

Kenji's International School Echoes with the Voices of "Sirbuba": An Interview with Nandu Uprety

Anjali Sharma and Merry Ray

Abstract: This article uncovers the journey of a Nepal educator, poet, and writer who found inspiration in a Japanese philosopher's search for the self through love, care, happiness, and the "golden" moments of life. Nandu Uprety opened Kenji's International School to follow Miyazawa Kenji's philosophy of humanity, working for people experiencing poverty, developing society, and nurturing nature. This is not to say that Nandu Uprety did not face challenges, as he sold all his property for this school and never sought donations. Yet he adored the blooming flowers in the gardens, the echoes of Sirbuba, and the happiness in the children's smiles.

Keywords: School, Children, Values, Miyazawa Kenji, Practical experience, Nandu Uprety

Introduction

Nandu Uprety was born on June 29th, 1966, in Sangrumba, Ilam district, in the east part of Nepal. He has a Master's in English, a Master's in Nepali, and a Master's in Education. He writes poems, songs, and short poems (*choto kavita* in Bengali) on topics such as weapons, mothers, animals, children, and socially relevant issues. He published a travelogue about his travels in Nepal in 1997. In the 1990s, he sold his ancestral property to establish Kenji International School. The school ran from 2000 to 2019 but was closed due to Nandu Uprety's severe health issues. Opening with only nine students, including his son, the number gradually increased to 170. The school also provided meals (breakfast and lunch), with only minimal costs charged to cover the culinary materials and the cook's salary. The journey of Nandu Uprety, from a teacher at a college in Nepal to becoming the principal of Kenji



International School, is representative of his quest for better education for children, imbibed with the values and humanity that gave birth to Kenji International School. His stance on moral values and love for everyone, be it human or nature, apparent in the ethos of the school reflected one of Miyazawa Kenji's philosophies: unless everyone is happy, there is no individual happiness. Kenji International School, under the leadership of Nandu Uprety, was considered a family growing together experiencing inner peace and joy. He received the IHATOV AWARD (2007), established originally by Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture, Japan in 1991 and presented



Image 1 (left): Mr. Nandu Uprety sir's home. On his right is Dr. Anjali Sharma, and on the left, Ms. Merry Ray. Photo by Anuj Uprety (Younger son of Nandu Uprety Sir).

Image 2 (right): Nandu Uprety sir receiving the 2007 IHATOV award. Photo received from Mr. Nandu Uprety Sir, used with permission.

to him by The Miyazawa Kenji Association Ihatov Center, for contributing practically to the vision of Miyazawa Kenji. He received the Nepal Samman Award from the Nepal Government in 2013 for his contribution to Education and Literature. Currently, he is working as the general secretary of the Poet Yudhprasad Mishra Memorial Foundation and as a central member of the National People's Cultural Federation in Nepal.

Miyazawa Kenji was a poet, novelist, writer of children's literature, and agricultural science teacher. He was interested in soil science, geology, history, and Esperanto. He constantly worked to improve the conditions for peasant families in society. He was a teacher of agricultural science at Hanamaki Agricultural School. His literary work evokes resilience, sensitivity, compassion, self-determination, and acceptance, and emphasizes the realization of children's capacity through education. He sought an understanding of equality that keeps the world

interconnected, believing that one can be happy if everyone is happy (Moritoki Škof, 2013, pp. 93–96). Miyazawa Kenji's philosophy bridged the gap between humankind and nature, seeing them instead as a relationship, and taught that all things, locally and globally, are a single interconnected whole (Chakma, 2022, pp. 35–45). Miyazawa Kenji's educational perspective is centered in pragmatism and experiential learning based in natural settings where the child can observe and practice (Colligan-Taylor, 1994, p. 63).

The research scholar Merry Ray and her Research Supervisor, Anjali Sharma, interviewed Mr. Nandu Uprety Sir at his home in Bhaktapur, Nepal. This is an edited version of that interview.

Semi-structured Interview of Nandu Uprety Sir at 11:00 AM on the 17th of September, 2023, in his home in Bhaktapur, Nepal.

Here, the Research Scholar (R), Nandu Uprety (N), and Research Supervisor (G) are used.

Research Scholar: Namaste, Sir; I will start with how you knew about Miyazawa Kenji.

Nandu Uprety: The Nepal Government and the Prime Minister of Japan organized a youth exchange program from Nepal. As a young writer, just 30 years old, I was selected for an interview. The Ambassador of the Embassy of Japan asked me just one question: “What will you do after visiting Japan?” I told him that when I returned, I would write about what I did. I would experience the people’s culture, tradition, development, and behavior, and make a book out of it. He was impressed with me and said, “Okay, you are selected.” So, that’s how I got to visit Japan. I didn’t know about Miyazawa Kenji at that time. When I reached Hanamaki City, I spent five days there and visited the Miyazawa Kenji Memorial Museum. Then, I came to know that this was the birthplace and workplace of Miyazawa Kenji.

Research Scholar: What was your inspiration for opening Kenji International School?

Nandu Uprety: When I visited Shiga Prefecture, there was a school whose name I have forgotten. It was an elementary school through grade 6. It was not based on Miyazawa Kenji’s philosophy. When we arrived at school, the principal was dressed up in a tie and suit, but he went to his room and returned dressed in a tracksuit. He went up to a crowd of students; I was surprised to see that children began climbing on his head and shoulders with sounds of joy. The school’s compound was huge, with a pond as well as a forest with squirrels running around. But there were only 250 students enrolled. I asked him why the school, with such excellent infrastructure, had so few students. He answered in this way: “Suppose I am talking to you—if, at the same time, on the school playground, one child falls and I do not know their name to be able to address and carry them, then I’m not being morally authentic in running this school. After I return home in the evening, I remember which students and teachers I spoke with and all I did during the day.” This impressed me, and I even shed tears because, at that time, in my country and my neighboring country India, only

Image 3 (left): From the left, 1st person is Mr. Nandu Uprety clapping, along with other participants in the International Youth Development Exchange Program.

Image 4 (right): Mr. Nandu Uprety visiting Hanamaki during the the International Youth Development Exchange Program.



if there were many students enrolled would a school be considered excellent.

R: When did you feel you should open the school, and did you inform the Japanese embassy or anyone from Japan about the school?

N: At that time, I was teaching college. I became determined to leave my job and start a school like this. We stayed for a few more days in Hanamaki—I started learning about Miyazawa Kenji and realized that he would have become the second Gautam Buddha¹ if he had lived longer. After I returned to Nepal, I left my job, stayed home for one year to think about it, and started Kenji International School in 2000 in a rented building in Subidhanagar. That is the background to the opening of the school.

I did not inform people in Japan about the school. But, a couple of engineers came from Tokyo to Nepal to attend the wedding ceremony of a friend of mine. My friend's elder brother's children were studying in my school, and when the couple asked, "Where are you studying?" the children replied, "At Kenji International School." They were surprised and asked the children, "Is it a Japanese name?" They replied, "Yes." Then the couple asked to be taken to school the next day. The next morning, the children brought them to the school; the Japanese couple talked to me, and the young man shared that his father was the director of Kodansha Publishing in Japan and had published two books by Miyazawa Kenji. They asked if they could inform the Japanese people about the Kenji School. I hesitated but, in the end, acquiesced, and our school was publicized in Japanese newspapers.

R: What was the Japanese reaction to Kenji International School?

N: In 2007, the representative of the Ministry of Education of Japan, the Principal of Hanamaki School, the Extracurricular Activities Head of Hanamaki

School, and the Chief of Hanamaki School visited Kenji International School, and I welcomed them. They saw everything: every movement within our school, our teachers' activities, my activities, and also parents' respect towards the school. Parents loved it very much and the children enjoyed being there. In the same way that the principal of Hanamaki School started his school, I welcomed the students at the gate of the school in the morning and saw them off in the evening.

In 2007, Hanamaki Metropolitan City honored five scholars, including a biologist, a historian, a literature person, a scientist, and myself. I attended the ceremony in Hanamaki City to receive the award.

R: Based on your knowledge, expertise, and experiences, what are your thoughts on Miyazawa Kenji's philosophy about education?

N: Kenji Miyazawa's philosophy emphasizes practical education and experiential learning and advocates love for children. Love inspires children to express their thoughts; the home and school environments also affect them. If they face difficulties at home, they must be able to communicate about this in school. Therefore, the school environment must be such that children can express themselves, be open, and be fearless in any situation. I enjoyed it when, from afar, they left their parents and ran toward me calling "Sirbuba Sirbuba..."

I was very impressed when I learned about Kenji and his philosophy during my visit to Japan. Miyazawa dedicated his life to the people. He did not think about any other things. He farmed rice paddies and generated a new breed of rice. He had no cold storage or refrigerators to store crops for extended use then. Therefore, he made a deep hole in the ground to keep potatoes and many other things. In this way, he spent his life with the poor people of Hanamaki. I am from a low-income family, but not a very poor family, so, I was very inspired by his life. His idea was to teach about farming in school, and he believed in a practical education. He took the

¹ Gautam Buddha is a religious teacher and founder of Buddhism; his core teachings involve ethical understanding of the mind, being kind, dhyana meditation, sensitivity, and mindfulness.

children or asked the teachers to take the children to the riverside to learn about the river. Kenji's philosophy also says that everything has life; for example, if you touch a stone, it also has life. One of the critical things his philosophy reflects is that all creatures are the products of nature. So, we should love all things; love everything and everybody in the universe. We taught the children the same thing. We should love everything. In the school, the children were 3- to 6-year-olds, and we didn't have any barricades on the garden side, but no one plucked the flowers. The children just go there and enjoy them. We didn't have any cleaners or sweepers. The children took turns daily cleaning the garden, the playground, and the courtyard.

R: How many children were there on the first day, how many classes were there in total in the school, and how did you select teachers for the school and ensure the implementation of Kenji's philosophy in the curriculum and teaching style? Did you give any special training to the teachers to help them learn about Miyazawa Kenji's philosophy?

N: On the first day, there were five to six students. There are seven classes: LKG (lower kindergarten), UKG (upper kindergarten), and classes one to five. We placed advertisements on public platforms to find teachers and called them for interviews; it was my responsibility to choose those we would hire. I informed them about Miyazawa Kenji, and after learning about him, the teachers became inspired. We celebrated Kenji's Memorial Day on the 21st of September. Sometimes, Japanese people would also come to celebrate. To ensure Kenji's philosophy was embedded in the syllabus, I came up with the idea of the peer group teaching system. I merged the early childhood (ECD) technique, the Japanese kindergarten system, and our Nepali system to create a unique curriculum and teaching style. This teaching style included active learning. First, the teacher gives information, and then the students prepare among themselves.



Image 5: From the left, the second person is Mr. Nandu Uprety, with four other scholars.

Another way of teaching is, for example, if we teach them about the marigold plant. We take them to the Marigold Garden. Students can see the plant, leaf, and roots. Students also carry drawing paper, draw a picture of a marigold in the garden, and write the names of the plant parts. In this way, it is easier to understand the parts of a plant. The students are made aware of the content in the syllabus according to their age. In Kenji's school, we incorporate whatever children need at that age in the syllabus.

While writing the book outlining the syllabus for our school, I also focused on the linguistic part and correctly using sound and text. We requested parents ask the children to read aloud, and any person at home or in the school who listens to them can correct them if they are making any mistakes. That is the way we created and implemented the curriculum. It was very much community-based and experiential.

R: Can you share what kinds of difficulties you faced when you decided to open the school, and what are the memories of the school that are still fresh even after 24 years?

N: When I returned from Japan after spending one month there, I was teaching in a private college in Nepal and left that job. I was staying in a big house, and I left that also. I had received some proper-

ty from my father, so I sold it and started school. My wife supported me for the first two years as she worked part-time in the college. My wife, one assistant, and I were the only ones there when I started the school. There was a big school next door to Kenji's School. That school's principal wore a tie and suit, and I always wear trousers and a jacket or tracksuit. So, they made up a slogan: "Don't send the children to Kenji's School because the principal must also learn to wear ties and suits." This reflected the idea of "proper" schooling and administration of schooling at that time.

Students paid meager fees, and our school was not very expensive. The school was for local people who could get there on foot. Therefore, we did not have any transportation facilities. We also provided meals in the school with a very minimal cost to pay for the materials and the cook. At that time, we received 200 or 300 rupees per child, and in 2019, we received 1500 rupees per child. I didn't get any salary for 10 to 12 years, but after that, I got some money for five or six years.

One day, my friends running the most expensive school asked me, "Nandu Uprety ji, if you don't need money, then why did you open the school"? I started the school not to earn money but to introduce Miyazawa Kenji's philosophy to schools in Nepal.

My wife and my family supported me. We had a very bitter time when getting the school up and running. We faced a crisis of money. We made liquid food, *jaulo*. It is a traditional Nepali baby food. We made *jaulo* in the morning and also in the evening. My eldest son was 11 years old and passed the entrance examination for Budhanilkantha School, a renowned school in Nepal. The King's children also studied there. My eldest son passed the entrance exam, but we didn't have money, so I requested money from my eldest brother.

Yes, there were challenging times, but I enjoyed those years. That is my life, the golden life for me. I still have tears when I remember that part of my

life. I enjoyed running the school and being with the children.

R: You ran the school for 19 years. Why did you close the school? You could have transferred the duties to someone who could take on this responsibility.

N: I spent 19 years with children. For the last three to four years, I have been suffering from back pain. Getting down to the school's ground and moving up to my room was tough, and it became impossible. I informed my Japanese friends that it was getting difficult for me to work. I requested their guidance. They suggested closing the school, and I did that. I spent one and a half years in bed. After I improved, I was appointed as an academic assembly member of Nepali Literacy in Nepal Academy by the Nepal Government. I spent four years there.

I completely closed the school in 2019 because if I had given the school's responsibility to someone else, I was unsure how they would run it. It was a private school, and teachers in Nepal needed money to manage it. Six teachers showed interest in running the school. However, I still believed it was better not to transfer it. I never got any donations for the school, not even one rupee. I enjoyed my work, and I started the school just for Miyazawa Kenji. So, I did not think of transferring the responsibility to someone else.

The only time I received donations of any kind was during the earthquake in 2015. We supported many people by providing shelter in the school compound. During that time, Japanese people sent money to assist earthquake victims. We used that money to help victims' family members and ensure their comfortable stay in the school, buying essential things and distributing them to those who suffered.

The school was closed in 2019 before COVID-19, and it was the exact right time to close it, as it was a small private school running on rented premises; running the school during the pandemic would have



Image 6: Kenji International School taken from the Facebook page of the school.

been very difficult. Yeah, closing the school was a bitter, but ultimately good, experience. It was the right decision.

R: What was the reaction of your family, relatives, and local people when you told them your decision to close the school?

N: At the beginning, when I wanted to open the school, I left my job, and they called me mad. My family also shared the same thoughts. But seven years after starting the school, they came to the school and saw children like blooming flowers in the garden. When I decided to close the school after 19 years, they again called me mad. They said that when you started earning more than two to three lakhs in a month through the school, you are considering closing it. Why are you closing it? They declared that our Nandu Uprety became mad again. My friends also asked, “Why are you closing the school? It is a primary school, so running the school is effortless and has fewer issues.” They said “Your decision is terrible,” but after a year, COVID came, and all of them clapped for me, saying “You are a farsighted person. You do not have the heart and eyes of man; you have the heart and the eyes of God.”

Later, members from the neighbourhood of Suvidha Nagar and my relatives came up and asked me, “Sir, where is the school?” They said that we need Kenji School for our children. When many people inquired about Kenji International School, I felt proud of my children who had studied there and the school I had made.

G: What are your present engagements, and what are your family members doing now?

N: Now, I write, read, and attend different programs at different places. I am also trying to translate Kenji’s work from English to Nepali. I will publish some books to show respect for Miyazawa Kenji.

I have an anthology of poems that will be published in Sajha Prakashan later this year. *Lagu upanyas parmpara* and *Prabuti* are criticism- and research-based books written in Nepali and published by the Nepal Academy. Poems by seventy-two Indian and Nepali poets, a combined anthology, is coming in the future, and my three poems are also included there: *Mother Spider (Āmā mākurā)*, *Mother’s Heart (Amma ka Maan)*, and *Tear of Weapon (Hatiyar ka Asru)*.

An institution in Nepal that generates and distributes music videos is recording 25 poems of mine and one of my books related to Nepal and India. The book’s name is *The Kala Pani River Journey*.

I do not do more work now. I write poems and stories because it is my interest, not my job. The government of the Eastern part of Nepal, Koshi province, asked to visit our place to for me to make the curriculum for the local schools, but I rejected that job because I couldn’t travel by bus or walk for long.

My wife is Pabitra Subedi. Initially, she taught at the Bhaktapur Education Campus and got a permanent job at the secondary level. These days, she is in a government job in Baneshwar. There is a school named Ratna Rajya School, up to grade 12, with around 2700 students. She is also the vice principal

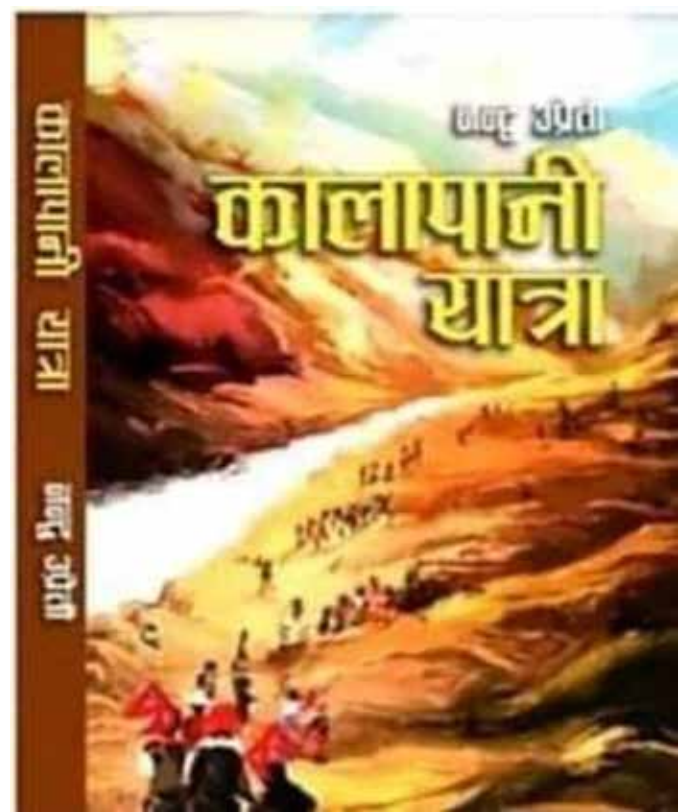


Image 7 (left): A Short Novel on Tradition and Trends written by Mr. Nandu Uprety

Image 8 (right): The Kalapani River Journey written by Mr. Nandu Uprety

of that school, as well as a curriculum writer and book writer for the Nepal government. Now, she has gone to visit her mother, who is 94 years old and sick, in the far midwestern west part of Nepal. My mother-in-law wrote a book titled *Atassi Bersama Kailash Mansarovar* (A Visit to Kailash Mansarovar) at the age of 88.

G: Are you in contact with some of the children who studied at Kenji International School?

N: Yes, some of them are doctors and engineers now. One of our students from the first batch teaches at Dhulikhel Medical College, Kathmandu University, and he also wrote a children's poetry book.

Researcher Analysis of Interview Themes and Concluding Thoughts

Throughout Nandu Uprety's journey—from visiting Hanamaki to opening the Kenji International School and running it for nineteen years despite hardship, to closing the school—Miyazawa Kenji's thoughts on education and his philosophy of life continued to inspire him. He first learned about moral authenticity from a school principal during his visit to Hanamaki, Shiga Prefecture, Japan, and in turn, he taught the children that loving everything means caring for everything in the universe and being kind toward them, as well as protecting nature. He wrote the poem "Hathiyar Ke Ansu" ("Tears of Weapon") and many other pieces of literature, showing his sensitivity and emotion towards everything. Living for others and love for everything is the message of Miyazawa Kenji that Nandu Uprety understood as moral, and

it was this morality that he cultivated among the children through the school.

Children in Kenji International School, aged 3 to 6 years old, were given complete freedom to access every corner of the grounds, but were taught self-control; for example, they learned not to pluck flowers in order to preserve the beauty of nature and food for bees. The children learned to love flowers, flies, other creatures, and even rivers whenever they visited. Wherever the children, they enjoyed themselves.

The profound experience of meeting a school principal in Hanamaki, Japan helped Uprety to learn Kenji Miyazawa's insights on education, schools, and children. As adults in the lives of children, we need to acknowledge the fragility of all of us growing up and help children accept their mistakes. Even though it is important to understand the reality we live in, children should be encouraged to find their individual passions and learn to see that as a universe, we are all interconnected. To accomplish this, Uprety established a practical, flexible curriculum, with emphasis on hands-on experience that went beyond textbooks and classrooms, and which included discussions on issues related to the social, economic, and political present. Exposure to these things in a supportive environment helped children to be curious and ask questions, critically analyze challenges, realize their role as individuals in the broader context of society, and strike a balance between modern science and technology, and indigenous knowledge and skills, tradition, and spirituality.

Acknowledgements: All the data are used with permission and available in the public domain.

I thank Mr. Nanda Prasad Uprety, sir, for giving us the interview and allowing us to use it along with the photos provided by him.



Image 9: Students of Kenji International School celebrating the anniversary of Miyazawa Kenji's birth

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