

A flame of hope still flickers for these little ones

BY SONAL MANCHANDA

NEW DELHI, Oct 14: Laughing and jumping, singing and clapping, they seem to be relaxing after a hard day at school. However, the teachers who are as much a part of this fun-filling exercise as are the children, explain that play is as important a part of learning at this school, as are academics.

'Open Door', a special school for autistic children, is one of its kind in the country. Not strange, considering the fact that the National Institution of Mentally Handicapped (NIMH), does not even recognise 'autism' as a disorder.

The school, which is run by Action for Autism, is exclusively for autistic children, a little-known and even less understood disorder. Explaining the disease, Merry Baruah, the force behind the organisation, says that autism is a recently understood disability. "Identified as a 'self-focused' neurological disorder,

autism, affects a person's ability to communicate, socialise and think in a cohesive manner. It can also affect the speech and sensory-motor development," she said.

This means that there are different levels in growth of the different aspects. "A child may be a whiz at maths, his physical growth may be perfectly alright, but he may not be able to cross the road. The social skills, like communication, are especially affected," she clarifies.

As a consequence, the child needs a structured educational environment and a set routine. At



MAKING MUSIC: Students of Open Door trying their hand at the harmonium.

'Open Door', there are five teachers to monitor seven children, which according to Merry is a necessity, as each child is at a different emotional, educational and social level.

Tamara Cohen, working on a project on 'Research and Awareness of Autism in India' and volunteering for 'Action for Autism', points out that all special schools abroad also have a high child-teacher ratio. However, she feels that a lot needs to be done for autism in India. "As part of my research, I visited four the metros. Not only did I meet 95 families who had autistic children, but hundreds of psychiatrists and many of them felt that autism is a 'western disorder' not found in India."

Tamara, who is on a Fulbright scholarship in India, admitted that after submitting her research project she would like to return to India and help the organisation set-up a resource centre for autism here. "The organisation already has a newsletter and Merry, apart from running the school, also counsels parents. If we could get some grant, we could coordinate all these activities in a more organised manner, so as to spread awareness among the parents," she said.

Incidentally, Action for Autism, is organising a workshop for parents of autistic children from October 25 to 27, to train them to learn to deal with autistic children, including learning to accept them and teach them self-help skills so that they are able to realise their full potential.