

Foreword for Indian Edition

The release of the book *Weapons of Mass Instruction* by John Taylor Gatto in India when Indian Government is implementing Right to Education (RTE) is very well timed. Some of the tenets of RTE suggest it is a step towards "compulsory schooling". This is problematic as when one look more closely at the way the laws are being formulated, one realize that it leaves no space for progressive individual and small-scale alternative learning initiatives. This is an extremely detrimental implication of "compulsory schooling" – an alternative initiatives generally originate as an attempt to find solutions to the problems our mainstream education system ails with.

In a country like ours, the right to education is a must. However, it is important to consider what type of education will help us become more self-reliant, reflective and sensitive human beings. Is our existing education system sensitive enough towards the needs of the child? Is it capable of preserving the autonomy of the learner that each one of us is born with? Or is it that in the name of RTE, we are trading the higher-order thinking abilities and freedom of the masses for three 'R's (Reading, wRiting, aRithmatic)? If this is so, then the irony is that, as studies around the country show, our education

system often fails to deliver the so sought after three 'R's.

In this book, Gatto very clearly brings out the real intention behind the establishment of our present education system in the nineteenth century. A reading of this book can prove to be an eye opener for all of us who consider schooling as essential part of child's growth and development and believe that schools are doing "good" to our children and so to us as families and as a society.

I have attempted to co-relate some of my own experiences and a learner, parent and teacher over the last four decades in India to what Gatto says as I observed stark similarities to the concepts presented in his book. I come from a family of "teachers" where my parents and almost everyone else in the extended family are in teaching profession. So, there is a sense of loyalty towards teachers and their intentions.

As I was growing up, I always carried an uneasy feeling about my experience of schooling and felt something was terribly lacking in the system. I was a good student, academically bright, behaviorally perfect and appreciated at school and home. In spite of enjoying acceptance and appreciation of that kind, I experienced restlessness and fear. I was a keen learner and kept wondering if I could address my restlessness and fear by working harder or seeking more guidance from my teachers. I felt the need to create a network between the resources available in and outside schools to get the best benefit of both. Today, I can understand my restlessness was because I had to keep "my real self" undercover to perform well in order to gain acceptance in the eyes of my parents, teachers and peers. My fear was a fear of being myself – what if my real self refused to comply?

I grew up with my younger brother who had Down's syndrome. I shared a very good relationship with him. Whenever he needed something or anything disturbed him, he always approached me to take care of his needs. I was always able to talk to him and help him reach a satisfactory resolution of the issue. I also observed whenever someone tried to enforce some decision on him, he held on to his position like a matter of life and death. Sometimes I wondered why he always ran to me when he was in any need. Today, I understand the basis of our relationship more clearly. While communicating with him, I never entertained the thought that he won't be able to understand what I had to say or that he will be unreasonable. I always communicated with him very openly, accepting his position, explaining the situation to him, helping him understand the reality of the situation and the need of others involved. Sometimes he understood the point and shifted his position, sometimes others had to do that. I am sure, he felt understood, accepted, respected and worthy as a human being in these interactions. I carried this learning with me as a part of myself. I subsequently experienced that to be true of all my interactions, whether I am interacting with my own children, my students or adults in my life. Gatto through his various experiences with his students brings out very beautifully the 'magic' that happens when we as teachers and parents are able to understand and accept children as they are and trust the genuineness of their intentions.

While working as a teacher with children in various educational set-ups around India, I learnt, that any experience which makes children feel accepted, trusted and respected as worthy human beings is like a breeze and they blossom in that

instance. That instills a lot of hope and enthusiasm in me. I am also aware, largely, children are perceived by schools and adults more as empty receptacles which need to be filled with what we as parents and teachers consider is "good for them". What children think or what they want to do is of no consequence in these 'learning situations'. As a result, children often loose touch with themselves and become excessively compliant or rebellious.

How manipulative our education system and modern practices of bringing up are, dawned on me only when my children came along. I experienced them as free-spirited, spontaneous individuals full of energy, spontaneity, originality, creativity, courage and sensitivity. They had their own ideas of what, when and how they wanted to do something. They questioned us all the time. Sometimes their responses were not in our favor but still that is how they felt and experienced that situation. We talked about various aspects of a situation and tried to arrive at a common understanding. I could see some eye-brows being raised at their responses. We were often presented with concerned and well-meaning advice that we must put a stop to their overt questioning. Otherwise, they would become outlawed and would be in trouble in social situations, especially in school.

I started noticing how all the virtues that we expect and admire in fully functional adults as life skills are systematically snubbed in a child during the process of schooling. I became aware how the attitudes of compliance, unquestioned obedience, doing monotonous work, not taking initiatives and responsibility, lack of problem solving abilities, following orders etc. are expected and instilled in a classroom and reinforced at home. However, I could never imagine the harsh facts disclosed

by Gatto in this regard. He establishes that these were the very goals of our education system at the outset, in an era when industrialization was taking place so that masses could fit into the needs of industry.

By the time our children grew older and reached school going age, it became clearer by the day to my husband and me, how stifling our education system actually is: how factory schooling takes us away from ourselves and everything else that is true of ourselves and of life. We wanted our children to stay in touch with their inner selves and with life. We decided not to send our children to a traditional school. So, the journey of living and learning together as a family started for us. Our children grew up learning at home and being in transferrable job, wherever it was possible, they went to alternative learning environment.

We embarked on our journey with a strong belief that learning happens all the time in our life – while we are climbing trees or watching elephants, raising kittens, participating and paying attention to what is happening around us, playing, even when we are getting bored and finding it difficult to figure out what to do. Academics was only one of the things they did as and when their interest followed in that direction. As our journey continued, over a period of time, both of our sons became compassionate human beings and self-directed lifelong learners. I experienced, whenever I took charge of resolving any of the issues and subjects they were dealing with, I only limited the scope of their learning. When I left it to them to discover and expand what intrigued them, they entered areas which I would have never connected as a part of that exploration.

While homeschooling, we had some interesting conversa-

tions with family and friends. One such conversation that kept cropping up every now and then was particularly about examinations. On hearing that our children don't go to regular school, the first question and most often the last one was, "What about their exams? How would you know they are ready to move to the next grade?"

It was only through these encounters I learnt that the purpose of going to school was not perceived as learning or adding something significant to the growth and development of the child. It was actually perceived as passing exams and going to next grades, whatever grades these were. Our children grew fine without any examinations. They wrote their first ever exam which was public exam in class X at the age of sixteen years. Now, as grown ups, they are not afraid of examinations – examinations are not bigger than life for them. They are managing well in their higher studies, still following their interests being their priority. I agree with what Gatto has to say about testing in the Afterword. If this testing is altogether abolished and learning and exploration made the primary experience for the child, it can do wonders.

Carrying this experience forward, I got involved in setting up Bhavya in Bangalore, an educational environment where children were in charge of their growing and learning. There, I worked with children on the same principles and got similar results. Most of the times, children would play freely while we worked with parents to help them relax their expectations of their children and accept them and experience them as they are. I experienced how blocked children are towards exploring and learning was directly proportionate to how anxious their parents are about their children's academic performance. When

parents relaxed their expectations of their children, children felt at ease and became free to explore their interests. They took risks of venturing into unfamiliar areas. They became much more focused and learnt whatever was at hand with much greater ease. Once they were accepted as they were without being constantly compared through marks, competitions, etc., they accepted themselves as worthy human beings. This led to improvement in their relationship with themselves, with their parents and then with everything else they came across.

I believe it is of utmost importance today to be proactive in creating more spaces which are truly concerned about the child – whether it is done through bringing changes in schools or creating autonomous learning environments where each child can lead and co-design their own learning agendas.

This whole journey over the last four decades has been very rewarding as well as challenging for me. Basically, we as a society are so conditioned to look at growing up and learning the school way that we can't see any other way of doing things as a valid possibility. Schooling is synonymous with growing. 'No school' strikes us as no growth, no learning, no job, no livelihood, no companionship, etc. It is a Herculean task to help people see the folly of our education system so that they are ready to look at any other alternative to the dominant schooling model as a viable possibility for the holistic development of the child and for leading to a happy, productive and sustainable life.

We, as parents and teachers are so engrossed in perpetuating the mission of factory schooling without realizing what it really is. We keep following the logic of the mainstream system, believing that whatever we are doing is for the good of the

child, without realizing the impact of our actions on the lives of children, their families and the larger society and planet. We need to be aware of the diverse realities and agendas behind the education system before we attempt to change it. Otherwise, we will continue to create superficial and ineffective solutions.

Gatto provides a very detailed account of how schools were planned for the needs of an industrial age and also the possibilities that exist for a teacher to make a difference. In this context, we need to stop viewing human beings as "human resource". First and foremost, we must challenge the industrial context in which our present education system is designed. If we want our children to grow into happy human beings who are capable of standing for themselves and accepting of others as they are, then we need to provide them with learning environments where they can grow up to be human beings with high self-respect for themselves and compassion for others. The priorities in the classroom have to shift from an examination-oriented system geared towards meeting the needs of the global economy to meeting the needs and development of children and their local communities. Strong and compassionate individuals can build strong societies and strong, eco-friendly and human-friendly economies.

There is an urgent need to completely shift our outlook towards children, parenting and education. This is possible only if we are willing to re-evaluate our societal values built around the existing industrial-military economy. Are we ready for that? Reading this book can act as a catalyst for opening up our schooled imaginations.

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