# ***The Hindu Metro Plus***

# Totto - Chan -The little girl at the window

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**Tetsuko Kuroyanagi’s book recalls the childhood in a wonderful school run by an unusual headmaster**

If you ask children what they are frightened of , they may well say they fear darkness or ghosts, or bullies, or tigers…And what would you respond to that?

A headmaster of a school asked this question of children and then told them, “Having eyes but not seeing beauty; having ears but not hearing music; having minds, but not perceiving the truth; having hearts that are never moved and therefore never set on fire. These are the things to fear”. He also added, “children you may not understand it now, but someday when you grow up you will understand these words”.

The headmaster was from a school situated in an abandoned railroad car, in a large ground. Where bogeys were converted to class rooms; where each child had his/her own tree; where they worked all morning on subjects of their choice and then went on long walks, by the stream in the afternoon. They came to school and camped there at night. The school was called Tomoe Gakuen and its extraordinary founder and headmaster was Sosaku Kobayashi.

The school sounds idyllic and almost out of a fairytale. But it existed in Japan during the Second World War when just outside the horrors of war unfolded. The school finally burned down.

Sosaku Kobayashi kept these children protected from the war outside, until the day each child went on to meet his/her own destiny.

Totto Chan - The Little girl at the window written by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi is a recollection of the author’s formative experiences at this wonderful school. In the book, she recounts the story of her own life and the lives of many children and how each one of them who survived, created a future for themselves and their country during the darkest of times. She attributes it to the headmaster, his love for children and his educational philosophy.

Kobayashi believed in freedom of expression and activity. Some of the methods in his school were very unusual. Everyday for lunch he asked the children to bring something from the hills and something from the ocean - to have a balance in what they ate. He allowed young children to swim naked in the pool so that they get over the curiosity of their bodies.

He also wanted the handicapped children in the school to be more accepting of their bodies. On sports day he gave away carrots and cabbages so that children could earn a meal for their family.

Tetsuko recounts “Even as I write I realise how many episodes that just seem happy childhood memories to me, were in fact, activities carefully thought out by him to achieve certain results.” Readers may wonder how the authorities in wartime Japan allowed such a free school to exist. Kobayashi hated publicity about the school and its unconventionality, and this in a way kept it protected.

In 1945, the school burned down when American airplanes began dropping bombs from the skies. With the hope that this beautiful school could live on in the hearts of people a little longer and feed their hopes, Tetsuko presents this tale to the world.

In recounting this story and her childhood, she has given courage and inspiration to many educators across the world. And through her, one falls in love with this extraordinary old man who undeterred by the circumstances, gave a light that each child could carry in their heart to light the world.

Santhya's school is inspired by this school in Japan and even derives it’s name from there.