medals and cups won by the residents in competitions.

Woman 2: Perhaps toys got by donation or locally made for and by children.

Woman 3: May be a good library

Jameela : Perhaps a photo-album ; in those days photo journalism was popular and much appreciated.

Swapna: I have heard that Asha indeed had such an ambition but Mangala who had been in modeling and show world [and suffered for it] discouraged it.,

Liz: Now I remember. Sorry Swapnaji! Let us guess what can a hostel have to proudly show. Perhaps the medals and cups won by the residents but they shunned competitions. We are all such stupid students. .You had already told us that there was a monsoon time swimming pool. Certainly the set-up can be shown.

Woman1: Thank you Liz. I remember Swapnaji telling us about sand pit and sand track . That is special and can be shown, . Some visitors may be interested in bare foot walking on sand.

Swapna: Thank you two for telling half of my story..There was another area which Asha valued very much. It was a place useful for the residents materially and also for skill development. It was the BASEMENT.: Let me just make a list of the items in the basement

A large working table with electrical plugs and fittings like in a college laboratory

A box containing electrical kit

A box containing carpentry kit

A box containing sewing kit

A pair of sewing machines

A handloom in a corner

A pair of typewriters with accessories

As you could have guessed these were useful when any repairs or alterations were to be done.

Jameela: They can give ideas to residents about hobbies

Swapna: I forgot to tell you that there were a volley ball and a badminton court and they were always busy in use.

Elizabeth: One court for so many residents? Naturally they will be occupied and visitors can see them in action

Swapna: This I kept for the last. It was something special though some may call it untidy or miserly..A MUSEUM

Jameela : A museum in a hostel! What could have been in it? Will Asha procure and exhibit old sculptures, , coins manuscripts, pottery and metal ware? And if so why?

Swapna: You are right . There was no need for any of these since government museums were already existing , just like zoos. In Asha's museum all the unrepairable throwaway matter which could be useful for knowledge and understanding .

Did you ever wonder what is inside your kitchen mixie or ceiling fan? A motor you know. But seeing the coils and magnets of a motor is another 'feel' and hands-on knowledge. A ceiling fan and an exposed regulator [= control switch] ; Items like a two wheeler machine part from a garage; Inside of a typewriter; A cycle model generator; A charka [which was popular thanks to Mahatma Gandhi]

Jameela: Charka could have been kept near the loom in the basement, if it worked.

Woman 1 : Now that you have mentioned a few examples many ideas come to my mind . a manual turning tool [like a lathe] to use in carpentry . small wooden toys can be made

Woman 2 : Potters' wheel and clay modelling

Swapna: See you all are quite imaginative. Another section contained models which children had made and exhibited in their school science exhibition.

Liz: Models are fine except in chemistry where demonstrations will be needed.

Woman 1: I have seen science museums in big cities with hands-on gadgets

Jameela: Now-a-days companies construct large exhibits for science demonstrations

Liz: They are called science parks . Am I right?

Swapna: Asha might have bought or got as donation some items , I do not know. But I was told that anything before being discarded was considered for information and including in the museum

Jameela : She might have put a hurricane lamp or petromax lantern in there.

59. BUSY BASEMENT

[Workshop in the basement is busy thanks to reports being typed and modifications to apparel]

Swapna that day was more in a chatting mood than her usual narrative mood. she asked: how many of you know typewriting?

Except Jameela and one other person there was no one. One voice said we do one finger typing.

Liz explained that she never needed proper typewriting skill since her college assignments were on PC [personal computer] ..Another woman of equally young age said that she made her presentations [short talk on a given topic] using computer generated slide show format. There was no need for old fashioned typewriter.

Woman1 For computer keyboard also old typing knowledge helps. Isn't it Liz?

Elizabeth : You want to ask “ Doesn't it?” because that is the correct usage for a question-tag. Yes it does help since typewriter was the fore runner and quite common and standardised all over the world. Computer copied it I think.

Jameela [her jealousy was obvious] A teacher can never be anyone else. . Can she Liz? If only we had had the facilities you have we could have done perhaps a little more..Our luxury was a FAX connection.Don't ask me what is that?

Liz and young woman 1 together said that that much info they had.

Swapna: Asha was a stickler for neatness in dress and certainly in written communication.

One impatient woman asked “Tell us how and why the basement was busy:”

Swapna: I can understand your impatience. We are discussing typewriting sitting at a time when the post of 'the typist' or ' stenographer' is not advertised any more.

Liz added since each one of us is a typist on our pc or laptop.

Swapna: Alright. At that time these jobs were very popular

Jameela: Even if one did not have higher education he or she got the job and a few reached very high posts also in the company.

Swapna: So Asha wanted everyone of the senior students to be good in typewriting whether or not they acquired any technical skill or higher education. So the seniors guiding juniors kept the machines busy..Every senior had her 'bio data' prepared, typed and kept ready in case they need to apply for a job.

Liz: It is also called CV [curriculum vitae] or resume.

Woman 1: Liz, you are a mini thesaurus. Thanks.

Swapna: Let me revert to my story of the basement. All the matter that would go into the monthly and annual magazines were neatly typed

Jameela: I guess all the matter for notice boards and permanent files also, thus keeping the basement busy

Woman 1: I hope the students did not mind since eventually all the services done, work in their favour.

*Woman 2: Perhaps we should also have in our houses a room like Asha's basement and call it '**computer room**'*

*Jameela: Or call it '**work room**' and put in a sewing machine, ironing board, carpentry kit*

Liz : Just keeping is not enough. Even boys and men of the house should be coaxed into learning and doing all those chores.

Woman 2: Even in the absence of a work area , let them [boys and men, you mean] start with washing vessels, sweeping and mopping the floor or at least hang washed clothes for drying.

Swapna: Friends! I have not finished yet.

All::Sorry let us listen

The sewing machines were also busy . This is because Asha wanted all her wards neat and clean all the time. In the house they managed to wash and clean whenever they felt like. In their schools and outside?

Asha suggested that everyone will carry a HC [hand kerchief] one small for dry wipe, another big sized for use after face washing. She thought why buy when old cloth or clothes can be recycled and we have sewing machines.

Jameela: I wonder how they will carry HCs. In their school bags? I have seen some mothers careful about such needs of the children . Your Asha made it a habit,

Swapna: The small one can be with the person always . For that Asha devised a pocket in uniforms or dresses, These were stitched in place by senior students and so the basement was busy.

Woman 1: So many fashion trends now. But utilitarian ideas I have not seen.

Jameela: Women's liberation should get into garments also.

Liz: Some girls wear cargo pants with multiple pockets.

Woman 2 We [senior age] should also have comfort even when we opt for sarees.

60. WHERE ARE THEY?

[Ashram is no more for very sensitive but extremely flimsy reasons]

This time the title was selected by the audience. They wanted to know from Swapna, where they, the persons and places they were hearing so much about, were now.

Swapna's guru must be quite old ; so. Who are running the place?

Swapna said that she was also wondering what more to say. It is good that you suggested the topic. With a heavy heart I have to say that there was no ashram when I visited last time. No smiling children- no welcoming didis or well mannered teenagers- no collection of broken pieces called museum- no basement with gadgets.

Visitors had to face a team of security at the gate where they saw a prominent board 'AMREWADI LUXURY APARTMENTS' The earlier basement was now a car park with a row of washing machines and ironing tables.

I searched for and reached Mangala and Kalpana who, I found, were quietly residing in a rented house. They related a number of brief episodes that happened a long time ago and at different intervals. In short alumni association which was created by Asha with great hopes turned out to be the cause of her frustration.

[A1 = alumnus 1 etc]

A1 came with fancy sweets, snacks like pizza, burger to give to ashram's residents. As per Asha's habit the donors were to come to where the children are and serve them. When reminded, A1 said, "I have [some ailment] I can't bend." The accompanying fairly senior girl, obviously her daughter whose some achievement was being celebrated here, said: "I don't want to serve orphans and low class persons." The

house wardens saved the day. Asha told herself A1 IS OUT.

A2 came and said “ I know there are no idols here. So I brought with me and also priests to do proper pooja.” Even when small children wanted to go near they were kept at a distance. Asha thought A2 IS OUT.

A3 invited her ex-didi to her house for a function and a feast was served. Didi’s report to Asha : There was as much food left on the ‘leaves’ [in place of plates] as we consumed . Looking at my facial expression A3 said, “ It is low class behaviour to fully clean up your plate – any way what is left goes to street dogs.” Asha thought A3 IS OUT.

At a prominent function where all AAs [ajjis] were invited the receptionist was cordial, and well dressed. Throughout the function this person avoided any face to face situation with any of the AAs. The ajjis could recognise, even after a gap of many years that she was one of the ashramites. Asha: One more person is out

Swapna said that she could not recall how many other similar events occurred. Looking back, we can say that these were a few insignificant events, some may also say that Asha was immature to take to heart the follies of a few. I may not be right if I say- such events frustrated her. We only know that when someone from her affluent family offered to give alternative location and arrangement for the ashram she quietly left. This I think is the only explanation for the rise of AMRE APARTMENTS exactly at the location where the ashram was.

Following this brief episode there was a long discussion among the listeners.

Jameela volunteered to summarize. We all feel that Asha needed at that time some senior adviser to get over her frustration. It is frustration coming out of disappointment and a sense of defeat. She had already alienated potential counselors by her atheism. The other ajji's were not ajjis but equally young single women. In any school ,college, large community or even in a monastery all the results will not be as expected. She should have asked herself – how many are gainfully employed and 'standing on their own legs'? how many stood firmly against domestic violence and exploitation? How many were of help to those in distress either economically or socially irrespective of their own difficulties? How many were readers [continuing reading habit] writers , teachers, counselors or pure social workers in their careers? - If she had asked and got the answers it might have outweighed the few examples you mentioned . It is a pity that that did not happen .

Perhaps all of us should see the brighter side of things before judging- either others or ourselves.

Swapna said : “Afterwards I wrote a poem in my diary . it was based on nursery rhymes and fairy tales.

[Jameela said the whole account of Asha sounds like a disjointed fairy tale

Elizabeth added: Shall we say figment of imagination ?– with her thumb pointing towards Swapna]

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