

# Foreword for Indian Edition

The school as an institution has been under heavy fire and severely critiqued. *School is Dead* was written by Everett Reimer in the 1960s. *Danger School* - a classic published by Paulo Freire's group in the late 1970's captured through scathing cartoons the harm which schools inflict on our children. Most schools are caged jails where an alien curriculum designed by some "experts" is thrust down the child's gullet. No self-respecting child would ever go to school unless pushed by the parents.

Today schools have facades resembling corporate houses. Many are gargantuan enterprises with thousands of children on their rolls, and for all practical purposes they are run like factories, or better still like mini-armies.

But there have always been libertarian thinkers envisioning "free schools" for children. Count Leo Tolstoy - a Russian anarchist founded a school for the children of poor peasants in Yasnaya Polyana, where he taught himself. This of course, angered the local nobility. Montessori was Italy's first lady medical doctor who worked out the "stages of development" in children. Gijubhai Badheka - a contemporary of Gandhiji was deeply inspired by Montessori's methods. His genius lay in cre-

actively adapting Montessori's methods to the Indian context and enriching them. For over 20 years Gijubhai ran a child-friendly school in his native Bhavnagar, Gujarat. He recounted his educational journey in the classic *Divaswapna* (meaning to "day dream"). This sterling book, first written in 1928, still remains India's most original contribution to pedagogy.

Rabindranath Tagore penned down his educational vision lucidly in the classic tale *The Parrot's Training*. He created a haven in Shantiniketan where students could imbibe the best of the east and the west in a very salubrious natural environment.

Tetsuko Kuroyangi recounted her experiences of Tomoe - a small libertarian school in Japan run by a visionary principal Kobayashi. This school which ran in several old railway compartments has been immortalized in the book *Tottochan* -made available in several Indian languages by the National Book Trust.

Perhaps the most noteworthy Indian experience in free schooling was Neelbagh - a small school started and run by David Horsburgh in the 1970s. Here children from nearby villages - many of them first generation learners learnt the most amazing and astounding things. Apart from being fluent in 4-5 languages they also mastered many worthwhile skills - carpentry, sewing, theatre and poetry. This school demonstrated that ordinary village kids could learn world class stuff in an atmosphere of freedom. The Neelbagh School posed a big challenge to the dreary, run down state schools and became a threat to the authorities. It soon shut down.

Perhaps the longest lasting libertarian school in the world is Summerhill. It was founded in 1921 by A. S. Neill in England with the belief that the school should be made to fit the child, rather than the other way around. It is run as a democratic community; the way the school runs is decided in the school meet-

ing, which anyone, staff or pupil, may attend, and at which everyone has an equal vote. Members of the community are free to do as they please, as long as their actions do not cause any harm to others.

Summerhill believes that children learn best when freed from coercion. So, all lessons are optional, and pupils are free to choose what to do with their time. Neill believed that "the function of a child is to live his own life - not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, not a life according to the purpose of an educator who thinks he knows best."

In the ninety years of its existence just about a thousand students have passed out of Summerhill but it has had the most profound impact on libertarian education worldwide.

The Sudbury Valley School was inspired by Summerhill. In the late 1960's Daniel Greenberg - an American physicist was looking for a child friendly school near Boston for his own children. He couldn't find one. So, a few like minded parents got together and started the Sudbury Valley School. This book is simply written, shorn of all educational jargon. It recounts the inspiring story of this marvelous school where children can "just be". There is no curriculum, no classes, no grades, no coercion, no uniforms, no bells and none of the rituals which define a regular school. Here children are treated as responsible citizens and they carry the burden of their own education. Unless asked, the teachers "stay away" from the children. Here children discover their own innate interests and then gallantly pursue them. And because they chose them, they also rough it out and learn them well. So, children become the true architects of their own education.

The school is also not expensive - the expense per child is about half that of a state run school. The Sudbury Valley School experience has inspired others to start similar schools elsewhere. Today, 30 such schools are spread over eight different countries.

Running a "free progress school" has never been easy. It requires guts to swim against the tide with the mainstream trying its best to tighten its noose and strangulating freedom and creativity. In this harsh terrain some "free schools" run their course and die, but then others are born. There have always been such freaky schools, started by gutsy individuals which have shown the hollowness of mainstream schools. From the margins they have teased and taunted the system and this has often brought about some worthwhile reforms.

Two years back Daniel Greenberg and Mimsy Sadofsky - both founders of the Sudbury Valley School were very kind to give me free permission to translate and publish Free at Last in Hindi and Marathi. The Hindi version will soon be published by Eklavya, Bhopal and the Marathi translation by the Garware Bal Bhavan, Pune.

For those visually inclined there is a wonderful 2-hour long film on the Sudbury Valley School. Over the last 40 years many TV channels - BBC, NHK etc have shot over a dozen short films on the school. Someone wove all these films together and uploaded them on a torrent. Each film has a different "take" on the school and in the end you get a reasonably "holistic" picture of the school.

The English version of Free at Last will be a "star" addition to the existing literature on child friendly education. I am sure the English edition will certainly inspire other Indian language editions of this book.

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