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The promise of spring

A rich harvest is in store in Malihabad when children enjoy learning to read and write.

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April in Malihabad is full of promise. The huge mango trees are full of blossoms — signs of the heavy harvest in the months to come. Already in each village, there is much mango related activity. While blossoms are turning into fruit, planks become wooden cartons and boxes for transporting the mangoes. The mangoes from here are famous throughout the country.

There is another blossoming happening in Malihabad. Quiet, steady and almost invisible. We stop at a government primary school. The children of Class I are sitting in a verandah outside a row of classrooms. They all have the same colourful story in their hands. In the story card, there is a monkey, which has just snatched a roti from a boy and he is sitting on a wall and eating it. Down swoops a bird and picks the roti from the monkey. The bird lands on a tree. The dog barks. The dog runs to get his roti... Roti aayi roti gayi. Jiski roti usay mil gayi.

The teacher has just read the story aloud. There are people passing by, going in and out of the school gate. The teacher stops every now and then. The children however do not look around. They are absorbed with the monkey and the fate of the roti.

Nervous beginnings

I sit down at the edge of the group. Softly I ask the boy next to me about the monkey. The boy looks nervous. I am a stranger. He is unaccustomed to being asked about what he is "reading". But some of his friends are not shy. Soon I am being told about what happens in the story. Different children add different pieces. "Can you draw something from the story?" The children are not sure. I draw a circle — a roti in the centre of a page. As I hand out small pieces of paper, there is sudden hectic activity. Everyone is digging deep in the depths of their school bags. Pencils and pens emerge. The teacher turns to me apologetically. "They are very small," she says, "we have not taught them to draw yet."

At first, progress is slow. Rubbers are furiously used. Several pieces of paper crumple and tear. Many tongues are held tightly between teeth in order to help the drawings emerge. Gradually, circles, some round and some amoeba-like, appear on the paper. They have marks on the them — like the roti in the story. Shyly, a few children meet my eyes to gauge my reaction. When they get a smile, they quickly dive back into their work. More squiggles, some outlines and several attempts to write words too. More children get up and come to show me what they have done. They describe their work. May be some of the children can read or at least recognise words. Most can read alphabets. But all know what happens in the story. On the little pieces of paper all around me I can see evidence of how much these children have blossomed. Despite their distracted teacher, despite the verandah, despite the noise and the traffic, the story cards and the mini books



SCHOOL IS FUN: Children engaged in hari patti. PHOTO: RUKMINI BANERJI

have left a mark. A few kilometres away is another school. Here the children of Class I are in a classroom. But it does not seem like the usual kind of classroom. There are no rows of children sitting in line and there is no teacher standing in the front of the class. What are all the children doing? All the children are in the middle of the room huddled together in a tight circle. I can see the head of the teacher amongst the smaller heads of the boys and girls. There is one story book open on the floor near the teacher and many copies around it.

"Mera Parivar?" I ask. The children are surprised that I know the book. Here there is no hesitation or shyness. Immediately they begin to take me through the book. A quick discussion follows on who has how many members in their family. I talk about another book in the set. "Have you read Tap-Tap-Tapak?" "Oh yes!" A rapid stream of voices start telling

me about the drop of rain and how it falls on the leaves and how the animals in the jungle get scared. The circle gets closer. Voices tumble out sliding one on top of the other. Their teacher simply smiles. She is enjoying the conversation as much as the children. She is silent but from the pride in her eyes, I can tell that she is relishing her children's chatter.

Ajit, a colleague and I decide to play a game. "If he tells you his name, can you write it?" I ask. Quickly two children run out and bring the barakhhadi chart and lay it out on the floor. Someone runs to bring out chalk. Obviously, such activities are familiar. Ajit whispers the first syllable of his name in the ear of one boy. "That is his name in the ear of one boy. Ajit writes a big 'Aa' in Hindi on the floor. Ajit whispers again. This time the boy frowns. His friends say, "tell, tell, we will find it in the barakhhadi chart". He still looks puzzled. Finally he says, "Do I have to write in English or in Hindi?" "What is

it?" the children want to know. "Jee". Quickly one girl pounces on the chart, finds the line with "ja". Her fingers point to the symbols on that row. The others chant with her... "ja...jaa...je...jee". "Stop, chant with her..." "ja...jaa...je...jee". "Stop, write that now." The class has solved the problem. Next to the big "aa" come the "jee". The final letter is easy. We now have a big "Ajeet" on the floor in front of us.

Writings on the wall

As we begin to leave, the children turn to the next activity. With their books in hand they move to the "hari patti" — the green writing panels on the walls. The panel is about as high as the children. Full length big pictures begin to appear on the walls. Some drawings based on the story card and some from their imagination. Next to the pictures, children write words. The wall is soon crowded with many many pictures and words jostling for space.

April in Malihabad is full of promise. The mango flowers will soon turn into mangoes. The boys and girls will soon be reading. The mangoes will travel across the country. Soon the word will also travel that children can enjoy books early in their school life. The harvest is going to be rich. For the mango crop and for this crop of children.

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