A DOSSIER ON THE CRIMES OF SCHOOLED SOCIETIES

Intense anger at the way science is taught in our schools, made Arvind Gupta, an IIT-trained electrical engineer leave his job in TELCO, in 1981, to look for alternatives in a broad spectrum ranging from Shankar Guha Niyogi's Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha, to writing books and making films on science. His collaboration with the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (Eklavya), in Madhya Pradesh led to a major breakthrough with 500 government schools adopting their format of science education.

Gupta's first science activity book, in Hindi, 'Khel-Khel Mein' later translated into English as 'Matchstick Mecano' was published in 1984 as part of the Eklavya experiment. A shift to Delhi in 1990 led to a five year teaching stint at Mirambika, a free progress school in Delhi, and to a fascinating collection of 'toys' resulting from his science activity classes. He was the first recipient of the National Award for Science Popularisation amongst children.

Gupta has been equally passionate about 're-birthing' classics on education and the environment. From the maiden effort of reprinting 'Danger: School!' in 1984, to Gandhian educator, Gijubhai Badheka's 'Divaswapna' and the blockbuster 'Totto Chan' by Japanese TV personality and animal rights activist, Tetsuko Kuroyangi, has been an eventful journey.

Gupta, who is currently on a CAPART fellowship to write a science activity book, talks about the context from which 'Danger: School!' burst forth like a missile, 25 years ago, and which has again spurred the Other India Press to bring out a modified reprint this year. The signal is clear: the debate must go on.

MOST BOOKS soon pass out of fashion and die their own natural deaths. Some books, however, survive. They are reprinted and translated into different languages. The reprinting of Danger: School! almost a quarter of a century later, is to be greatly welcomed. The last decade saw it translated into Hindi, Marathi and Telugu. This book is not aimed at teachers and pedagogues alone, though they certainly could get a glimpse of how schools traumatise children. Every parent must read it, if only to ensure that the school is a safe and joyous place for their children.

This landmark book, first printed in the early 1970s by *the Institute for Cultural Action* (IDAC) based in Geneva, is part of a series of 'dossiers' published by IDAC on education. Paulo Freire its founder, was a Brazilian educator and reformer. For several years he had been teaching illiterate adult peasants to read and write, in remote and poor villages. His method was a politically radical, grown up version of the method Sylvia Ashton Warner described in her book, Teacher. Warner, who taught Maori children for 24 years in a New Zealand school, realised the incongruity of teaching language by using English primers that had little respect for or reference to their lives. She devised an ingenious method -- every day she asked the

children which word they wanted to learn about. If they said 'drink' (many of them had alcoholic fathers), that word would be up on the blackboard and forever in the children's minds. Published first in New Zealand, Teacher's American edition appeared in 1963.

Following a similar method, Freire began by talking with Brazilian peasants about the conditions and problems of their lives, and showed them how to read and write the words that came up most in their talk. He found that it took only about 30 hours to teach before the wretchedly poor and demoralised peasants were able to explore reading on their own. Freire's teaching method, which he called 'alphabetisation', has been lucidly described in his book The Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1969).

Thirty hours. One school week. That is the true size of the task. Of course, the Brazilian army did not like Freire making peasants literate and politically conscious and threw him out of the country along with another celebrated Brazilian, cultural interventionist Augusto Boal, the dramaturg who devised and wrote Theatre of the Oppressed, a Freire like method of conscientising workers and peasants.

How many hours / weeks / months / years do our children spend in schools without even learning the basics. By nature children are inventive and full of curiosity. They want to explore and understand, make sense of the world they live in. All children have a 'gleam in their eyes before they go to school. But, soon this gargantuan Educracy (education + bureaucracy) fails them, calls them impaired and stamps an indelible scar on their hearts. Many parents have always felt that there was something seriously wrong with schools. But they have never been able to pinpoint the 'crimes' which schools constantly perpetuate. Danger: School! does exactly that. It is perhaps the world's most subversive cartoon book on education. Drawn by Brazil's ace political cartoonist Claudius, the scathing illustrations and crisp text graphically document the authoritarian, artificial world of the school.

The whole ritual of the school -- children in starched uniforms, backs bent with heavy satchels, school gong, morning prayers, principal's sermon, attendance, inane lectures, tests, exams, score-sheets, boring homework, has actually very little to do with the process of learning. Schools segregate a particular age group of children in one class. In real life, children interact with a diverse age group - at home children learn a great deal from their elders and in turn teach the young ones. In school the only adult they meet is the teacher. They not only loose out a lot on adult experience but are also unable to share their skills with young ones.

A child coming to school is not a clean slate - a tabula rasa. He has experienced a lot of the world. Schools take no cognisance of this fact and seldom build upon their experiences. Instead, all children are doled out the standard curriculum. Could there be anything more illogical than all the children in the class buying exactly the same stupid textbooks? In the 20's

a conscious educator Gijubhai Badheka did away with textbooks and started a classroom library with the same money. He wanted children to explore the wide world of books, rather than just textbooks. It is a shame that no school has built up on this progressive idea.

All children learn to speak and communicate naturally without ever being taught. It is they who need to talk the most, to develop their communication skills. But in any normal school, it is the teacher who does all the talking. The children meekly listen. Thus the greatest survival skill - to talk and communicate is learnt by children outside the school, never in it. This led the renowned American educationist John Holt to comment "I am glad the schools are just for six hours a day. If we had twenty four schools most of our children would turn out dumb."

There are very few schools where children can learn at their own pace. The Sri Aurobindo International School in Pondicherry is one such place where children choose their teachers and learn the subjects they like at their own pace. A child could be doing third class English, fifth class Hindi and seventh class mathematics at the same time.

Thousands of primary schools are mushrooming in rural India every year. But most children feel happier outside these schools and, if forced into them, leave fairly soon. The official estimate of dropout rates al the primary level is 70 per cent. While earlier tile drop-out rates were attributed to parental poverty and apathy, recent research shows that children drop out because the school as an institution is downright boring and has very little to offer to a bright, imaginative child. With most village children dropping out at the primary stage, the social base for nurturing and garnering talent becomes very skewed and narrow.

The authoritarian structure of the school squashes the innate curiosity and creativity of the child. Parents have much more stake in the future of their children than any school can ever have. Realising this, many parents in the West are opting to home school their kids. In many countries the law makes it compulsory for children to attend school. Here, small groups of parents have taken a professional degree in education, pooled their skills and insisted on home-schooling their children. Their argument is "We don't trust any institutions public or private. We have given birth to our children, and we will teach them ourselves. We will give our children real life enriching experiences, which the schools cannot give". Though the home-schooling movement is gathering momentum in the West, it might be premature and unviable for a country like India.

Most parents -- especially the rich - are content if they can get their children admitted to a prestigious boarding school. If a school is charging Rs. 5000 a month, then, they feel, it must be good. This disowning of parental responsibility and subcontracting of children to alien institutions seldom pays. Parents cannot sit back. Only sustained societal pressure will change schools for the better.

Recent attempts at liberalising the Indian economy have had only a marginal impact on education. Under the able leadership of a dynamic director-general; the monolithic CSIR laboratories have adopted the slogan 'patent or perish'. The same is not true of NCERT an eternally sick PSU -- which has been foisting its fossilised curriculum as well as diktats on all the states, thereby strangulating all local initiative and innovation. As one ex-education secretary candidly remarked, "The most far-reaching and radical reform in Indian education would be to disband the NCERT. This cheapest reform unfortunately, will not be politically possible."

What teachers and schools do to children is:

- They give them solutions but keep the confidence to themselves.
- They give them memory but keep the thinking to themselves.
- They give them marks but keep the knowledge to themselves.

The pity is that children are never asked any real problems in schools, and if they are, it is with the intention of hearing the same regurgitated solutions they are given. Danger: School! tries, precisely, to warn us against that.