

# A Life Worth Living

-Arvind Gupta

Does life have an aim? I have often mulled over this question. I feel life is innately meaningless. But then it would become very unbearable. We can't live in a void. So, we have to lend our lives a meaning – even if none exists. This is what makes a life worth living.

Speaking for myself I wanted to become a primary school teacher, in a small hill town. This idyllic dream still propels me! Being good in studies I got into the IIT. And later got a good job. At heart I always wanted to work with children. So, after two years of work with Telco I took a year off to work with the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP). I made toys and wrote books. Many children and teachers liked them and used them. This made me very happy. It gave me deep satisfaction to do something meaningful.

Over the years I have had the privilege of working in many countries with teachers and children. I have conducted workshops in over 1300 schools in my own country. These experiences made me acutely aware about the dire poverty of good reading material for teachers. There was very little worth reading, which was available at an affordable price. My response to the situation was very personal. If I liked some book very much, and if it was moderately priced I would buy 20-30 copies of it, and share it with my friends. For as long as I can remember I have bought multiple copies of books. Before email came in I wrote 30-40 postcards everyday. We had a vibrant "underground" in education. We shared our cherished books, translated them and distributed them.

Much before we were able to inspire the National Book Trust to print *Tottochan* it had already been translated and printed in seven Indian languages! We did the same with several other books. The greatest Indian classic on education *Divaswapna* by Gijubhai Badheka languished for full 60 years before we made it mainstream. This speaks so much of our gargantuan educational institutions! *Danger School!* by Paulo Friere's group, *Teacher* – Sylvia Ashton Warner, *Duishen* – Chinzees Aitmatov, *Summerhill* – A. S. Neill, *VSO Science and Maths Handbooks for Teachers*, several books by John Holt, *Unesco Source Book for Science in the Primary School*, *Gayneck* – Dhangopal Mukerjee (the only book by an Indian author ever to have won the prestigious Newbery Medal, *Exasperating Essays* – D.D.Kosambi, *School of Barbiana*, *Bahuroop Gandhi* – Anu Bandopadhyaya and printing of scores of other books not for personal profit but for public gain is testimony to what ordinary focussed citizens can do.

My needs are simple. Expensive clothes look cheap on me! I scarcely eat anything when I am invited for a party. I crave for the home cooked "khichidi". For twenty years I have not been to the barber. Every month or two, my wife "chops" the few strands of hair that have dared to grow long. My daughter has been stitching my pyjamas for as long as I can remember. Out of love or ignorance people often shower fraudulent titles like Dr. Professor, Director on me. I am none of these. I have never had a visiting card. I don't need all these appendages for my personal identity. My deeply satisfying work sustains me. Seeing the gleam in the eyes of children everyday recharges me. Good, meaningful work propels me.

Money, status and power don't mean much to me. I am not in competition with anyone – but with myself. Every single day I translate for 4 hours so that I can share something meaningful with 40 crore Hindi speaking people. Because I have been on the roads all my life is one single reason why I have been able to reach out to so many people, from all walks of life.

There are many positive role models. On the Internet there is a site named [gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org) (Gutenberg is the place where the first bible was printed on a printing press). A digital visionary - Michael Hart, inspired it. Today there is enough computing power in the world to digitise each and every single book, in each and every language in the world and put it on the web. All the books of the world can be made available to all the children - whether rich or poor, at the click of the mouse. Gutenberg has a very simple slogan "A MILLION BOOKS FOR A BILLION PEOPLE". What an inspiring slogan! It stirred me. In the last eight months I have digitised over 130 books (in English, Marathi and Hindi) and uploaded them on my site

<http://arvindguptatoys.com>

Gutenberg has digitised over 15,000 books and placed them in the public domain. We need to do the same with books in Indian languages. We can do it, as Indians are great at assimilating technology. Our children are starved of books. Our libraries are non-existent and antiquated. We can do meaningful things by placing every possible piece of literature in our languages on the web. I often think why Gandhi would have really loved the Internet. I will end by a small quote from Gandhi

Live Simply

That others may simply live.