

Foreword for Indian Edition

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Many people might question whether this book is really relevant to India – with so many children out of school or they may try to dismiss it as just being about the American education system. I would caution against that. As I was reading this book, I found myself underlining something or other relevant on almost every page.

I believe *Dumbing Us Down* to be essential reading for all those who are interested in going deeper into the Gandhian philosophy of *Nai Taleem* and *Swaraj* as well as those who would like to understand the deeper philosophical problems with the Right to Education Act (as currently framed) and the expansion of mass schooling in India. I have also found this book to be very useful for me as a parent in my journey to unschool myself and my daughter.

Many years ago, I had an idea of publishing a book full of confessions in which teachers asked for an apology for their crimes against children in school. I asked several friends who had worked in the education system to share their stories and ask for forgiveness for the crimes that they had either directly or indirectly committed against children. Something in the vein of "forgive me father for I have sinned." Many Indian educators liked the idea but shied

away from sharing their own experiences. It might have been deemed an act of betrayal or maybe it was fear. In any case, *Dumbing Us Down* is an excellent example of what I envisioned.

Just as his spiritual predecessor John Holt did, *John Taylor Gatto* is writing from the perspective of a teacher – a teacher with 25+ years of practical blood, sweat and tears of experience. He is not a high-flying policymaker or armchair intellectual, but rather someone who has served in the trenches and is trying to warn us about the real game. He writes with deep integrity and clarity – not the 'should be' or 'could be' of most so-called education reformers. I can only pray that our Indian teachers will someday become so honest about the crimes that happen in their classrooms and schools.

Gatto comes down hard on the industrial one-size-fits-all schooling model. He argues that not only are schools irrelevant to the lives of children (something that most sane people would agree to), they are, in fact, damaging. *His central thesis is that factory schooling is causing great harm to children and communities.* It is an anti-learning, anti-social, anti-democratic activity. Through his work, Gatto is asking us to question a sacred cow: that what has been propagated as the panacea to all social, economic, political, and ecological ills may actually be one of the main causes of them.

It is important to note here that today the definition of factory schooling can no longer be limited to just official schools. Its framework and values – essentially geared around social control – have permeated into non-formal education programmes, into toys and sports, into the way we organize our seminars and conferences, into TV and the mass media, into religious training, even into our family

lives.

At the core of Gatto's critique is the question of institutionalization. By institutionalization, I mean the suppression of the human conscience and human goodness to the logic of large-scale institutions. Many false gods of nationalism, technology, GNP, corporate brands etc have been foisted upon us. Diverse communities have been socially engineered or re-configured (either through weapons of mass destruction or through weapons of mass instruction) to fit into these institutional categories and norms.

History has shown us that some of the worst crimes against humanity have been carried out where people have become obedient and fragmented slaves to the abstractions created by institutions. There are many examples of this dehumanization in our daily lives : the *Army Jawan* who says he was just following orders and serving the nation when he kills an innocent Manipuri...the urban *housewife* who takes a plastic bag everyday from the subziwala and says it is not her job to keep her neighborhood clean and care for Mother Earth...the student *monitor* who watches his peers humiliated and beaten daily by the teacher for not completing their homework on time...the *girl* who only buys expensive branded clothes in order to be more beautiful or more popular. At its essence, institutionalization is about silencing the voice inside of us and suppressing our own personal and collective "experiments with truth."

Today, the nexus of *Mai Baap*, Reliance, Star TV and the World Bank know what's best for us. They are calling the shots but they give us the illusion of freedom and choice – be it TV channels, mobile phone companies, potato chips or even skin whiteners. We have made a Faustian bargain with the gods of the ready-made world,

conditioned to have every aspect of our lives processed and packaged for us in exchange for "convenience." But they take away our choice in the most essential things of life – fresh air, non-toxic food, access to nature's gifts, time for caring relationships, control over our own spiritual growth and internal happiness. They don't give us the freedom to say 'no' to the world of professional armies, nuclear power plants, waste incinerators, financial indebtedness, genetic manipulation etc. We are told we must accommodate these "necessary evils" if India is to achieve its dream of one-day becoming a superpower.

Gatto's critique invites us to re-engage with more fundamental questions of what constitutes a good life: What is an honest livelihood? What makes for a healthy democracy, economy and society? How do we live in harmony with all sentient beings? Gandhi tried to raise these questions in *Hind Swaraj* more than 100 years ago and they have been highlighted over and over again in all the spiritual streams of India. Yet, the rat-race education system has no time for these questions.

Unfortunately, in India, we have spent the last 60 years letting ourselves be labeled. India is 'backward', 'developing' and 'poor'. India is 'illiterate' and 'uneducated'. And the more recent ones like 'first-generation learners'. This is one of the most insulting terms I have ever heard, as it implies that our ancestors never learnt anything because there was no school in their village. These labels are all imported just like the English brands that the literate middle class so Mc-lovingly craves. They enslave us in a civilizational deficit mind-set which prevents us from seeing and properly assessing our own gifts and re-imagining our definitions of education, development and progress beyond

homo economicus.

I would like to suggest that India is lucky. We are poor in institutionalized education and factory schooling (according to all the UN charts) and rich in *shiksha*. The world that Gatto is pointing to – of joint families, of healthy communities, of meaningful apprenticeships and authentic projects, of local languages and community media, of time in nature and in silence – is all about real *shiksha*. We still have a lot of it in India. In fact, *shiksha* is what keeps India afloat.

Gatto is trying to help the Americans decolonize their imaginations to find out what is truly important for happiness. We may be able to get a few tips from him for decolonizing our great Indian middle class. *Dumbing Us Down* reminds us of four important things that must be part of any serious analysis and debate on education in India today:

1. *Education must be seen in the context of the larger game of Economics and Politics* – the State and the Global Market are deeply intertwined. The story is much bigger than Lord Macaulay. India Inc. wants to play with the big boys in the global economy and has made a commitment to 9%+ growth at any cost. This requires three things: unbridled mining, unbridled privatization of common resources and unbridled consumerism. In this game, schooling must play two roles:

- (i) to suppress any resistance by producing obedient fragmented citizens who have no relation to the wisdom of place, and
- (ii) to breed children as rabid consumers. Education must sell us the illusion that having more and more stuff is the only thing that will give us real happiness. Gatto exposes

the simple formula for happiness which we are all taught: Good education = good jobs = good stuff = good happiness.

There is a provocative film, *Consuming Kids*, which aptly points out that the main target for advertising and marketing agencies today is kids. Specializing in the 'nag factor', kids are the ones ultimately driving purchases and economic growth. Schools are good targets because children, in the marketing parlance, are a 'captive audience'. I recently saw a school in Jaipur where children were required to wear Adidas-branded school uniforms.

So, not-so-coincidentally, all over India we can see the growing involvement of corporate houses in the education system, under the guise of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). These range from the Azim Premji Foundation, Piramal Foundation, the Tata Foundation, ICICI Bank, Hewlett Packard, Nokia, Coca Cola, McDonalds, Microsoft. In their core philosophy, all of these corporate foundations are wedded to the government's vision of 9%+ growth and are using the education system as part of their PR strategies (to cover their corporate misdeeds) and to expand their markets.

The agenda of the World Bank, who is a key influencer of the Indian Planning Commission, Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals, is much more about opening up new profitable rural markets (with hungry educated, English-speaking hyper-consumers) than it is about solving poverty. They still try to fool us into believing that trickle-down economics can actually work. But the facts speak for themselves: as a result of 20 years of the free market economy, today, 100 of India's richest people own assets worth one-fourth of the country's GDP while more

than 80% of the people live on less than 50 cents a day. In this scenario, the Great Indian Middle Class and its dreams of India Shining look more like a nightmare.

The point is not to point fingers. Our thinking must move beyond a few 'bad apples' or 'good intentions' and start to re-look at the design, operating logic and interconnections of the larger industrial-military system. The education system, however, conditions us believe in TINA – 'There is No Alternative' to the current self-destructive model. The Ministry of Human Resource Development *brazenly* wants us to keep us believing that human beings were born to be 'resources' to feed the Machine. The weakness of the rights-based social movements in India is that they all still remain within this edu-economic paradigm of unlimited growth, humans as commodities and technological utopianism. We are not allowed to imagine other trajectories for 'Progress' – only to fight for our right to access this homogenizing one.

One pernicious way that schooling specifically dumbs us down in India is by silencing the voices of wisdom in traditional communities by branding them as 'illiterates'. If listened to, these neglected voices, like that of my grandmother, might inspire a different set of priorities and relationships, a different meaning and direction to human existence, a different India. They may not be a 'human resource' but they are definitely a source of wisdom, love and imagination.

We have also internalized the myth that those with more schooling are more 'educated' than those with less schooling. Out of this knowledge hierarchy, the well-schooled people somehow have the moral right to steal, mistreat, discriminate against and exploit their 'ignorant'

less-schooled compatriots. This dehumanizing rationale can be heard all over India from NGOs, government officials and corporate leaders in their understanding and treatment of tribal peoples and tribal lands as well as urban *bastis*. It eerily sounds like an extension of the white man's burden argument.

2. *We need to pay more attention to the Hidden Curriculum of schooling* – the underlying structures speak louder than the content of the curriculum. What is not said is more important than what is being said in the school. For example, the hidden curriculum teaches us that textbooks and passing exams are the ultimate source and purpose of learning. We are conditioned to believe that every moment we spend outside of school, learning and experiencing life on our own or with our friends and family, is useless, 'a total waste of time', since we will not be tested on it or get certified for it. Those who use their hands and engage in 'physical labor' are belittled and shunned. Children in the U.S. have started to suffer from Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD) and obesity from spending so much time studying. We also get conditioned to external rewards and punishment to drive our learning rather than our own internal curiosities, motivations and local contexts.

I am reminded of what happened to my young friend, Sumit. Sumit started coming to Shikshantar from nearby Dewali neighborhood when he was in class 5. His father owned a small auto parts shop. Sumit was one of the most curious, friendly and active kids I have ever come across. He would come every day at 3 p.m. after school. He became enchanted with herbal plants and self-healing after meeting some traditional healers. He set up a roof-top garden full of medicinal plants by himself at his house – an 11 year-old

boy. He also was excited about theatre, writing and animation. He would also help his father at his shop. I remember he used to often question me about Shikshantar and point out wherever he perceived there to be gaps in our values and practices. When he reached class 7, it all suddenly stopped. Sumit was overwhelmed by the world of daily homework, weekly tests, tuition classes, and with it over the years, I witnessed Sumit's vital energy systematically drained from him. He simply had no time for doing the things he loved. Sumit has recently completed class 12. He is filled with fear about his future. He has lost confidence in himself and his ability to learn on his own. He is ashamed of his father's small business. This is not only the case with Sumit but with millions of children all over the country. Those who discover and develop their real passions today do so in spite of the system rather than because of it.

3. *Self-designed learning is the real deal* – the ancient story of Eklavya is a testament to the power of self-designed learning. It illustrates how each of us has the potential to learn and achieve excellence without formal instruction and control. Like many other ancient stories, it also inspires us to learn by doing with nature. Unfortunately, modern schools and NGOs have converted Eklavya from a hero to a *bechara*. Dronacharya's demand of Eklavya's thumb as *guru-dakshina* serves to remind us of the extent in which centralized authority will go to preserve its power and legitimacy.

Today in India, progressive educators speak of child-centered learning. Unfortunately, in the child-centered discourse, the child is still treated as an object to be manipulated rather than having agency to make his own meaning

in the world. My friend Dayalchand Soni once shared a beautiful Mewari proverb, "*Real democracy does not come from choosing one's rulers. Rather, real democracy comes from being able to choose one's teachers.*" So rather than child-centered learning, we should be exploring how to create more opportunities for *child-led learning* where children of all ages can be trusted with self-designing and self-organizing their own learning processes, rules and spaces.

Over the past two years, I have been involved in an experiment called Swaraj University (www.swarajuniversity.org) in which each *khoji* (*seeker-learner*), is encouraged to develop their own unique and personalized learning syllabus. We have learned that two elements are critical for self-design learning. One is diversity. I believe that if there are one billion people in India then we need to think in terms of one billion education systems. In a speech to teachers in 1990, Gatto said, "*There isn't a right way to become educated; there are as many ways as fingerprints.*" We must challenge ourselves to develop models and processes which can support diversity rather than stifle it.

The other crucial element is authenticity. As human beings, we are driven by authenticity, that is, the desire to do real things that matter in the world, to ourselves and to others. Our basic sense of dignity is linked to our ability to act in purposeful and meaningful ways. In Swaraj University, we have been encouraging the *khojis* to spend their time working with real projects on questions and issues that they really care about. I have witnessed that we all have an immense energy when we are inspired. We don't need any gold stars or threats of punishment. Authenticity gives us purposefulness, deep meaning, intrinsic motivation, self-discipline and real feedback.

Two things are worth clarifying. First, that self-designed learning does not mean learning in isolation or being anti-social. In fact, it is the opposite. It calls for deep co-learning and co-creation with all of life. Second, self-designed learning is driven by the spirit of humility as indicated by the proverb, "The more I know, the more I know how little I know."

4. *The alternative to modern institutional education is rebuilding healthy local COMMUNITIES* – the late saint-activist Vinoba Bhave once said that the alternative to *tanashahi* (authoritarianism) is *natashahi* (affinity groups and community relations). Gatto inspires us to put our energy and effort towards rebuilding the local eco-systems of healthy joint families, safe place-based communities and sustainable learning commons. This line of thinking follows the famous African proverb "that it takes a village to raise a child." In urbanizing India, the traditional notions of community are deteriorating rapidly. Gatto is essentially asking each of us to ponder the disturbing question: "What is my community?"

Over the past several years, my work in the Udaipur as a Learning City process has been to try to regenerate community and common resources in the urban terrain. We have learned that our connections to local language, the soil, bodily labor and friendship are critical for rebuilding genuine community. A sense of place (beyond cyberspace) is essential and often brings up important learning questions about how we see our relationship to food, energy, water, animals, waste, and even shit.

The gift culture is another powerful idea that we have been exploring in the context of community. In traditional

communities, the richest people are not those who hoard the most but rather those who share the most. We each have so many beautiful gifts waiting to be brought out and shared with each other. Many processes and rituals need to be initiated for regenerating bonds of trust, mutual aid, compassion, collaboration and belonging.

In a healthy community, our children (and us as adults), will have access to a whole range of gurus, or sources of inspiration, including farmers, artisans, healers, grandmothers, entrepreneurs, activists, animals etc – not just school teachers. This means that their experiences of 'socialization' will generally be much richer than what takes place in school. Currently, because of the narrow definition of 'teachers', schools have created an artificial scarcity of 'good' teachers. Being in communities' allow us to shift to a mindset where there is an abundance of learning resources available for all.

We have tried to create spaces around the city which are open to and foster inter-generational and inter-community dialogues and creative activities. Wisdom can only be nurtured when different ages are all dynamically interacting with each other beyond narrow peer groups. In such spaces, it becomes possible to slowly question and overcome the severe fragmentation of work, entertainment, education, family, exercise, etc. that typifies modern industrial, urban life.

There has been an active campaign to destroy joint families and traditional communities in India. Many activists see it as a vehicle for harsh patriarchy, religious fundamentalism and caste oppression. Their fears are often-times justified. But rather than throw the baby out with the bathwater, I suggest we engage with these social ills through

processes of deep dialogue, authentic listening with open hearts and the spirit of cooperation. Trying to suppress communities by strengthening centralized institutions (which don't have hearts) will only lead to more and more violence.

In conclusion, Gatto dares to ask us to consider the blasphemous idea that there should be less schooling in life rather than more of it. He wishes to break down the artificial dichotomy that has been created between education and life. He is calling for us to do an honest assessment of the damage schooling has done to our local cultural systems, to our local ecological systems, to our local economies, and to us as spiritual beings. The time has come for such a debate in India.

With the spirit of *satyagraha*, Gatto has recently started the *Bartelby* project, a movement for non-cooperation with the education system. He wishes to break the grip of official mass standardized testing over parents, teachers and students. Such stress-inducing tests hijack the real learning process and widen the gap between education and life. He knows that those in power will not support an end to testing. So Gatto is encouraging students to peacefully refuse to participate in standardized tests by simply writing the following words on the standardized tests given to them, "I would prefer not to take your test."

The Right to Education Act in India is not about real learning or freedom. Rather, with its emphasis on compulsion and standardization, it is essentially about deepening the institutions of mental slavery and cementing the monopoly of factory schooling. The RTE will kill much-needed innovation in education. Taking inspiration from

the Bartleby project, we must explore non-violent and creative ways to resist and subvert this Act. We can start by create various escape processes that encourage us to engage with and truly value all of the different kinds of learning, knowledge and wisdom that exist outside of classroom. It is also necessary to challenge various forms of discrimination against those who don't have degrees, including delinking degrees from job selection criteria. If we do this honestly, we may soon realize what most cultures have known for a long, long time – that we actually learn more outside of the classroom than we do sitting inside of it. I was very pleasantly surprised when I recently asked a group of 8th class school children in Kerala if they could learn without school and institutional control, that they all gave a resounding, "Yes!" Thankfully the seed of self-designed learning still lives within them.

Another thing that provides me with hope is the growing homeschooling and un-schooling movement throughout India. Ten years ago, when my wife Vidhi and I decided to un-school our daughter (and un-school ourselves as parents), there were only a few families in India who supported this idea. Today, this movement is growing and is marked with a lot of diversity of thought and processes. Some people argue that we are being irresponsible and we should fix the public schools so that all children can benefit. But I believe that several deep and far-reaching questions about human learning are being raised by this innovative movement. Many common cultural resources, apprenticeship opportunities and public spaces (which are available to all children) are also being engaged with, created and protected. At the core of this movement is an effort to reclaim our children's time as well as time with our chil-

dren. I am reminded of the joke which asks, 'What is the definition of someone who is rich? The answer is someone with money. What is the definition of someone who is *really* rich? The answer is someone with time. What is the definition of someone who is *really, really* rich? The answer is someone who can spend time with *children*.' This movement is directly challenging the culture of mass fear which paralyzes us with the belief that we will somehow be 'left behind' in the rat-race if our children don't compete in factory schooling.

My heartfelt congratulations and thanks goes to *Banyan Tree* for taking the initiative in bringing this very important book to the Indian education scene. I hope that those who read it think twice (or even thrice) before trying to force, bribe, coerce or 'mainstream' innocent children into factory schools.

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