been reduced to teaching factories? Have not commercial interests crept in and made the process of schooling into a business? Aren’t business management courses more sought after than history or literature or the fine arts? What kind of children do these schools turn out? What would their aspirations be?

 Truly, we are at crossroads today. Since we shed our submissive, colonial mantle, our feudal past, some 70 years ago, we were told to move forward to build a new world. A world where we did not fear anyone, where the old hierarchical systems were now broken and all were equal; one in which we respect each other’s differences, no matter what. The new world called for a scientific and rational temper and outlook that would help us to grasp the modern world, and, above all to conduct our lives democratically. These values have been enshrined in our Constitution and all our schools were asked to promote these. But India has an ancient tradition and as Rabindranath Tagore said we should have our feet firmly set in our tradition but our eyes and ears open to the winds of change and modernity. We can choose what we want but not shut out these winds by closing our doors and windows. Unlike many other nations our tradition has also been to draw into it a multi-cultural tapestry. We have never shied away from this. This has been and is our common tradition.

**Our experience**

The classroom is where the culture of a society is played out. Our experience has taught us that the values that we want to bring into society have to form part of the school too, in fact, they must necessarily be the core of the culture of the whole school. It cannot be something applicable only to children or only for some aspects of the school life and not others. In effect, it must be the life of the school and therefore visible in every aspect of it.

Cooperation as against competition, non-violence as against aggression, integrity as against cheating, respect for others as against contempt, democratic functioning as against blind obedience to diktats, all must be applicable to all levels, management, teachers, non-teaching staff and students. This is what is meant by ‘culture’. To practice aesthetics only in the art class but have a shoddy school campus or classroom does not make sense. We cannot tell children to do or believe in something that we ourselves do not believe in or are not practising. They can see right through us and their respect for us immediately drops. Over time they learn that they too can say one thing and do something completely different and often in contradiction. This is when the rot sets in and a counter-culture begins.

**The adivasi classroom**

In the initial years, the government’s Asst. Education Officer would enter the classroom and ask – which is class 1 and 2 and 3 and so on? The children would answer which group they were in. This of course infuriates them. But for the adivasi child, the need to have no physical barriers between the groups was very important. They had to see each other and if necessary get up and walk over to talk to someone else. Strangely, they could do this unobtrusively without disrupting the class. It took us some time to understand this behaviour but we realized that the feeling of being in one community is very important to them. Physical barriers actually divide them over time.

The sense of community extended not just to each other in the school but also to the parents and members of their communities. Often parents and elders were encouraged to be part of the school and teach songs, stories, history and other cultural practices. This gave the children the feeling that the school was not separate from their home and to the elders that the school was a place they could be a part of, whenever they chose. Given the fact that they spoke a different language, had different customs and rituals from the rest of the local communities here, these people have always felt that they are apart, and have been marginalized. Now the school has found ways to restore their dignity and give them the feeling that they have an equally important place in society. In the eyes of the child this is an important message as it would otherwise lead to a sense of inferiority.

What the school has tried to do is not to bring in a new culture but to enhance the culture of the adivasi community. Cooperation is