

Vani Periodi and Umashanker Periodi

Vani and Umashanker Periodi reminisce candidly about parenting and the unusual style they adopted. Not following norms meant there was trial and error, but never the absence of deep reflection, which influenced their children in positive ways, building resilience, empathy and the ability to adjust to varying life situations.

We had planned for our first child to be born in February and everything was going fine; the doctor had given February 10 as the delivery date. We were very happy that things were going as per our plan. Our first daughter came three weeks earlier, in January, giving us the first lesson in bringing up children – not everything that we plan for our children’s upbringing will go as per our plans! We were reminded of Khalil Gibran, ‘Your children are not your children.’

It is very difficult to plan any intervention with children for concrete outcomes. As far as children are concerned, you can neither leave them to just grow without any planned intervention nor can you plan anything concretely. So, should we allow whatever happens to children to just happen? And not guide them? These are very difficult choices. In this article, we are attempting to reflect on what we, as parents, did because we wanted, our children to be independent, courageous, humane, and free. We did not have any idea how to bring up children and though we got help from others, basically, it was trial and error, succeeding sometimes and failing quite a few times. Many things are done instinctively; many others just happened in the flow as we were living our lives!

Looking back, we can see some of the decisions that helped our children grow. Coming back and relocating to our village was one such decision. This helped in many ways. Our children grew up in a rural environment. Though our village is just 22 km from the city of Mangalore, it is one of the most backward villages in the Bantwal district. We did not have electricity in our house till 1985,

there were just a few houses which had electricity. We started working from our house. We worked with *Chawadi*, an organisation which worked with people, especially the youth, of our village. We trained young girls to perform *Yakshagana*, a male-dominated folk art and dance form. For our own girls, it was a natural upbringing. They imbibed a lot of the village culture and made a lot of friends. We did not have formal jobs; we were freelancing. Hence, they got exposed to poverty, both because our own earnings were meagre, and also because poverty existed so closely around them in the village. This built a good perspective for our girls and exposed them to diversity in relating to and feeling for the vulnerable sections of society. They continued their friendships with their friends in the village after we moved to Bengaluru.

The other important decision was admitting our children to a Kannada-medium government primary school. This was an extremely difficult decision; our friends and relatives discouraged us. But Vani and I were very clear about this – we were certain that our children would get a rich experience in a government school. We were convinced that in government schools, education is good and there is less pressure on children than in private schools. Government schools also have a lot of space, and our daughters would grow up with other village children and some less privileged children. This would give them a sound foundation for their future life.

Our friends came down very heavily on us saying we are depriving our children of the rich experience they would have in a private school. They asked us what we would tell them if later in life our girls questioned this decision which deprived them of private school education. This made us think. And we decided that we would work with the school to provide different types of experiences to children. We planned experiences and exposure that would help children to grow holistically and be independent, rational, humane and free. For this, we organised several creative and leadership experiences, conducted a series of creativity and

leadership workshops, and frequent story-reading sessions, which introduced books to the children of this school. Our friends helped a lot in these practical sessions. We continued these workshops and activities in the school and village even after our children grew up. Our children and their friends continue these activities even now for the children of the village. Studying in a local government school built a very different perspective in our children.

After studying in the government school till class VII, our children went to an alternative school, the Centre for Learning (CFL) In Varadenahalli, near Magadi in Bengaluru. Our children did not know a word of English when they joined this school. But the school built their confidence and never made them feel inferior. The project they did with our children to help them acquire the English language was very creative. They asked our children to direct plays in English for Kannada-medium government school children. The teachers at the school were very good mentors for our children. They knew more about our children than we did and so, naturally, we allowed our girls to be mentored by these teachers. The school provided our children with the space to be highly critical, question everything and be reflective. It introduced our children to a very different social set-up and provided them with a rich social circle.

In developing values, these educational institutions played a very significant role. There was no conflict between the home and the school for our children. First, it was the government school where they were sensitised about freedom, poverty, vulnerability, and diversity and then it was CFL which gave them a strong footing in being critical, questioning everything and being reflective. Finally, all of it got re-established, consolidated, and grounded in the Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

From the beginning, we discussed everything with our children -- from our financial problems to whether we should have another child in the family. This culture of discussion and dialogue helped us a lot. Anything and everything would be discussed and jointly decided – the menu for a guest, the tours we undertook, joining school, problems faced by any of us. In later days, this discussion slowly came to the level of dialogue. Now, for everything, there is dialogue. Things are decided and solved through dialogue. It is not easy; takes time because things go back and forth, but ultimately everything ends on a nice note, with everyone's buy-in.

When we were having our first child, we did not

have any support at home. Since Vani was working for *Mahila Samakya* (a Central Government project) as District Co-ordinator, Mysuru we decided that Umashanker would take a break. Looking after the child and maintaining the home, including cooking all three meals, was his responsibility. We continued with this arrangement till our child was three-and-a-half years old and independent. Our child grew up in this atmosphere of the mother going to office and the father looking after the home. This, we feel, developed in her an alternative perspective which came to her very naturally. When our daughter started going to school, she read the common rhyme. '*Appanige office kelasa, Ammanige mane kelasa*' as '*Ammanige office kelasa, Appanige mane kelasa*' (father is working in the office and mother is working in the kitchen to mother is working in the office and father is working in the kitchen). We feel that this had a very strong impact on our children – they had role models at home who were totally different from the mainstream image.

Some simple things that we do with the children also have a far-reaching impact on them. Our Amma (Umashanker's mother) lived with us and looked after our children. Amma had the habit of sniffing snuff, and she would misplace the snuff box all the time. Then a frantic search would ensue. Everyone would be involved. Once Ini, our elder daughter, told Amma, 'You must keep your snuff-box in one place and always keep it in the same place, then you will not misplace it and there will be no searching for it.' Amma not only followed this advice given by her granddaughter but would also acknowledge that this idea of Ini's had solved her problem. One can only imagine how much self-esteem this incident must have given to the young grandchild, making her feel that people can listen to her and follow her advice.

Once, Indu, the younger one, was playing with our neighbour's child. They were making a lot of noise and Umashanker scolded the neighbour's child. The child went home. Indu was offended and started crying. Vani told her to speak to her father about it. Indu came to Umashanker and said, 'Why did you scold her? They don't scold me when I go to their house.' Uma thought about it and said, 'Sorry, I will not scold her again.' Later, when that child came to our house again, the first thing Umashanker did was apologise to her for scolding her. We feel that incidents like these have a very strong message for children.

During one of the reading sessions, Ini was looking

at a book on flags. She said to her mother, 'Amma, among all these flags, the Indian flag is the best.' Vani responded by saying, 'Yes, for us, the Indian flag is the best. For the Americans, it would be their flag, for the Australians, their flag, for the Pakistanis, the Pakistan flag. Each country has their own flag, and they love it. Hence, we can only say we like our flag and not that it is the best flag.' We had forgotten about this incident. Recently, when Ini was doing her PG, she reminded us about this incident and said that had a lasting impression on her and changed the way she looked at things. So, we never know! It is these small-small incidents which make and build values in children.

We built a minimalistic, very simple tiled house. It was without proper doors and windows. Amma came to this house to stay with us. This was a great opportunity for our children. They were brought up by Amma, who was a very strong woman, open and rational. She was open to new things and looked after the children with a lot of freedom. She connected with children very well and during school vacations, all her eight grandchildren came home. For two full months, they would stay in our house, looked after by Amma. This living together was a source of great learning for all our children.

Ini's teeth had gaps and were protruding. Ini wanted to set it right. There was a discussion at home. Do we value this form of beauty? Should we spend such a lot of money on something we do not believe in? But we did not decide for Ini; we told her that if she wants it, she could go ahead with it. Not a single word was spoken about this matter again.

We used to celebrate all festivals – Deepavali, other Hindu festivals, Christmas and Ramzan. Christmas in Mangalore is a lot of fun, and we would visit many friends. Our Indu began the practice of giving gifts to others. She would decorate the Christmas tree and on the eve of Christmas, tie gifts to it as if Santa Claus had brought the gifts. Everyone used to look forward to the surprise gifts. (We stopped this process when we felt that it was becoming a ritual!) We would always meet our Muslim friends during Ramzan. There were occasions when we would have *iftar* in our house inviting them.

Caste was not a topic that we suppressed. We discussed it openly in the family. Umashanker shared a lot of caste discrimination he had experienced as a child. Vani shared the Brahminical culture that was prevalent in their caste. The children grew up understanding both aspects –

higher and lower caste, their manifestations and impact. Children experienced caste discrimination at a very young age. They also learned to cope with it at that young age. Vani spoke to them in *Havyaka*, her mother tongue; we spoke in Kannada at home and the children learnt *Tulu* from Amma and the neighbours. So, culturally, it was a rich amalgam of cultures at home.

Our children have grown up to be politically aware citizens. How this happened, we are not sure. Probably because they participated in all our interactions with friends and various groups. I feel that they naturally imbibed politics as they participated in the movements, protests, workshops, and activities. We did not train them in any ideology or '-isms'. They were free to form their own opinions. We feel this helped them in forming their opinions and taking a stand when required.

Indu had a tough time in the government school. She was compared with her elder sister, and she was not treated well by her teachers. It was a painful experience and she refused to go to school. We gave this a lot of thought and, in the end, asked Indu to stop going to school. We home-schooled her. Our friends helped her with a few subjects and at home, Vani would concentrate on the rest. That we backed her decision gave Indu a lot of confidence.

We used to go on trips together. Simple trips - many times these would be to our friends' houses. But these trips gave us a lot of time together to discuss different things and enjoy the simple things in life. These trips brought our family together. We also took our children to meet our friends and to the meetings of *Samuchaya* and other NGOs. This led to our children building independent relationships with our friends. Some of our younger friends became very close to our children.

One thing that we very consciously did with our children was to not force them to do anything that we felt was right. This, we had learnt the hard way. We have seen many of our senior friends struggling with their children, unable to guide or influence them. We have examples of so many people who uphold high values but have not been able to make their children follow the same. This made us think a lot. We had decided very early in life that we will live the way we want to but will not impose our lifestyle or life choices on our children. Our children would be free to decide whatever they felt was good for them. We would take them along to all workshops, dramas, street theatre, movements, trainings and

wherever we went. After some time, when they were able to decide, we completely left it to them to decide if they wanted to accompany us or not. And then our children would choose to come or not. The decision would be theirs. Many times, we were disappointed and sad due to their decision, but we stuck to ours and respected theirs. This, we felt, made for a very healthy understanding of each other's decisions.

One thing that really worked to our advantage was the fact that we helped each other pursue what they aspired to – from Vani's creative journeys, like drama, quilting, or anything else that she wanted to do, to Ini's interest in dancing and singing or Indu's craftwork and stitching – all of us encouraged each other and made space for each one to pursue their hobbies. I think, in this way, the satisfaction quotient of our family remained high.

Our parenting style was not very heavy; it had a light touch. We did not make rules – hard-and-fast rules that cannot be broken. Nobody was punished; there was no strict regime. There were a few guidelines, and we did what we felt was right at that moment. We took equal responsibility for everything as a family. It was easier this way. For

us, living a smooth life without too much conflict was important.

It was a boon that both of us, Vani and Umashanker, shared a good understanding, had similar values and, by and large, had similar beliefs on bringing up children. Both of us avoided conflict. Understanding each other and responding quickly and rationally to resolve any misunderstanding or conflict that cropped up, was the norm. This was possible because we respected each other a lot. Today, looking back at how we brought our children up, we see many things we did with a purpose, but there are many things that went against our beliefs.

Going back to the question we asked at the beginning – can we plan everything for our children? The answer is a clear NO! Then, should we leave it just like that? No, we have to strike a balance. A balance between planned intervention and freedom. We need to let a child choose her own path; we must support her but basically, let her do what she wants to. The fundamental thing is that we have to first live the values that we want to propagate. This is the ultimate lesson! You live life the way you want; children will pick up what they want.



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