

Manzil, Delhi : Opening doors, creating pathways

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Ravi Gulati left a corporate job and took to teaching children of drivers, barbers and maids near his home in New Delhi's Khan Market. Today, in his unusual classroom every student is a teacher and every teacher a student.

“Journeys are always more than just a means. They make the end what it is and ought to be.

Manzil

• is a destination made meaningful by its journey. I share with you my own journey which led me to Manzil,” -- Ravi Gulati, Founder, Manzil



Starting at the beginning. Manzil runs from my home in Khan Market, where I live with my mother and special sister. We live surrounded by the richest and the most powerful people of Delhi. The children and youth that over the last 10 years we have come to regard as our family – my buddies – grow up in their servant quarters. They are children of housemaids and cooks and electricians and barbers and drivers and servants. That's about 120 young people at any given point of time, and more that have flown from the nest,



and return as they feel, like one returns home. Journey from within.

My elder sister has multiple handicaps. Because of her special needs, she went to one of the first integrated schools in Delhi – Balvantrai Mehta Vidya Bhawan – and my mother came to volunteer at the school for almost 20 years, followed by working for 10 years in Sahan Institute which works with even more severely challenged children. In 1996, at the age of 62 and just coming out of a year and a half's battle with cancer that we lost my father to, she wanted to open her own little school to serve young children with learning disabilities in Kotla, a slum-like area lying in the heart of Delhi, originally a cluster of villages that Delhi just grew around. Manzil was the name she chose. Breaking the Habit. Meanwhile, I had left aside an extended phase of broad exploring in order to take care of my father during this year-and-a-half, and after his passing away, had made a decision to settle down in a remote hill village basing my life on farming organically. But life, as usual, had other plans. Two children looking for help with their school maths approached me. Hemant – a washerman's son studying in class 8th – and his friend Pramod – a gardener's and a class younger. I was trying to reorganize family affairs before making the move to the hills so I had some time, and I agreed. Ten minutes with the children unraveled their concerningly dubious understanding of numbers. 2 – 5. Is it 3, -3, or can't be done. Ten more minutes imagining how numbers would look if the current decimal system of representation were to be replaced by the binary one, and to my amazement, I found an incredibly sharp comprehension of this utterly alien concept. There was something completely contradictory there. The children were clearly bright and intelligent, but somehow they had been dumbed down by how they were taught at school. Over the weeks and months that followed, two things happened. Hemant and Pramod asked to include another of their friends, then another, then yet another, again and again... and I found myself acquiescing... each time. Soon there were 20 children, from various classes, all together because irrespective of the class they were in, all lacked the same basic understanding of what they had been doing for years. But when I was explaining BODMAS for the third time for the benefit of a new-comer, Hemant protested. He had already understood it well, and was hungry to move on. This was getting repetitive for him. 'In that case', I said to Hemant, 'I invite you instead to explain BODMAS to your friend'. Hemant was confident of his learning, but hesitated to teach. Years of conditioning had taught him. A teacher was a 'position' and he wasn't in that position – went his unarticulated thinking. A teacher was a 'role-for-the-time-being', and he was ready for it as far as BODMAS was concerned – went my unarticulated thinking. Besides, unlike him, I needed to carry everyone along in the class, and I wasn't ready to start a separate class... yet... After some persuasion and promises of back-up support, Hemant reluctantly agreed to try his hand at teaching and, unknowingly to us then, together we laid the foundations of a crucial aspect of life at Manzil today. Questioning. Never underestimate the power of questioning- it can lead you on a quest of finding answers that exist only in you. The second thing that happened affected me personally and directly. I had grown up in this home in Khan Market. As a child, I had played cricket in the neighbourhood with children from all backgrounds (even though we had the 'good' sense to discern who of our friends we could take home and who we couldn't). Now I was old enough to understand the context of my

'don't-take-home' friends, through which I 'saw' their lives anew. Why had these children submitted to a farce perpetrated on them in the name of education? Do children, anywhere, have much of a choice anyway? I understood, over the months and years that followed, that their parents, whether under the sway of a widespread modern myth that schooling equals education, or having observed that any schooling, good or bad, still brings respect and status (unfortunately that's true) and better earnings (surprisingly, often not true), put their children in the only affordable schools accessible to them – those run or aided by the State. The schools leave much to be desired; their characteristics in the main are: *Apathy, often visible in the form of absenteeism or no teachers assigned or books available for months into the academic session. Over-emphasis on blind obedience and a generally stultifying environment. Questions measure rote-learning ability rather than any understanding. Blatant cheating, including in the form of letting children know in advance the questions that the teacher plans on asking them in the exam and having also supplied in advance – verbatim – the answers sought.*



Looking at the insides of the wheel and finding the cogs. At this point, it may be useful to examine two distinct goals of education that are frequently mixed up. The classical ideal of education is that it makes us better human beings, both within and in our lok-vyavhar (conduct in society), brings out our best potential, makes us active and constructive members of society, teaches us jeene ki kala in community (the art of living; they stole the phrase from the public domain and branded it) etc. The other goal – a utilitarian one – is how it helps us earn personal wealth and status. The parents of my children have at least one clarity. They are interested in education's utilitarian benefits. They do not even bother to pay lip-service to the classical ideal, and so in this way they are clearly more grounded in today's reality of what schooling actually pursues as opposed to what it likes to say it does. But to their utter bewilderment, even the promise of jobs on which 'Education' (schooling really) was primarily 'sold' to them turns out to be hollow when they leave its portals with the much-coveted certificate in their hands. Too many people enter the job market, certificate in hand, unprepared with the skills, knowledge and attitudes that modern jobs demand. Nobody taught them what they really needed to know. We used to call them the educated unemployed. Some now call them the educated unemployable. But to their utter bewilderment, even the promise of jobs on which 'Education' (schooling really) was primarily 'sold' to them turns out to be hollow when they leave its portals with the much-coveted certificate in their hands. Too many people enter the job market, certificate in hand, unprepared with the skills, knowledge and attitudes that modern jobs demand. Nobody taught them what they really needed to know. We used to call them the educated unemployed. Some now call them the educated unemployable.



Interestingly, in their frustration, they often return to even higher studies. But all this does is drive a kind of 'education inflation' where young people pursue progressively higher and higher degrees in the hope of out-pursuing others, thereby seeking to thin the crowd of competitors for any given job. Few really acquire the skill-set needed to perform the available jobs through their education. If and when they do, it is through experience, often accidental. All this understanding evolved, of course, over the years, in parallel with the evolution of the work. It was clear that trigonometry was not going to serve my buddies in any way, except only as a passport to class 11th where the first thing they were going to do was run as far away as possible from maths. Yet a life awaited them, beyond school and college, for which they had dreams and aspirations. Unlike them, I realized that if there was one thing that would give them a real shot at what they wanted, it was the ability to converse confidently in English. Dispelling Myths English. Funny thing is, as far as my information goes, it's spoken only by 5 % in India. Yet it is treated as our lingua franca. Not a sign on a shop in Khan Market is in any language other than English. Not a programme is announced or introduced at Delhi's cultural hubs like India Habitat Center in a language other than English. Big business, higher education, higher judiciary – all completely monopolized

by English. Our slavish attitude towards what should otherwise be just a language is betrayed by oft-heard phrases like, “He is dumb, he doesn’t even know how to speak English”. And in spite of having learnt English as a subject for years in school, my children could not have a simple, meaningful, independent conversation in the language. If there was one thing that would not only dramatically improve their chances of landing good jobs, but also generally address the diffidence they felt in dealing with things outside their ordinary spheres of experience, it was learning Spoken English. We started classes. But first some analysis. It clearly wouldn’t do to do as had been done in school to teach English. Being creative is often about clearing out what already exists, often about being prepared to reinvent the wheel and not condemn that as waste of time. We cleared out the books. We felt that, in the main, they had distracted both the teacher and the students from the real task of the learning of English. As teachers covered the chapters in English, there was no time nor inclination to discover a language. It was more a race to complete the syllabus in time. The best students could only keep pace with an externally imposed agenda and speed. With no books and no syllabus, and an hour to talk freely about anything that caught our collective fancy, but strictly forbidden at the same time to use Hindi, we had managed to recreate the conditions of that most complex of learnings that almost every human being is destined to master – the learning of his or her first language or mother tongue. And when I bought my first computer for self use, it was obviously available for the children to learn. When friends and relatives visited, they interacted with the children. All went away changed, their respective prejudices dented. When I traveled outside Delhi, I took them with me. When I met someone interesting, I invited them home to meet the children. When one of them told me he wanted to be an Air-Force pilot, in searching for one I met someone interesting. Cause and effect interloped, until their separateness and sequencing could no longer be discerned. Years later, I read a Sri Lankan social worker’s words, “You build the road, and the road builds you”. Bull’s eye! I knew because I had already experienced its truth. Money Matters. And that’s how Manzil grew, in numbers of young people sure, and more importantly in the richness and diversity of our experiences that we lived together, but not in the size of its buildings or coffers. As a matter of fact there were no coffers. Renting out the shop that my father used to run when he was alive, coupled with an old habit of keeping our personal expenses under control, allowed us to give all our time to Manzil, without having to draw any salaries. Rent and salaries are usually the two major costs of running something like Manzil, and we were burdened with neither. For 6 years we were able to claim, not entirely accurately, that it takes no money to run Manzil. We didn’t seek any funding. Some came of its own accord. If every journey has a first step, I urge you to take it. If I were to speak now about the essence of what we are trying to do at Manzil, what we are really interested in is ‘Education for Responsibility’. And like when a pebble hits a still pond, the waves travel outward in countless concentric circles larger and larger in size even as they turn feebler and feebler in intensity, so is the circle of influence of each one of us in society. The circle of influence is in fact the circle of our responsibility. It is theoretically limitless, for it goes far beyond what is visible. Nevertheless it starts at the Self. Learning with a view to equip oneself to earn an honest livelihood can be seen usefully as one’s responsibility to oneself. But beyond self, the circles extend to family, neighbourhood, village, country, world, cosmos in ever larger if feebler circles. Manzil- The journey goes on.



Moving on from our toddler steps at Kotla, to the youthful strides at Khan Market, and now our bold leaps into the hills of Uttaranchal (more details can be had on request), Manzil’s journey has been one of constantly discovering the deeper continuities and inter-connectedness of all life. It is this thought that infuses our work and vision, and illuminates our understanding of Education and Empowerment, as that which builds connections between the self and social, the personal and the political, the intellectual and the emotional, the rational and the felt, the common and the distinctive, the ordinary and the sublime. We are all learners here. And like life itself, any Manzil is only a sojourn.

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