

## **SALAD PLATE**

### **OF AJJI STORIES**

**M.D SWAPNA**

SWAPNA THE AUTHOR BECOMES A STORY-TELLER

DESCRIBES EVENTS OF THE PAST, TRUE OR IMAGINED

SIMPLE SUBJECTS , ORDINARY PEOPLE.

ACTORS [AND EVENTS] FROM DECADES BEFORE

[ Imaginary ]AUDIENCE BELONG TO THE PRESENT TIME YEAR 2022 C.E

Written in Mysore, Karnataka - influence of the local language [Kannada ] unavoidable- including the title.

## **SALAD PLATE OF AJJI STORIES – M.D SWAPNA**

Grandma's tales - Samples from forthcoming books on  
aavooru ajji (Grandma of that town),  
aa kaala ajji (Grandma of that time),  
aashrama ajji (Grandma of Orphanage),  
and Bob's stories –

Typesetting and Image alignment

– Halesh prasad – amhpsys@gmail.com

A5 size -.52....pages

November , 2022 july 2025

Copyright

Kanchana - [kanchanakathiresan@gmail.com](mailto:kanchanakathiresan@gmail.com)

For private circulation

For copies mail

[engoneforall@gmail.com](mailto:engoneforall@gmail.com)

[kanchanakathiresan@gmail.com](mailto:kanchanakathiresan@gmail.com)

phone message only [whatsapp] .8762789139

## PREFACE

Swapna reaches this southern city after many decades of working in various states of India. According to her this experience had enriched her with many “stories”. They are simply memories of events in which she was somehow involved; some direct participation; many others reported by various sources or read in news. Names, places etc. may not match. Nor are they relevant as the narrator herself refers to her lack of details in her memory.

Three main characters are mentioned:

AA- aavuuru ajji – is fond of children and plays with primary school children.

AKA- aa kaala ajji- is HM of a high school- [ HM- headmistress]

ASHA- is the warden of a girls’ hostel cum orphanage.

All of them were friends among themselves and also with the narrator Swapna. The events cover a period starting from a newly independent India.

The story-teller, Swapna herself plays with the children of a local school applying the methods used by AA. A high school teacher who comes to know about this voluntary activity becomes an admirer [‘fan’] of Swapna and drags her to interact with the other high school teachers. Thus are born, AKA stories discussed with them.

During weekends and other holidays Swapna is surrounded by a circle of friends. Looking at “bakras” [Hindi-sheep, victims] voluntarily coming to the slaughter house, Swapna could not avoid the temptation of telling ASHA stories.

There is a bonus story of a fictitious local old man called Bob who comes to know Swapna and they become mutual admirers. He shares his experiences at the present time and place with Swapna, which she narrates to a group in a park.

In all the stories there are ‘present time’ paragraphs and ‘story’ pages. Readers have to go back about 50 years from the present day when the story resumes.

Readers have to mentally shift from the present to a time when there was neither TV nor any other modern day information aids. To verify simple fact even journalists used to go to libraries or old newspaper archives or well known scholars. Common man had to wait for months or years to get a land line telephone connection.

The author, who also belongs to that period of time, is highly thankful for the computers, electronic communication facilities which are easily available today. The pictures are taken [stolen!] from www [world-wide-web] and this is the reason some images look somewhat non-Indian.

It is the author’s opinion that some events and problems which were important at that time are still relevant. Persons who deal with teaching and learning and those handling disadvantaged, underprivileged children may find some aspects of interest to them.

As the title suggests these are samples from collections of episodes, lying in manuscript form with the author. Hopefully this booklet will fall into the hands of some persons who may help in proper publication.

## CONTENTS

5

	Page No
Aavuru Ajji Stories	
SP 1 MIRROR, MIRROR [1], [2],[3]	6
SP 2 LET US CALL A SPADE...	18
Aa kaala ajji stories	
SP 3 (CON) CAVE, VEX MIRRORS	22
SP 4 SKIPPING COUNTS	31
Aashrama ajji stories	
SP 5 DREAMERS, OR DREAM MAKERS?	35
SP 6 PACKED FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY	40
Bob stories	
SP 7 GARVI TO GAURI	45
[ SP - salad plate]	

**SP 1. MIRROR, MIRROR [1]**

At the present time Swapna is the narrator of stories. The listeners could be very young children or high school students or teachers and the staff of the school - Aavuru ajji [also referred to as AA] was [is?] a friend of Swapna, lived and worked almost six decades ago somewhere in India- AA was fond of young children . She believed that just playing with them can make them [both physically and mentally] better.

[aa uuru = that town ; ajji= grandma, respected old woman - Kannada language spoken in Karnataka, India ]

***SWAPNA TO THE READERS:***

My story starts from a school in the present time.

I get to any school which would welcome or at least tolerate me, a rank outsider in their premises. I reach well before the school starts and my story- telling starts as soon as I get a victim ['bakra' in Hindi]

Let me begin today's report by saying that I just gate-crashed here.

Did I just say I was asked a question by a child? No, sorry. I should have said so. Let us call the child C1. Yes, C1 asked a question. Yes, C1 was not the only one. There were quite a few children [let us call them C2, C3 etc.]. It was obvious that all of them were curious why an aged person [politely senior citizen, but they do not yet know such artificial terms] should take trouble to come to school –School!- and that too much before the school bell.

It was C1 who was even earlier than me, was the one to put into a sentence, her question. In the local language she had said, simply, "why". By that time I had sat on the floor with my back resting on the wall of the veranda. I just

said 'hullo'[I do not remember the exact word used by me]

*'ICE-BREAKER'*

Kalpana was an experienced teacher and a resourceful person. She was my close friend too. [She is the one I refer to as AA or aavuru aiji..She had told me about the greatness of an "ice-breaker". As she explained - this term was used [ by a stranger] when meeting a new person or a group. The ice breaker can be a word, sentence, an object or an action. Just like an offer of food to animals and birds or bowing and bending to elders. She had also told me that in case of children, alone or in a group, a smile could be as good an 'ice-breaker' as an offer of ice-cream.

Thus, I just smiled at C1 and indicated a place near me,. I told myself that this being my first day at school, I may not get even one child to come to me. Whether it was an opening act ['ice-breaker or not] I did not know; but I just opened my standard shoulder bag and slowly took out the contents one by one. The usual stuff viz. Eatables, water bottle, were there but I did not even show any of them. They can wait for the end of the session; if at all any session took place on this first day. A small compacts set mirror, comb and hand kerchief came out. The kerchief I keep is different from the usual mini-sized square piece of silk cloth carried by ladies. Mine is always a hand towel usable for drying one's face, hands after washing.

Now C1 came forward to look at the mirror in my hand. I gave it to her.. Then some more children were near me. I asked them to sit. I asked C2 if she wanted to see her face in the mirror. Actual words were; "Do you want this?" [ in the local language this will be only one word]. Children are naturally shy when they encounter strangers. Perhaps their parents have also taught 'proper' behaviour.

Or simple warning; [“***don’t talk to strangers***”]. C2 just nodded her head, her eyes almost speaking the words:

8

“May I?” I gave the mirror. When she tried to return it to me, I just gestured that the mirror can go around.

### *SHY*

One child [let me call her C10] who in my opinion must use the mirror did not come forward. [It is always the case, isn’t it? We, the democratic minded, want utilities to reach the needy; but the truly needy group never knows about it; or do not come forward to use it ; they have to be encouraged, invited, cajoled to come forward and claim what was meant for them]. I sent C1 to encourage C10 to come near. Of course children have their own ways of including other children.



### *CHILD-SPEAK*

[Among children , if one just observes, there are all kinds of invitations, with corresponding words in the local language .

Gentle: you can also come, join

Rough: you need special invitation or what? Just come

Middle order: aunty does not mind; [your] mother may not object

Equal friends; hey! come quick, we are already here. ]

Which method C1 used to bring C10 in , I could not hear, but both came. C10 walking slowly, shyly, almost unwillingly. I looked at the shy girl’s face. I saw a healthy,

nice common child's face but could be better with a little washing and cleaning. I took out my comb and asked "May I ?". Another sheepish smile.

I ran the comb all along the already existing central partition of hair all the way to the back of her head. Then I gently combed both the sides. When I started plaiting one side C1 came with open curiosity. C10 said in general to both me and the others: "My mother was not well today". I asked C1; " Do you want to plait the other side?" She did not say anything but took the bunch of hair in her hand.

9

### *TWO BRAIDS*

[For the sake of readers who are not familiar with school etiquette in India such as foreigners –girls at the school level wear double partition of hair with central divide parting], Non-symmetric or other fashions are rare. In fact this is one way of finding if a girl had passed out of school and going to college]

This is my account of my first day in the school with a mirror and a comb.



The school's bell time was approaching. I made gestures and gathered all the children near me and told ; “ Come tomorrow early. I'll be here”. A bold child asked: “What is your name?” I said: “ Swapna. You can call me aunty or

Swapna aunty; no, never ajji” Then many voices were heard: “I am.....” “I am.....” “ My name is ....” C1 said pointing out C10: “Her name is ...” This was followed by ‘bye” “ bye aunty’ . Of course I should not forget to say : “ goodbye, children” can I?

[Except for the main characters of these stories personal names of others are not important. If some readers like to have specific names I suggest C1, C2 etc can be substituted by your own

Chandana, Sahana/Christina, Susanna/Chandni, Shabnam etc. In this narration C1 is a child –

When boy or girl has to be mentioned it will be B1,G1 etc.

Similarly S1, S2 for students

For teachers T1, T2 etc.]



**SP 1. MIRROR , MIRROR {2}**

On the first day Swapna got children attracted to her by just a mirror and a comb. Today many more children were waiting for her.

“Good morning, aunty” “Good morning, aunty”

“Good morning, children”

Swapna: “What shall we do today?”

11

The child C10 who was helped by Swapna yesterday was there seated comfortably in the front, well oiled, combed, neat and cheerful. She said; “See, aunty! My akka has helped me today,” [akka- elder sister].

Swapna said; “ Very good.” She really wanted to ask how old was her sister and curbed herself , since it may distract what she wanted to do today [ even though she asked the children about what to do.]

She could see that many other children were looking neater than yesterday. She never asked but guessed that some story telling [reporting about a new aunty and her comb] would have happened in their respective homes.

Swapna took out her mirror and looking at it arranged her sparse grey hair. Then she passed it on to C1. It went on: from C1 to C2 and on until everyone had a look at her own face in the mirror.

Swapna asked: “Do you want to hear the story of aavuru ajji and the mirror?” Naturally there were many ‘yes’ses

### *THE STORY*

Kalpana and Darpana were friends. Both were living in aavuru. Darpana got a good job in another town.

Darpana and her family had to move away from aavuru.

She gave away many house hold items to her servants, friends and others.

She wanted to give to Kalpana, some items like rolling blackboards , benches etc. There was a full length mirror

in the lot. It was Darpana's idea that a full length mirror helps children both in looks and outlooks. She said so while gifting her mirror to the school.

Darpana told Kalpana "See, I hung the mirror near the entrance in my house. Every time [that was almost 20 years ago] my daughter went out, either to school or elsewhere she used to spend a minute in front of the mirror. The same was true of her friends while coming into the house for a game or chit-chat [Remember they did not have TV at that time, added Swapna, the narrator.]

This brief conversation triggered an idea in Kalpana's mind. What worked in a house could work in a school also. She installed the mirror near the gate, just inside the school. Was there any effect?

Anyone could have seen, if only they could observe, the difference in the appearance of girls. – Shirts smoothed, ties adjusted, hair adjusted by the lithe fingers of oneself or of her friends, ribbons neatly tied mostly by others. On top of all these minor actions one could hear a lot of giggling, good-humoured taunting etc.- These were some of the immediate results [of the mirror on the wall of the school.]

### *PRESENT TIME*

The narrator at this stage turned to her audience and said " "Whether the mirror helped to build up 'self-confidence' among the students or not" was a question. To decide on this was not an easy task. Don't you agree?" "

### *STORY*

Kalpana had no idea whether it worked and she did not spend time to worry about such long-time effects. Some helpers, non-teaching staff noticed all these events as eagerly as Kalpana. Since they knew Kalpana was always accessible to any ideas from any quarters they brought in

their observation. Some students shied away from the mirror or its vicinity since they knew they were poor.

This observation made Kalpana to realise that a mirror can lift the morale of the fair and gifted. The same can also do the opposite to the under-privileged. Then she asked the assistants whether they could assist such students. Some asked how and then Kalpana said, “Just be observing them as you had done and let me know. **Afterwards we could discuss what can be done.”**

Kalpana had a firm conviction that second-level employees will certainly have a soft corner for fellow humans of the same class. This turned out to be so true that those girls who were shy [ or reticent or unwilling ] to look at the mirror could go to a small room where the assistants were ready with oil, comb, soap, towel etc, and also physically ready with a will to help. One could see that those who emerged from this room directly go to the mirror. One can also see them mutually grooming one another. **There was camaraderie here, not vanity or competition.**

Kalpana who was observing all these activities from a distance or listening to reports from the staff was so glad that she wrote to Darpana [friend who donated the mirror] about the events.

#### *PRESENT TIME*

“Did you like the story?” Swapna asked the students. C1 said, “Kalpana had done long back what you have done now and here. I like it “ “Me too, we all like the story” this was C2 and others . One feeble voice was heard.” Where was the story? No hero, no animals” Swapna asked if anyone else thought the same way.

C1 said, “ Yesterday I was the star of the story, passing the mirror and coaxing C10 and the others.”

C2 said, “In Kalpana’s time all the poor students were the stars.”

“In that story the real stars were the super aunties, the assisting staff.” said another child.

Swapna asked “ How about Kalpana aunty?”

All agreed “Yes, she too”

Swapna further queried, “How about Darpana aunty who gave the mirror?” The unanimous verdict was “Yes, she too, though she never came to the school. She could guess what will happen”

“Thank you children. In every event there is a small story. You have found it today. Tomorrow I will tell you another outcome of the same story’



## AAVURU AJJI STORIES

### **SP 1 MIRROR [3]**

IN A SCHOOL both the students and the staff have to be always alert. Have you seen cartoons depicting bosses [or even subordinates] snoozing in working hours, sometimes their feet on the table. Such scenes are cartoonists’ delight. Can you imagine any such picture in a school? Never, a school is a place where code of conduct is continuously, voluntarily and meticulously followed both by the elders and the children. Or else it was gently enforced.

Thus, DRESS CODE was there as long as one can remember, both at this time and at the time of the ajjis. Swapna did not know the history of ‘uniforms’ for school students. She did not care either. The purpose or any other aspect of school uniforms, in her opinion, is academic and therefore boring or less useful to the children or the general reader of these anecdotes.

For Swapna it was her third day at school and she was early. She, being a senior citizen and an active voluntary worker, had seen countless number of children with umpteen colours and combination of dresses, For a moment, she wondered what happened to her on that day.

She was looking at a small group in her usual corner, in all ‘colours’. She thought aloud, “What happened to your uniforms?”

### ***COLOUR DRESS***

Someone said, “Don’t you know madam, it is ‘colour dress day’?” Now Swapna recalled that in any school in these parts [of India] one day in a week, usually Saturday was ‘sports dress day’ i.e. white and one more day was usual or casual dress. Of course irrespective of the colour of the dress cleanliness, plaits, ribbons were just routine.

Before she could unload her shoulder bag and before she could summon children, she saw in front of her, a truly colourfully dressed person in a saree and matching blouse. She was much taller than Swapna’s clients.

This person introduced herself and said she was a teacher in the school. “Students were talking about you and I thought I could meet you, if you don’t mind”. Swapna said “Welcome. I just spend time with the young ones. See, here are my friends of two days”

By this time our small group was in place, with a chorus of “Good morning, Madam” each child saying it two

times. It was obvious that the greeting was meant for Swapna aunty and the teacher, one each.

T1[teacher1 ] returned the greetings to the children and said, “ Swapnaji, isn’t it your name? Students were talking about you and what you did here. I came here to invite you to our teachers’ room during lunch time. We will be very happy to discuss with you.” Swapna said. “Thank you. Let us fix the program later, if you have some time join us. We stop as soon as the bell rings”

16

### ***TEACHER-VOLUNTEER***

It may be a rare thing, our readers might think. It is not so rare, that sincere teachers join and mingle with students in their extra-curricular activities. Some teachers may be strict and aloof, doing their teaching responsibilities only. There are some like T1 who do not mind sitting among the tiny ones.

T1 was obviously popular among the students. When asked by Swapna T1 said that she was comfortable sitting down with the children.

Activities began. Swapna had with her today a few mirrors which many ladies use. It is called a make-up mirror set. It has an ordinary mirror and another a gentle concave one which the user employs for finer work like applying kumkum or kajal [ for non-Indian readers; kumkum- mark on the forehead; kajal – black eye lining] . Parents would not approve of a make-up kit for young children even though it is a household item. Of course they are right said Swapna, any extreme make-up even lipstick is inappropriate for school children, She had taken the bold step of exposing young children to such an article and T1 could soon see why.

Even the experienced teacher, T1, was surprised at the enthusiasm shown by the students. The usual checking one's face in the [ordinary] mirror was done.

Then the magnified image attracted all the students without exception. Some opened their eyes wide to see it magnified in the mirror, some with open mouth to look at their teeth. One says, "Hey, let me see your railway gate" [ this is an euphemism for a mouth with front teeth missing]. The other replies, "Go, Go to the railway station" T1 was truly impressed by the interest shown by the students. 'one activity- just a few minutes- everyone is involved' she wondered.

17



### MAKE-UP MIRROR

Swapna explained to T1 , which can also be heard by the others: "See this mirror is plain like a slate. The other mirror is slightly curved. Like this palm when you receive 'Prasad' from the priest in the temple. [for non-Indians : Prasad or the offering by the priest is reverentially received by cupping hand - prasad can be holy water, a leaf, a flower , holy ash or even a tasty sweet]

Somehow on this colour dress day the bell was delayed. C1 asked, "No story today, madam". "Sorry, children, no time. But you can tell your teacher yesterday's story"

C1 set the ball rolling. Other children joined in. With events less and comments more, the story was finished.

T1 asked "How did you coach them to tell the story neatly?" Swapna said, "It was their own effort. It was not

neat story telling. But the points were covered, weren't they?"

## BIG MIRROR BROKEN

In yesterday's story there was a big mirror near the entrance of the school. C1 asked "Is there the mirror even today?"

"No, Kalpana removed it. One day it was found broken "

AAVURU AJJI STORIES

18

## SP 2 LET US CALL A SPADE...

STORY TELLING , playing games, just talking, gossiping [ in child's language talk about what you like] had been the routine in Swapna's pre-school time activities. As the readers of this series know a T[E] [English teacher] got interested in these activities and became Swapna's chela [fan]. Let us give her a name – Elizabeth- often shortened to Liz or Beth.

### ENGLISH TEACHING

On the day of this story, Beth came with a bundle of books and a set of pictures, asked Swapna whether she [Beth] could perform an experiment with pre-school children. Swapna said: "If you can convert your experiment into an activity, very well. In that case, let us be with the children and do what you and they like to do" It was a small booklet she had designed for children who could read English. [Of course in the group a few were there who could slowly read simple English words] .

A sample page:

[ I, or a name ] went to [pic 1]

[I or she] saw [pic2] .It was very tall.

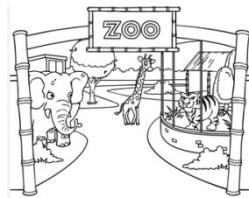
There were three [pic3] s . They were inside a [pic3]

There was one [pic 4] in a [pic 4]

Sabeena, the bright outgoing child in the group,

volunteered to read. Her version:

[pic1] zoo



[pic 2] giraffe

[pic3] elephant  
in fence



[pic 4] tiger with  
cage.



19

Liz was immensely pleased. ‘shabash sabrina! Could you now help C1 to read?’’ [shabash – Hindi- good, well done] Sabrina smartly and with great self-importance tried to ‘teach’ C10. Swapna intervened and said “Sabrina will read the written words and C10 can repeat. Pictures will be filled by C10 only.” Swapna then turned to Liz and asked “Am I helping you in your purpose?”

Liz said, “Sure, sure, I never thought in this detail. Let us try” There was no problem. Without any help C10 could complete. Some items like cage and elephant were in her mother tongue.

### *URDU/HINDI*

Another child [from another state and a new entrant to the school] read it out in his own language. Sabrina said “ I will repeat it in Urdu [ or Hindi if you like to call it] and did so . It was clear that everyone could easily guess and understand.

Liz was pleased. One text- two or more languages-“Well done children. Shall I make more books like this?” There was unanimous agreement.

Swapna asked Liz “Do you want to take your book and show to others?” “No. Let it be here. I am happy this was fine.”

After the children had gone Liz convinced Swapna to frankly tell her comments. Swapna asked “Was it your purpose to teach the names [or nouns] in your pictures?”

When Liz said yes, Swapna said, “You must have learned something more from today’s episode. Your aim was to teach, that too a few nouns in English. . But children learned, on their own. The sentences were understood by each child in its own way and through its own language.

Liz said ““Yes, I got it. I observed that all the three children used the English word “zoo’ even though there is a word in their own language and they may know it. Yet the English word “zoo’ was preferred. So also “giraffe’

Now I have a simpler aim viz. Using common word in English and our languages. That may be a great way to accelerate addition to vocabulary. Swapna said this is what we did with the mothers of new entrant children. Do you remember we called it espresso education? There are many words used by even illiterates in our languages: bus, car, taxi, bungalow, train, hospital, police station.

Women on their part have added many more words – like all the household items – gas, mixer, grinder, oven . Already bulb, fan etc were there. Swapna said: “ Honestly I am not aware of how many more are pushed in by the mobile revolution like message, texting.”

***COMMON WORDS =PROPER NOUNS***

Liz thought these words should be treated as proper nouns or surnames of people. Her idea was, if they were common nouns, only then there is a need to translate and coin new words in each language. There was no need if they are treated as proper nouns.

Suddenly she said “ I wonder how nice it will be if this idea is extended to science and all other special subjects! Why translate electron, proton, oxygen, hydrogen etc.?”

Then she gave Swapna another book. She said “All our neighbourhood children want to look at this book.”

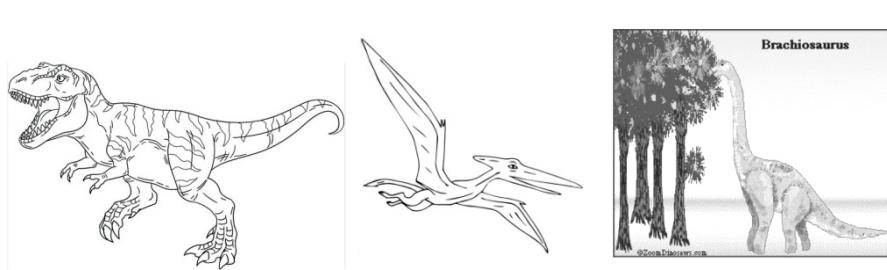
*Title: DINOSAURS*

21

This is [...] It is very big.

This is [...] It has wings . It can fly.

This is [...] It has a long neck. It eats grass.



Then Liz said: “The names given here are used all over the world in hundreds of languages. Can’t we do the same with many other nouns and make vocabulary burden less?”

Swapna said “I don’t know whether your fellow linguists will agree with you, but I agree . If a spade wants to be called a spade and nothing else, let us call not only

the spade as spade and also all the other spades too as spades .

The idea is just like you are Elizabeth also called Eliza, Liz or Beth. But if as a third person or some children call you, ‘the nice English teacher’ that also becomes your name. In teaching and learning these extra comments do not help. So let spade remain a spade and Liz as Liz.

Aa kaala aiji stories

22

SP 3 (CON) CAVE AND VEX MIRRORS

The teacher T1, it seems, was the English teacher. She had gathered the other teachers and got permission to use the staff room for the meeting. That was no problem since the HM herself volunteered to be present in the meeting, [HM- headmistress]

The meeting started with T1 telling the audience [ after the customary introductions] “ I heard in the corridor words like mirror, comb, neat, clean etc. spoken by primary school children [ in the local language the expression will be ‘ from the mouth of children’ ], I asked them who taught them those words to which the reply was “Nobody taught us. Swapna Aunty uses both local and English words when she tells us stories.

“As a language teacher I was naturally interested. So I sat along with children in Swapnaji’s session. The result is we are here to discuss with her.”

Swapna : I do not know what you expect from me. Nor how I can be worth the time you spare for me. I am neither a famous scientist nor a poet or writer. But I consider myself a narrator, a person talking about simple events I

have seen or heard. My friend whom I call aavuru ajji or Kalpana had a large number of stories, many born out of her own experience.

Your English teacher would have told about my mirror session with children. It was the same as Kalpana had done years ago in her school.

Here, T1 said, I assure you that the primary school children enjoyed the session very much. Simple items , a few minutes per person but participation hundred percent.

Swapna said “T1 has already become my fan, which I do not deserve. My guru, Kalpana might have had theories behind each of her experiments or activities, but I limit myself to narration . I leave theorising to the listeners.”

After this fairly long {!} speech Swapna kept quiet and there was embarrassing silence for a few minutes. It is natural. Even though they were teachers, her audience had to overcome the feeling of hesitation with strangers. Swapna volunteered “Would you like to hear stories of Mangala who was HM, whom I refer to as aka?”

Someone asked , “What or who is that?”

### *THE THREE AJJIS*

Swapna at this stage told about the three ajjis of her own younger days and how she was influenced by them to be of some direct use to the society, not just talking, writing, theorising, commenting, speculating etc. She then asked: “Shall I start the story of the mirror at the high school level? “

While T1 was enthusiastic, another teacher T2 said: “Though I am a social science teacher, I don’t know anything about psychology, behaviour etc. I teach some history, geography, and basic economics like banks. You are talking science with mirrors etc. So I have to just listen.”

## DISCUSSION

This remark led to a small discussion even before any story telling could start. HM said that she had a request to Liz as well as Swapna . “You two used mirrors as a play thing or toy. You also said that aa Kalpana used it the same way back in 1950’s. Did aka use the same or similar toys in her high school? Is there is a story to tell? “ T3 said : “ I teach science and mathematics . I wonder how primary level children can be explained about concave and convex mirrors or lenses. “

Elizabeth, the English teacher , answered the question “It was just a demo handled by children themselves . No theories; only observation and fun.”

HM: ” Can’t we do more than that here?”

Swapna :” Let me share some of Mangala’s ideas with you. The so-called make-up mirror-set may be available in many households. Perhaps reading and magnifying glasses also, which are lenses. For children of such homes when they reach high school it is something which they have seen and handled already”

Liz said : ‘ It is like boys throwing stones and getting mangoes and later learn about Newton and the apple.”

HM told the science teacher, “I think there is something to learn from Swapnaji, don’t you think, sir?”

The science teacher agreed [poor fellow! What else can he do when HM asks]. Swapna thought this teacher must have been a serious student in his younger days, since he asked “ Don’t mistake me Swapnaji, Do you explain reflection of light from curved surfaces to primary school children?”

## EXPLANATION

In answer Swapna looked at Liz who took the hint “ Oh, No. No boring or high-brow stuff. Just see, enjoy looking at your big eye or nose. Some children joked about “railway gate” [child-speak for missing front teeth common in that age group] .

Swapna said “Thank you Liz. Just tell them what one child asked “

Liz: “Yes, I remember. One child asked, “Where can we get such a mirror? I want my mom to buy one.” At that time Swapnaji said, ‘Not necessary. Just take a big spoon or steel [= stainless steel in India] cup, or baanali [saucepan , frying pan] . Some children went to our midday meal section and brought a few items. “

25

Annamma, the cook said “That means you had a good time and the kitchen staff helped you”

T1 said. “Yes, your friends are all nice and helpful”

#### Reflection from Convex and Concave Surfaces



Swapna:”Thanks, you teachers. I am not a teacher or preacher. I am a narrator and today all the time was spent in discussion. Are you ready for the story, perhaps next time?”

HM stood up and formally thanking Swapna, asked the teachers if the session today was dull and were they ready for the story next time.

Science teacher was the first to say “No, no it was quite informative to me. Let us have story and also discussion” The others agreed. Thus ended the story of aka and the mirror without a word about the aiji or the mirror .

[This story is an extension of AA1 to AA3 ]

26

Aa kaala aiji stories

Sp 3 MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL [2]

Next teachers’ meeting started straightaway with Swapna telling aka’s mirror story. Let us call aka as Mangala for this event. Swapna began her narration.

### PRESENT TIME

Your English teacher was witness to the happiness of young children, just seeing their own faces. Mangala knew it was universal at any age for both male and female, except if they were differently abled [meaning handicapped]. This is true for visually impaired. For the others Mangala’s view is a moot debatable point. I feel it is not important for my story .

What is relevant is that Mangala had heard of Kalpana’s experience and she thought that it would surely help high school students, especially hers which was a girls’ school.

### STORY

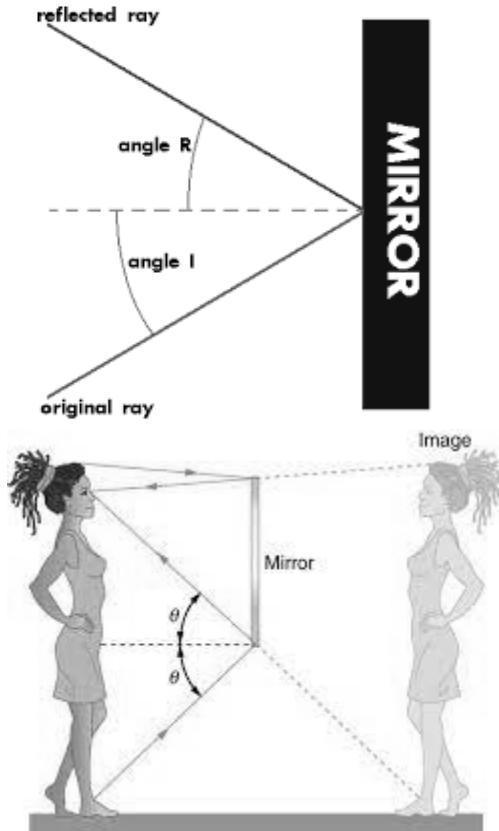
Kalpana got a gift of a long mirror from a friend. Mangala had to buy one. She asked the science teacher for advice. T[SC] in her school was not just a storekeeper like elsewhere. But she was a user of her science lab. Her

cupboard of equipment and the lab itself had lock and key. But they were kept open for most of the working hours. Mangala did the right thing asking such a person.

## OPTICS

T[SC][science Teacher] made a few diagrams and came out with her recommendation. She said, "What I drew is called geometrical optics or ray optics. On that basis a mirror of 3 feet long and one foot wide would be sufficient for our purpose. i.e. full height view of a person, assuming a person is 6 feet tall.

27



PRESENT TIME

Swapna, the story teller, could see interest shown by the T[SC] in the audience , She said, “If sir is interested I could draw the diagrams and show. Since our eyes are near the top of the head the mirror has to be fixed at the top [ near head or eye] .Perhaps that can be after the story telling is over.

## STORY

The mirror was fixed inside the main gate and just near the entrance to the school.

The first day was full of curiosity. At any free time groups of friends were in front of the mirror:

*Admiring her own figure*

28

*Leaning forward and inspecting details of the face*  
*Comparing heights from the image*

*Commenting on others*

## CHILD SPEAK

[Comments in this age group vary with the place, mother tongue etc.

“She is a healthy girl” means ‘obese’ or ‘fat’

“She is a cleaning mop” means ‘unkempt hair’ or ‘funny hair style’

“She is a flagpole” means ‘too thin’

One comment which needed a little thinking was:

“She thinks she is peacock but really she is a pea-hen”]

Of course Mangala was watching the proceedings. She also called the non-teaching staff to observe whether any individuals or groups avoid coming to the mirror. The second and the third days’ reports from the non-teaching staff made Mangala to think. It seemed that those girls who considered themselves too dark or commented upon likewise, were never found in the so-called fair coloured group. Each one [of this unorganised, unformed group]

found a time when the mirror was free [ i.e. no one around the mirror] and inspected herself.

Mangala thought this was no wonder nor unexpected in a govt school. She just wondered: Was there an added aspect of family income, status [ and also the caste?]. The non-teaching staff who themselves were the victims [or had the same complex] of the affluent society's prejudices were too willing to identify such students.

### PRESENT TIME

Swapna stopped her narration and looked at Liz "Are you eager to say something?" . Liz said [mostly for the sake of other teachers]"We had a similar story to tell .

In Swapnaji's preschool sessions some children had to be encouraged to come to us , because they were not well groomed enough. Later they could join. But at a later age prejudices leave a mark, I guess."

Swapna said: "I am not a sociologist to comment. You look around and decide. May I go to Mangala's story?"

29

### STORY

Mangala built an impromptu wash basin inside the ayahs' area and provided them with some essential washing and grooming materials

She even briefly told them the story of Kalpana's experience with young children. The helping staff really did not need any telling or cajoling. On their own they got to action.

Soon the supporting staff as a group were reporting to Mangala, [it appeared to have some amount of pride and boasting in their voice and language] , thus:

The not-so-affluent and the not-so-fair girls directly came to us; Used the soap and talcum powder etc. which were available. A few carried their own hand towels too. Some

gratefully accepted the oil and comb offered by us. All were happy for our service.

Mangala never asked if they thanked her. Instead she said, “Excellent! Are they helping one another to comb and plait?” “Sure, sure. Only on the first few days there was hesitation.”

Mangala thanked in her mind the great idea of Kalpana and her friend Darpana. She decided to observe the progress of these set of students in curricular and extracurricular activities.

30

### PRESENT TIME

HM said: “Perhaps we should include our non-teaching staff also in our story telling sessions.”

A teacher [probably the PT master] opined that they may not feel comfortable sitting with them, to which Liz suggested that there can be a second row from where they could see, hear and also speak and participate. This was agreed upon by all especially by HM.

According to HM, another important detail was left out by Swapnaji . “Did it help the poor students’ morale and self-respect?”

Swapna : “As per Mangala’s noting in her diary the experiment was a great success that year and the next. Voluntary participation increased even in academic debates and competitions. Mangala also noted that this could not be called a scientific conclusion but only an impression .

### RESEARCH

HM:”She could have done a long term controlled study with some research groups.”

Sw;” Mangala had written[in her diary] long-time study was not possible;

As per Mangala's diary one day the mirror was found broken and there was blood around. She writes " I never felt like replacing it. It was totally my fault"

HM:"Why? Any financial problem? Did the assistants want more money? "

Swapna: "None of these. It is a tragic story, showing, after all Mangala was also human.

Someone asked if they would hear that story . Perhaps after consulting the diary and any surviving friends of Mangala.

31

Aa kaala aiji stories

SP 4 SKIPPING COUNTS

This is a direct report from a meeting of Swapna with the high school teachers – known to our readers as AKA meeting [ AKA – aa kaala aiji].

Elizabeth: My colleagues ! I have just now told you what we did in the morning for the last three days.

When all the children took turns to do skip-rope game the others counted the successful jumps and recorded them. We did this in 3 languages . It was fine because no child could skip beyond 20, nor count beyond 20. Here we have assembled to ask Swapnaji about the game.

HM: what is new about them? . We always let the children play in their lunch or recess time.

Liz: "That is the point. Do we join them? Do we have any extra goals other than allowing them to do as they like ? "

HM : "Do we have to bother them during their free time also? "

T2: Our friend Elizabeth thought the playing of games a worthy topic for our discussion meeting, shall we ask her how?

Liz: Instead of answering your question I request Swapnaji to tell us what we learnt from preschool

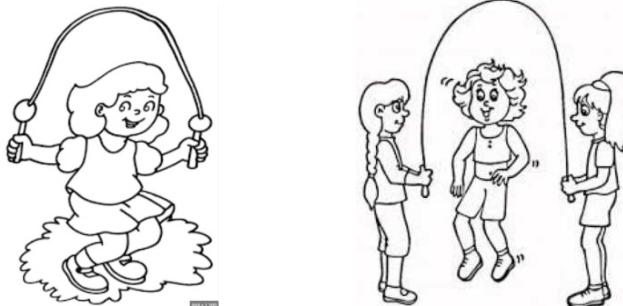
children. Didn't we learn some high school level maths Swapnaji?

Swapna: Yes, we did. Not that they taught us anything. But the nature of competition and results led us to some thinking. The children were happy but Liz wanted to discuss our decision here.

T2: What was so challenging about a simple game and announcing the results?

Swapna: Could you describe the event? Then we will worry about any fault on the part of the referees , *i.e.* Liz and me.

32



### GAME PRIZE

Liz; many children took part. As a matter of fact no one was allowed to sit out. Whether good or not all should try. Each one was given 3 chances.

T1: First time zero scorers could have been eliminated .

Swapna: Is there any one to second this suggestion?

The crowd was equally divided on this issue.

One assistant [perhaps the cook]: My child never had a decent skip rope. So she would be out or what?

### THAT EMOTIONAL REMARK SETTLED THE ISSUE.

Liz continued . One question came up. In 3 rounds two top scorers had the following scores:

CHILD A - 9,10, 9 TOTAL 28

CHILD B - 3, 19, 6 TOTAL 28

Fortunately only we two were the elders and so we were the judges.

Liz said : We argued for a while and I was for the top scorer viz. child B [ best of three 19]

But Swapnaji said that child A deserved better but for the sake of no controversy let us give both first prize.

We told the children that both had the same total.

Now Swapnaji asked the audience if this was an apt topic to discuss or not . Many had no opinion. HM asked what do they do in national and international events?

## OLYMPICS

33

T[PT] physical training teacher: I follow athletic events on TV whenever they condescend to show. In most of the events where scores are made individually [ i.e. unlike a race where many take part simultaneously] even Olympics favour our English teacher ‘ let me explain . In events like jumps, throws, weight lifting etc. one can have: once failed; failed again; and then the highest score ; always the best of 3 is taken.

“Irrational tradition continued without applying one’s mind “said Swapnaji in an unusual outburst.

Liz said to Swapnaji: You were not this strong at that time . Is there a very strong reason for your emotion?

Swapna : I think our maths teacher can explain

## MATHEMATICS

T[M]: We are comparing A [9,10,9] and B [3,19,6]. If we take the total or mean value [=average] they are the same for both the competitors. The standard deviation called sigma is better for A. That is sigma of A is much smaller than that of B . Therefore strictly speaking A is a better performer than B. Am I right madam?

$$\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{\sum (x - \bar{x})^2}{n}}$$

$\sigma$  = lower case sigma  
 $\sum$  = capital sigma  
 $\bar{x}$  = x bar

Swapna obviously pleased said ‘Well said, sir, I don’t know whether I would have reasoned better than what you did . Looking around, HM saw that all were not following what T{M} said. Would you elaborate ?

T{ENG} said: I thought English was easy and also tell my students so. Now I know maths can come in and make any language difficult .

## SIGNIFICANCE OF SIGMA

34

T[M] said the onus is on me .

Let us take the case of selecting a person to a cricket team. Whom will you take in your team?

A’s record is some half centuries and a few high scores. B’s scorecard says he hit once 150 and all the other times duck or single digit.

Here the verdict was unanimous. A is reliable, will not get out. At least he will give support to the team and the other batsman.

Music teacher also said, “Yes, in selecting children for competitions also we follow the same principle. The child should at least complete the song.

Swapna said: A is more consistent than B

Someone said: Now, I got it, B can [why is] unpredictable. We can have confidence in A

## ENGLISH CLASS

Liz said one top score can be ‘a flash in the pan’ Should I explain the phrase?

T2: No need. English is not the property of Liz. We too know enough to understand though not to teach. What you said means it may be a lucky chance or in child’s language;’ fluke’

Swapna: Thank you friends, so many years ago what my gurus [and AKA ] used to do is vindicated by this discussion today.

T{ENG}:Anybody please do not go home with any wrong idea. 'Vindicate' means 'support' 'confirm' etc.

Swapna could not be sure, but she saw another teacher sticking a tongue out at Eliza.

35

Aashrama ajji

SP 5 DREAMERS, OR DREAM MAKERS?

### THE THREE AJJIS

The three famous women of Swapna's story telling sessions were known to our readers as AA, AKA, and ASHA ajjis. The expansions are respectively aavuru ajji, aa kaala ajji, ashrama ajji. The description matches with AA for primary school age children , AKA for high school, ASHA for a warden in charge of a large number of children [ all girls under the age of 18] .. Sometimes Swapna the narrator uses their names also . They were respectively, Kalpana, Mangala and Asha.

All the three were senior to Swapna and all of them were very good friends.

Asha is known for her brainstorming sessions since she was a great believer in consensus AND cooperative action. It included their colleagues and fans and whoever was willing to listen even if not able to contribute by suggestions and discussions. So it was usually a large number, even so, Asha saw to it that any formal methods of conducting meetings do not get into their program. Proper dress, proper seating were not even thought of. So also other items of time 10 to 1 ; 2 to 4 with lunch break etc, were not observed . That means a serious topic informally handled was Asha's idea of brainstorming.

## ALL WOMEN DISCUSSION

No speeches – No welcoming- Casual dress- Start with coffee tea [or milk or water]in front – Those who prefer to munch, will get help from kitchen and store room assistants - All or majority being women and that too around middle 20<sup>th</sup> century there was no question of any ‘agnihoma’s [note if needed means ‘smoking’] or ‘aachamana’s [alcoholic drinks]. The topic usually came from Asha who used these occasions to find the natural tendencies of her friends and associates-

Occasionally others helped to bring up a topic – usually by way of questions and or doubts about Asha’s views , past decisions or some progressive ideas and actions . To give the readers some idea:

### TOPIC

Sometimes the topic will be very specific . e.g, what to distribute after flag hoisting or after a march past.

Sometimes the topic can be very broad.[ e.g Are we producing mediocrities in our institutions including Asha’s ashram?]

Sometimes the topic is not even known beforehand.

During general discussions the group would decide on a topic. e.g. While discussing the effect of cinema on the inmates [readers please remember there was not even TV in those days] someone suggested “ Let us discuss whether we can bring good documentaries and desirable movies and show in our ashram’

## PRESENT TIME

Swapna said : “ Today I am going to give a summary of one session [ of course as much as I remember]”. The narration went on: Asha knew that new waves were coming up in society.[ Here Swapna reminded her listeners that it was almost a decade after India’s independence ]

## STORY

Asha said, “Television will soon be here. Radio is very popular. Tape recorders are there in many houses. But they are mainly for entertainment and frivolous time-pass” Mangala said: In India government is the only forward looking agency. All new things have to be done by the government departments and laboratories. So TV also has to be promoted by the government.

Kalpana said “ I remember a joke by your friend who went abroad for higher studies” “ Is it about TV?”

“ In a way yes” Someone asked “ Is a joke so private? Can’t we hear it?” Asha said: ‘Don’t worry Kalpana, it would not be irrelevant and out of place. Please tell the joke in your way”



This was in a prestigious foreign university.

After an elaborate lecture on electric and magnetic fields the professor showed a CRO and said “It is very easy to use. Use the knobs here just like you would use the knobs in a TV.”

The class seemed to be happy. Our student from India got up “ I know how to use a CRO . Could you show me how to use a TV?”

SEE OUR STUDENT HAS NEVER SEEN A TV IN INDIA,

[ CRO- cathode ray oscilloscope]

Mangala said, “Now I know why Ashaji brought up this matter. In India many subjects are in the books or in high

profile labs and many items take years to reach the common man.”

Asha knew that in society new waves were coming up.. Mangala said that with the nation becoming independent people were also aspiring [or shall we say dreaming?]. The changes in society were being accelerated by science and technology, but according to her, also by sociology.

38

“Many middle class persons also want to go abroad. Backward classes want to be on par with the middle class even though many lack education or skills. Thus the demand for all kinds of privileges, reservation, concessions grows.”

Asha asked, “Why do you bring up this point? It is well known.”

Mangala said,“ Exactly, to put into your head that your idea of preparing our youngsters to cope with new sciences has a problem. By the time you prepare your wards others with concessions would already have captured what little was available.”

## DREAM

The group agreed that they could not predict any future history or developments. They could only plan for each individual child and what was possible to do in the given circumstances.

Asha said, “A person who is smart enough to think, learn, analyze and take decisions does not need packages made by us for them. Our aim is to make every child such an individual before they leave here. Do we all agree?”

## DREAMERS

Mangala said: “We have to agree since we have no concrete plans.”

Kalpana said: We are the dreamers, dreaming for the best for our wards. In the process are we becoming dream-makers out of our children? Perhaps we should not. There the discussion ended.

### PRESENT TIME

Swapna asked whether this account of a brain-storming session helped the present audience. HM said it just shows any discussion any time will end up in hopelessness and frustration.

Another said that is because things are not in our hands. We have to somehow cope up with the situation.

### CHARITY-GAP

39

Annamma [the cook] said, “Sometimes we dream too much for our children while they [our children] go to sound sleep without any dreams.”

Someone who could observe a tinge of sadness in Annamma’s voice asked, “Annamma, What happened? You can tell us.”

Annamma: My nieces were assured by a good madam that their college studies will be taken care of by her. Then when the results came out, our children had failed in many subjects. Now what face can I show to that madam?”

“When we are all here to help, how did you allow the students to go astray neglecting their studies?” was the general question.

It was decided that, children needed constant help guidance and encouragement.

HM said, “If some students come out with rank performance don’t we claim credit? We even publish photos. When our pupils fail also I think half of the responsibility is ours, don’t you all agree?”

Liz said our HM is special. HM’s of other schools send up only ‘good’ students from 9<sup>th</sup> grade to SSC class. According to rules, we cannot ‘fail’ or hold average performers at any level. To get over this problem clever

HM's convince the parents to take these 'average' students to other schools. They even issue compulsory TC's . [note: TC- transfer certificate- mandatory to go to another school] . This is one of many tricks employed to maintain a 'good' school's reputation.

HM said thanks for seeing my point of view. The authorities have eyes only for pass percentages, and not for our responsibilities.

Annamma said "My nieces should have come to this school, madam"

Aa kaala aiji stories

40

#### Sp 6 PACKED FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

As we know the narrator Swapna was a downright impersonal matter-of-fact person. Her stories lacked emotion as the readers know by now. For her, even the actors, [i.e. persons in the story] are only incidental. Their names were not important. Events had to be told.

So, it was a surprise when she asked some personal questions. She asked, " How many of you stay at home , send children to school, and elders to work?" After a show of hands, "Only a few. Fine. Most of you are lucky you do not have to worry about any one's lunch except your own at home"

Jabeena [journalist in the group} said: "We are unlucky too at the same time. We miss the chance of caring for a loved one'

#### WOMAN'S BURDEN

Elizabeth {English teacher] " How come caring comes down only on to the women? Always packing food, travel kit for the others. For herself she has to manage on her own. Perhaps Swapna meant that"

Jabeena said: "For a moment I thought I could be quite generous in my statement"

Liz [in a teasing tone] “ As wise as an owl, aren’t you?”

Some voice: “Shall I translate into Hindi?”

Jabeena: “You devil! You purposely brought “*ullu*’ equivalent”

This elite group viz friends of Swapna could appreciate jokes in English, Hindi in addition to their own mother tongue and the local language. [Note for non-Indian readers: *ullu*= owl – in English owl may be ‘wise’ in Hindi it is derogatory]

#### FOOD PACKET

41

Swapna continued:” In my grandmother’s time any guests from another place, who stayed with us for a few days, used to have a send-off as emotional as they were going away for good. One item was a box of food given to them as part of their luggage,

Woman1 said, “ I have heard that the travellers carried food for the whole family to last the period of travel. If Andal , our one-time HM were here she would have given the special term used in Tamil.

Woman 2: I know it. It roughly translates as “packed food” In our place there is a ritual after a wedding ceremony. The groom’s party is given a send-off with such a ‘packed food’

Woman 3: Swapna was to say some info about Asha’s ashram. We are talking of lunch boxes instead.

Swapna: “ I apologize. I am to blame. ‘Lunch box’ was a metaphor I wanted to use for what Asha sent with a person leaving the ashram [hostel], permanently.

#### LUNCH BOX FOR LIFE

Asha used to say any parent even the illiterate ones are great. The mother [sometimes the man included] packed a lunch box for her children for their long journey ahead. She may not even know how valuable her contribution is. It is for the psychologists to decide and tell.

#### STORY

Swapna said, “Let us go back to our story. Asha always felt guilty that she could not be a proper parent or mentor for her wards {children under her care]. One aspect was her inability to find a life partner for any of them unless they come back to her at their proper mature age. Certainly marrying off was not in her agenda of work or responsibility. Her guilt came from her unwillingness to talk of love, sex and anything related to the subject. Not even self-protection from crime.

Another aspect was finding means of survival. It can be called by any name: job, career, profession, source of income.

42

### PRESENT TIME

Jameela, the journalist, said: “Even at that time there were many methods by which these could have been dealt with. With regard to sex [both the good and the criminal aspect of it] were the subject of importance in any institution caring for adolescents; like govt. depts.. family planning associations, counselling psychologists.

Swapna replied:”she must have worked with HM Mangala and others to do exactly as you suggest. Even today our society is not quite ready to let girls ‘choose’ their partners. Pre-marriage love, dating or sex are not even to be mentioned, though these may be happening stealthily and sporadically. As for as Mangala had told me Asha felt guilty that she did not have any clear views on this topic and so avoided it . It was mostly left to the other caretakers such as the ‘didi’s.

### CAREERS

Elizabeth: “With respect to career, as you have mentioned she encouraged every child to study and to pursue any one of the choices available. Was that not enough?”

Swapna replied: “Yes, she was diligently preparing each one of them to have some qualification. But she felt that

she did not know the next step in the rat-race of that time's 'modern' world

### STORY

Going back to her story Swapna described how Asha managed her anxieties. She thought that each child should be given opportunities to have two important basic qualities: **Self-confidence, self-reliance**

As a team Asha, her assistants and friends prepared a check list. ,

43

## LIST TO BE TICKED

[ details in office files ]

1. *Travel local - going with 1 or 2 inmates by local bus, train etc. Tickets, stop or station names to be noted and reported.*
2. *1 above alone and with a job assignment*
3. *A day- time travel to a given place and address and back the same day just as 1 and 2 above*
4. *Same as 3 but travel overnight.*
5. *Go as a group for lunch/ snacks to a friendly 'standard' house. Go alone to a house for helping someone sick or prepare for a function or festival – join for a weekend with a 'standard' family.*
6. *Make a fully imaginary bio data- also make a real one with one's own name*
7. *While in the ashram complete an apprentice program for a short period – do the above staying outside*

*Asha very much stressed the last item of the above list.*

For this she had to work hard, convincing companies to accept her candidate not yet 18, or just 18. On many occasions it was without any appointment, posting or remuneration. The common purpose of the employer as well as Asha was to observe whether the candidate could manage the stress of 8 hour work, travel and also discipline and punctuality. Any technical skill is only a bonus. Many NGO's, social workers, university

departments were useful since they could resonate with Asha.

A small challenge was to find “decent” persons and “standard” families. When someone asked what are ‘standard’ families?, Swapna replied , “This was also a challenge for Asha.” Perhaps we can discuss it another time.

44

## PRESENT TIME

Swapna stopped here. She looked around and could see curious [doubtful] faces around her.

Woman1: These seem to be ‘cooked-up’ situations or ‘mock’ drama scenes. Do they help real life situations?

Swapna: Asha believed these ‘make-believe’ experiences help a teenager. Remember these inmates had never seen parents or relatives. Many were separated or run away from them. Quite a few were declared orphans.

Woman2: Two cheers for the great ideas of work experience and managing on one’s own. Even we, the home people fail to give this kind of exposure to our children. Many learn anew and on their own if and when they become independent.

Woman3: Some never do. Like in some rich families or business households.

Woman4: Why, even in poor families the same thing for financial reasons.

## URBAN / RURAL

Jabeena , the journalist , said that she had a doubt . Was Asha preparing her wards for modern urban living? Many of the items on the list were irrelevant for a rural agrarian setting.

Swapna: Excellent observation! They [the trio of aa, aka, asha ] discussed this before making a checklist. They

thought the rural scene had its own ways of absorbing and assisting any newcomer. It is only the urban complicated lifestyle which needs preparedness.

## BOB STORIES

### Sp 7 GARVI TO GAURI

SWAPNA, i.e., this writer, calling herself a story teller, [nay, a narrator of events] usually took great pleasure in talking to children. This time it was different. It was a park where she used to go for fresh air and exercise. [In this small town in the year around 2020 CE parks had the usual trees and greenery. also some very resourceful officials had installed gym items free for public use. ]

#### *THE COVID TIME*

The pandemic covid had to be controlled. Lock-down was announced. Parks and public places were closed. At the time of this story telling, it was just a relief, lock-down lifted. The regular users of the park were thrilled to see familiar faces almost after a year. After 'hello's and 'how are you's the standard question to ask was for enquiring about who escaped the virus attack . For this purpose Swapna suggested that all sit down and calmly talk about the persons present, their family here and others away either here or abroad. Of course they had masks on and sat at a decent social distance.



Swapna said: "I have to thank the virus for this opportunity to meet here and talk to each other". Someone was heard saying 'why thank the virus?' Answer to this remark was also given by someone. "See, it provided a topic to start with." Swapna continued: "We had been coming here to this park in the week-ends morning or evening. All of us being [mostly] women we could find common activities other than house or family gossip."

46

#### PARK ACTIVITES

Someone supplemented this observation by saying :

"One lady demonstrated yogasanas standing poses

Another showed how we can loudly laugh and forget small worries.

Another showed simple walking in circles as a group with varying speed, style and gait.

We also sang some songs in chorus.

Swapna continued: "Covid came-Parks were closed- We were all afraid to visit each other, even if we knew where they lived. Now that the lockdown is relaxed we are back here. I see our talented leaders are missing. I hope they will be here safe and sound. Meanwhile, as we are assembled here let me do what I usually do viz. to any willing listener narrating events as I have seen them. Thus the story telling session for the first day started.

#### STORY

Bob is my friend, a stickler for fitness. One day he was as usual taking his walk, occasional jogging and finally exercises in the open gym [Courtesy Municipal Corporation of this town]. One of the items was as we all know it is here in this park also, an arch for bending of the spine. With his hands all the way back Bob was looking at the sky. Then he slowly brought his hands forward at the same time bending from his waist, bent forward all the way to look at the grass on the ground. For maximum effect as a practitioner of yoga he knew he has to

straighten his neck to see right ahead. He did this once. It was then that he saw the face directly looking at him. A second stretch and a bend forward Bob saw the same girl.

47



When it happened the third time he just got off the gym apparatus, got out of the park and reached the grim looking girl.

#### PRESENT TIME:

Swapna turned to see if all were listening. After finding that they all had made a semi circle, including a few newcomers to the group, she was satisfied that they were all wearing masks. Since even some children had joined she briefly described the park scene with appropriate bending actions to show Bob's actions.

Then she told her audience, in her habitual frank way, that she never remembered the names of any persons or street names. Names and character aspects did not matter, according to her, in most of the single event stories. She also added for the sake of this story let us call this girl 'garvi' [or just G]

#### STORY

Bob came out of the park and came to the girl standing near her scooter.



## PRESENT TIME

Swapna told her listeners, “ I did not tell you all about my friend Bob. He was not a standard “good morning how are you how can I help you “ type of a regular person. If he talked to anyone it was direct and to the point.

## STORY

Bob saw the girl [let us call her G] and asked directly, “ Is it starting trouble or puncture or petrol?” The girl said. ‘ “It is petrol problem . Sir. When I started .....” Bob cut her short and said, “ Cut out the details. If you could walk to my van there, I could help you”’. With obvious gratitude G was about to walk when Bob stopped her and said, “Wait; push your vehicle to the side , near our friend banana seller.. Lock. Request him to have an eye on it. After G had done as told and when they reached the van Bob said “Take this water bottle and empty it. ‘

## PRESENT TIME

Swapna turned to her audience “See my friend Bob had always a standard first aid kit in his van. The difference between an ambulance and his van was that his van had 3 types of emergency kits: One the usual medical kit. Second, for persons doing a work-out – water, biscuits, glucose powder , some kind of juice [ not Gatorade] .The third one for normal vehicle emergencies.]



## STORY

Bob told G, that the van usually had a bottle [about a litre] of petrol and that that day it was not there. They had to go to a petrol bunk'

G said. , "we all knew sir. That is why I waited for you. Sorry for the trouble. See I have only ten rupees with me and .." Bob said, "Enough. Shall we proceed?" So saying he opened the rear door of the van and almost pushed both the water bottle and the girl in and shut the door.

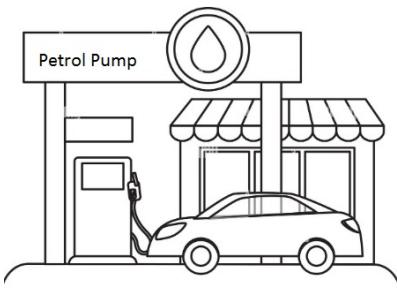
Their reaching the petrol bunk, Bob paying money, on return the girl filling petrol, starting scooter are all just uninteresting details. I don't think my narration will include any such mundane items.

## BOTTLE

But there was one small detail worth recording. After pouring the petrol, G was about to toss the bottle away. Bob stopped her and told her to put the bottle in the van. "It helped you today. It can help another later."

Then he pushed a currency note into her hand,. "Go. Fill up some more fuel and only then proceed further."

When Bob was about to start his vehicle, G came running. "Sir, sir, your address." Bob said, "It is ok if you forget. Otherwise give the money to the honest banana seller so that he can give me" so saying the van moved away.



## BANANA SELLER

Almost a week had passed before Bob parked his van near the same park again. When he was back from his exercise routine the banana seller was standing near his van. He said, “That haughty girl on the scooter you helped some time back, do you remember?” “Yes, tell me. Did she over speed, hit something or somebody?”” No, sir. She came and gave me this cover [local word for envelope] to be given to you.

“To me? Neither you nor she knows my name. I never told either of you about myself.”

“What is there in a name, sir? I might have been named Basava or Bheema. But I can better be recognized as Badava, the banana seller.”

## PRESENT TIME

Swapna told her audience “Sometimes street vendors or even other strangers want to be friendly with their customers. Some people talk much, seem like acting too familiar, but most often they are never intentional or insulting.

Anyway observe this man’s wit: “ Badava’ you all know is “poor man” in our local language.

## STORY

Badava{!} said ,” She referred to you as a man in a white van with white beard”

“Yes, that describes me “said Bob and opened the cover to find the exact amount [the sum of cash received and the petrol bunk bill}

There was also a note of thanks and a biscuit packet. Bob gave the latter to the vendor,” Take it to your kids. Do you see my investment of help yielded interest?”

## PRESENT TIME

Our language has many idioms. One of them is ‘paying back with interest’. Here it is meant in a positive way. What do you say?”

One woman said paying for petrol was the principal and the biscuit packet was the interest. Swapna explained that the vendor also understood the same way.

Some people tried the local idiom. Some tried literal translation and others figurative. Swapna said all of you are not only have information and also lot of imagination. Let me tell you what Bob told the vendor.

If help is the mother, gratitude [=thankfulness] is the child

### STORY

Just then the banana seller said ‘See sir, she is coming. She had been always very proud about herself or her shining scooter, so much so that she would never give a “lift” to anyone. Even when someone waves for a ride she would just move along. Her friends used to walk on calling after her “ Garvi, great haughty Garvi”

The scooter came and stopped near them. On the pillion seat today was a school girl in uniform with a [usually] heavy bag. She [the scooter driver G] said, “Thank you sir, for both material and mental help. You are a mentor, sir” . Her final words were “Gentlemen, my name is Gauri not Garvi, at least not from today” [ note for non-Indian readers: Gauri is a given name to girls in India. Garvi means a proud [haughty person]



Swapna ended the story. Of course many classy looking women got up picking up the towel on which they were sitting, formally thanked Swapna and left. However the majority waited on to chat. Various voices were heard.

“There is no story at all.”

“But it is an event worth telling.”

“Is this Bob a true character? Is he living in this town?”

“Where is this park? Is it the same as ours?”

Swapna just sat smiling since she thought none of the questions needed any answer.

A friend of Swapna remarked” Our Swapnaji is quite naughty. She knew the girl’s name all the time. She said let us call her Garvi as if she did not remember the name. Then she transforms Garvi into Gauri. [ note for non-Indian readers: ‘ji’ is a honorific suffix].

Another woman said the transformation was really in Gauri’s character.

The woman who said initially that there was no story at all , now said “ I see a story now.”

Swapna said, “I know that for Bob this is just one of his many activities in daily life; one of the many unplanned and highly forgettable. There may be many people, young, old, retired, working who would be rendering help in their own ways. We just do not know and for the media or news persons these are not “stories” or “news’ worth reporting.

One woman in a sari and lily-white hair said :

**One small event for one old man**

**A big lesson for a young girl**