We are delighted to present the August 2011 edition of Kindle, a bi-monthly newsletter from the Azim Premji Foundation.

Our lead article explores an issue that is at the heart of ensuring quality education in our schools i.e. teacher education. It emphasizes the value of practice that is based on sound theoretical knowledge – a process that can encourage teachers to become reflective practitioners.

The next article looks the life and legacy of a person whose vision of education was far ahead of his time and relevant almost a century later – Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore’s dream of an education where the child is happy, where learning is joyful and where she is close to nature still remains a dream in most of our schools.

From the green landscape of Shantiniketan, we move across to Bhagwanpura, a remote village in the heart of the Thar Desert, to hear the story of Sowdan Singh. Mr. Singh is a government school teacher, with whom the Foundation’s Rajasthan team has worked. In his own way, Mr. Singh seems to have infused the spirit of Shantiniketan into the small village school where he teaches.

In some senses, the worlds of Tagore and Sowdan Singh meet at Azim Premji University. The University aspires to develop outstanding talent and build the knowledge that is required to address the deep rooted challenges facing Indian education and allied development areas. The University welcomed its first batch of students on 23rd July 2011 – we provide you with a glimpse of this new born institution.

Finally, we report from our District Institute in Yadgir, Karnataka where the best performing schools of the area were recently honoured in a public ceremony. These schools have achieved remarkable results despite challenging circumstances and represent the triumph of human will over adversity.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of Kindle. Do send us your comments at: kindle@azimpremjifoundation.org

Nilanjan Choudhury
The Azim Premji University welcomed its first batch of students on 23rd July 2011, the tone of which was set by a statement made by Anurag Behar the Vice-Chancellor in his address to the students, “You'll notice we deliberately have no red ribbons to cut and no chief guests to impress. But, if we live up to what we've set out to do we might get ceremonial a 100 years hence, long after I'm gone, and the name that we create today still thrives...”

The composition of the first batch of students reflects the complexity of the issues that the University attempts to address, in the areas of development and education. To ensure that the University is able to nurture talent and passion, the admission process has ensured that we have a diverse group that learns as much from each other as from the course itself. Dileep Ranjekar traversed 10 years of the Azim Premji Foundation’s engagement in the field of education and set the context for understanding the thinking behind the Foundation and the University. He reiterated that right from its nascence, the foundation constructed a century’s plan of progression for this movement.

Shabnam Virmani’s singing of Kabir and Bhitai’s poetry, cut through any rhetoric and forced us all to engage with the questions of action, reflection and the need for introspection and openness to learning, to be able to work on issues of justice, equity and social change.

With that in mind, we began our movement with an outbound trip to Sharavati Valley. With lots of cooperation from the monsoon (it almost took a break during the four days) it was four days spent in not so heavy rain, swimming building rafts, trekking, high rope walking, map reading and navigating.

The map reading and navigating exercises taught us a lot about coordination, teamwork and our capacity to listen to each other. After being hopelessly lost within half hour of setting out, most groups took over 8 hours to cover the approx 10 km distance they were to navigate. But we, argued, introduced ourselves to each other and confronted each other.
At times, we even side-stepped each other. Swimming and high ropes were as much about confronting our own fears as getting support and encouragement from the rest of the team. Raft-building was well... about making something that floats... and it did not make it to the other bank in all cases. It was also about synchronizing our efforts, assessing our strengths, balancing our lack of skill with coordination and effective planning.

The 16 hours of solo time in the forest – spent under a blue tarpaulin tent, with just a candle, no torches, phones or watches were a time for self-awareness and reflection. Some of us could not deal with it and ended up blowing the whistle to be 'rescued'.

Abdul Kalam, a student feels, “The nervousness and dilemmas about leaving my job and joining the University have been troubling me. Initially, I almost felt a little out of place. I feel better now after meeting my batch mates, hearing their stories, observing their ways of working and dealing with things. Here, in the forest and in the workshops we have set a tone that is open and honest. I do hope this spirit remains and we nurture and build on this feeling of camaraderie through the next two years.”

The academic skills workshops were intended to create a common ground and to build a community of learners equipped in some basic skills required for their courses in text based, quantitative and computer skills. Talking of her experience of facilitating a workshop on text based skills, Indira Vijaysimha a faculty member at the University says, “It was a pleasure to see the entire group’s sincere attempt to begin academic writing. Even the recalcitrant few who were hesitant and questioned the need of writing - “jab jo kuch bhi sikha woh dimaag mein hai, to likhne ki kya zarurat hai?” (when everything learnt is in the brain, then what is the need to write?) eventually got down to the task. This particular student wrote a note on the Green Revolution and began to use the MS Word program on his net-book for the first time ever!”

Sneha sums up the mood in the university now when she says, “After the riotous times and with our righteous cause, we all join in saying that we will do our utmost to see this university into the 22nd century. So catch us if you can through our mission. This Catch 22 is brimming with resolve.”

Alphabetical order.

The stakes are high, the expectations huge and the intentions right. The University has started its journey and for now it does seem, on the right note.

(Benson Issac is a faculty member and Sneha Subramaniam is a student at Azim Premji University)

I grew up in Bhagwanpura, a remote village located deep in the heart of the inhospitable Thar Desert. Situated in the catchment area of the Bilaspur dam, the village was not accessible by road. I never attended school as a child. I spent my childhood herding my family’s goats and taking them to the forest to graze. Every day on the way to the forest, I would pass the village of Salari. I struck up an acquaintance with a few children who lived there. These children told me about their experiences in school. My uncle’s son who took lessons from a teacher in the village, would come home and brag to his friends about how one day he would become an officer. These stories intrigued me. Soon I developed a longing to go to school.

My resolve to get an education was strengthened by the following incident. My father had taken a loan from a bank but our family’s dire financial circumstances made it impossible for us to repay the loan. One day the bank manager arrived at our village in a car and started looking for my father. Word about this got to my father and he started asking the children who passed through the jungle while going to school to teach me. At first, they refused. I threatened to hit them with the stick I used to herd my goats and they relented. Every day after their school gave over, I would wait for them with my goats. I would learn a letter a day. I used my stick as chalk and the ground as a slate. These children taught me for a couple of years. I was not sure if I had learned, anything until one day during Ramayan Paath, a continuous reading session of Ramcharitmanas, I picked up a book of the Ramayan lying around and read four lines. I was elated. I was literate at last.

In 1978, there was a famine in our village. The government started public works programmes to provide employment and wages during that period. I also participated in some of these programmes. On the day wages were being distributed, instead of giving me Rs 60 I was given Rs 75. I gave Rs. 60 to my family and kept Rs 15.