

Scottish nostalgia

by Suchita Malik

Venue: Garnetbank Primary School in Glasgow. **Scene:** outside the school building from where children could be seen playing inside. Their faces were flush with excitement and happiness. It looked the like of a soccer match as the kids tossed around, to and fro, very much like the ball. On going inside, one came across many more groups of children, all involved in the activities of their own choice. There was a painting class going on in one corner, children involved in the intricacies of a theatrical performance in the next room while others were trying to dance their way out to the tunes of a song they hardly seemed to understand.

And lo! there was a luncheon-hall ahead. Here one could see many of these tiny-tots, their faces smeared with chocolate, ice-cream, candies and snacks under the supervision of an affectionate and caring teacher. The scenario was inviting enough for us where we had gone for the admission of our children on our first-ever visit to Scotland.

"May I help you, please?" so we were greeted by a suave and petite young lady.

"Ah, yes! we are here for the admission of our children," I nearly blurted out, feeling a little uneasy with her politeness.

"Oh, sure! our pleasure. Will you be kind enough to talk to Ms Douglas, our head-teacher. I will show you the way to her room."

We were escorted gracefully to the room of the head-teacher and asked to wait for a few seconds. The young lady went inside, and immediately came out the head teacher only to tell us that she was in middle of a meeting and apologised profusely for the fact that she would

see us only after two minutes. We were asked to take a seat amidst all those courtesies.

My mind immediately recalled the long, never-ending queues we had stood in for seeking admission of our wards to the "prestigious" schools of our City Beautiful. The reverie was broken barely a minute later as the head-teacher herself came out, escorted us in to her simple but elegant room. Pleasantries followed and the children were made to feel at home with an attempt to follow and remember their names. The tone set, she hurried to get the admission forms from a neatly-kept chest of drawers and filled the blanks herself asking for the required information. We were only asked to sign the documents. We were not asked to show the previous school-leaving certificates which we had so meticulously taken along. It was only their age enquiry without any insistence on the birth certificates. We put our signatures and our children were admitted and to the next higher level.

The formalities complete, we thought of taking leave with a very sincere vote of thanks. But no, she said, things were not complete as yet. She had yet to guide the children to their respective class-rooms, introduce them to their teachers and fellow children. And then started a guided tour of the school with a visit to their class-rooms and a formal introduction with their teachers. Having fulfilled the necessary round of formalities and after giving the required instructions for coming to school the next day, she was kind enough to see us off at the door, thanking us again for selecting her

school for the admission of our children.

Both children happily went to the school for one full year which was almost like a second home to them. They were well-cared for and tutored in a very affectionate and informal manner so much so that each day was a new experience which they looked forward to. All they had to carry along were their lunch boxes, and school time was indeed a fun time. They played, participated, communicated as well as learned. It was a happy break from the usual rut as I watched them grow and learn in a play-way method. They had been freed from the shackles of bagfuls of books, the never-ending homework and the lurking fear of units back home.

The teachers were an extremely nice lot to interact with. None of them would ever use an influential parent to get work for her chartered accountant son or be nasty with the child if the parent failed to oblige.

Alas! the freedom was rather short-lived. They are back home and back to their bag and work loads with a vengeance. I can't help but introspect on the merits of our education system which stifles the natural growth of our promising children under tremendous work pressure.

Is this safe for a healthy future environment? Don't we need to give our school-going children some breathing time and a fair opportunity to open up and show their worth? Let us not bury them under a donkey's load but give them enough leeway to stand on their own under an emotional and protective care. Let schooling be a dream come true instead of being a nightmare for them. Any takers — environment sleuths or policy framers?