

THE 'TREEPS'

Combining Business with Pleasure

Can you imagine your 18-year-old son, brought up in Mumbai, not knowing how to make a telephone call? And then, how about his not knowing where to buy a ticket for the local train? Or not knowing how to find one's way from Chembur to C.S.T? Or being afraid of entering a lower middle class hotel? Or being frightened by an office with aluminium- and-glass door?

But then, children growing in child welfare institutions (CWI's) face exactly these handicaps when they emerge into the world from their institutions.

Vinimay started working for children in CWI's in 1982. Within a few years, we faced the problem of helping 18-year-old boys to get jobs, to find a place to stay, etc. While handling this, we were confused and confounded by their apparently unexplainable behavior; they would leave their jobs for trivial reasons or for no reason at all; or they would move to a lower or less remunerative job; they appeared to lack interest in their own career and financial betterment.

Soon we understood that this problem was related to the lack of certain type of skills mentioned above. The employees found the boys inadequate even for simple jobs like taking down a telephonic message and the boys were feeling terribly inferior.

In our lives, we do not consciously think of these 'skills' because we get them and we impart them continuously and unconsciously through day-to-day life. But children brought up in institutions do not get this training 'naturally'. Yes, they do get education, but 'education' as it is understood, deals only with 'academic' and 'technical' skills but not with these 'social' skills. Without these social skills, a person is not able to fit comfortably into the society he lives in, and his academic and technical skills become useless.

But then, these social skills and self-confidence cannot be imparted through blackboards. It should be done through practical training and the training should start early in childhood. This led us to decide that the children should be given social exposure systematically and this programme should cover all the children. The programme should be interesting, graded; varying with age and above all should give enough time for volunteers to interact with individual children. Thus arose one of the most popular programmes of Vinimay, 'the trips' (or 'treeps' as the children call them).

After much deliberations and discussions, this 'trips' programme was formally launched in 1988-89 (incidentally this was also the year in which Vinimay was registered as a Trust) and given a final shape in the following year. Under this programme, children of the age group 6-12 are taken for a half-a-day picnic to nearby gardens; children 13-15 years of age go for one day educational trips (zoo, Nehru science centre and museum); and children of 16 years and above

for a one-day trekking to different places. Presently this programme covers all the 300 children of CCH and about 50 children of BKN. It is being extended to cover about 100 children of BKN this year.

Undoubtedly, the trips are enjoyable by themselves what with their joy ride in buses and rickshaws, the bhelpuris, the udipi lunch, the exhilaration of footing it out to an ancient fort on top of a hill!

But then how do these 'social skills' fit in here?

These trips are just the 'medium' through which social skills are imparted to the children. During these trips, they are asked to buy tickets, to request the bus conductor to tell us where to get down, to look at the 'menu' card and order one's choice, to observe notices and sign boards, to choose between travelling by train and bus, to overcome the fear of sitting on a giant-wheel etc.

The Vinimay volunteer is always at hand to clarify any doubts, to lighten any embarrassment or to encourage when there is hesitation. To enable meaningful interaction between the children and the volunteers, only 10 to 15 children are taken out on a trip at a time and the child to volunteer ratio never exceeds six to one.

And that is what they are, 'the treeps', combining business with pleasure!