



THIS is an unusual book: part autobiography and part thoughts on education; each aspect worthwhile, nay, distinguished. Muriel Wasi was an unusual woman. A triple first class from Madras University, she topped the Presidency lists for 1933, went on to Oxford for further education and made the most of her stay there, absorbing all that her teachers had to offer with critical discrimination. This quality stayed with her throughout her career as an educationist and university teacher.

A Critical Reader

Life started on a happy note. Her Roman Catholic parents were Christians from the Konkan coast; both of them fine doctors, successful and respected, with a keen sense of ethics. The house that Muriel grew up in was large, comfortable and full of children and had a library with books on a variety of subjects. It was her parents, particularly mother, who inspired her to read and think for herself. She remained a voracious, albeit critical reader, throughout her life. She expressed her deep gratitude to Oxford and England thus:

"The principal of my college, Grace Haddow, had a gallantry that I came to associate with English women of intellect, training and professional standing. They may be found in other societies but Miss Haddow's brand of gallantry still seems to me distinctively English. There was nothing she would not do to help those of any nation, race or religion, who had proved their ability."

She continues in the same spirit of seeking and sharing: "As the persecuted intellectual fled from Nazi occupied Europe, he tended to come Oxford-wards, and we therefore had the advantage of great minds presiding at our seminars with courage and an independence of mind that exemplified what the university stood for in those deeply troubled times."

This training stood her in good stead even in old age in an India sinking in a morass of ignorance, religious bigotry, cant and hypocrisy.

Muriel Wasi's career as an educationist flourished long after she had retired from active service from the Ministry of Education and then as a teacher of substance, first at St. Stephens College and thereafter Jesus and Mary College, both leading Delhi educational institutions. She continued to think, write, attend and grace seminars on education till a year before her death from cancer in 1995. In a 1978 essay, "What to do with Public Schools" from her book **Living and Learning**, she observes: "If you can take underprivileged children and make scholars and good citizens of them, you have demonstrated that you care about survival, better than volumes in praise of your services. Some part of your inheritance, the dated part, will have to be abandoned. Study this inheritance to see what you can afford to shed, what you must keep to be true to yourselves as good schools. But come to terms with your society and the times. For your survival is at stake".

Vision of Life and Society

Hers, however, was a healthy pragmatism. Her vision of life and society and the individual's role in both, derived from a continuously evolving intelligence that embraced without sacrificing either critical perception or compassion. In her scheme of things rendering service meant sacrifice, not capitulation to sentimental blackmail. She felt students at the university level were seldom encouraged to be independent thinkers and that their teachers taught them by rote. She saw this as a grave dereliction of duty.

Wasi was one of the earliest champions of an interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of English Literature. She believed that in order to be well informed about literature, you had to be acquainted with history, sociology and politics as well. She believed that classrooms ought to shift to libraries and students and teachers alike partake of the wisdom offered by books on various subjects. In "The Uncommon Task", an essay taken from her book, **The Romance of Teaching**, she quotes from Tagore: "A teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself. A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its own flame. The teacher who has come to the end of his subject, who has no living traffic with knowledge, but merely repeats his lesson to his students can only load their minds not quicken them."

Muriel Wasi was that rare individual who had a continuous curiosity about the world around her and managed to share her discoveries with anyone who came to her with the desire to know and learn.