

LEARNING TO SAY NO TO A SYSTEM THAT FAILS

*The resurrection of a book which challenges the role of the school as a processing house for "productive" citizens, is significant for India - a country caught up in a time driven by the market, writes **Arti Jaiman***

Recently a worried relative called up. Their bright, school-going daughter was having trouble coping with her studies. She just could not memorise the poems that were part of her school syllabus. A stern missive from school sent the desperate parents scampering for help -- to a tutor. Three and a half years old, their daughter is about to get her first taste of failure at learning. Learning that consists of little more than regurgitating meaningless Nursery rhymes -- in English -- that have little reference to her everyday experiences in her largely Hindi-speaking home.

Ensnared in our plush 'English-medium' life, one could well ask, if the child is comfortable in Hindi, why send her to an English-medium school? Her parents would, probably justifiably, retaliate, "And condemn her to a life as a second-grade citizen, who will constantly have to live with the knowledge that by not knowing English, she just isn't good enough!"

In a time driven by the market, and in a market driven by suave, English-speaking power-brokers, our schools have yet to outgrow their original function as processing houses meant to turn inquisitive, ingenious children into unquestioning 'productive' members of an industrial society; 'good citizens' who are constantly being warned not to rock the boat, or question the status-quo and the ever increasing dominance of market values in our lives.

So much of our own school days are shrouded in nostalgia, blocking out recurring moments of fear, oppression and loneliness. Big punishments for small 'crimes'. One forgot a notebook, and a teacher taunted 'Did you forget to eat your breakfast, wear your clothes, your shoes....then how dare you forget to bring your book.' A meaningless argument meant only to make a child cower with fear. For fear meant respect. Or so they thought. And if the hierarchy of teacher and student were not enough, the setting up of other hierarchies, all based on the power of 'discipline', of fear. Monitors to check uniforms, prefects to dole out punishments. A process of manpower management that would appear to draw its inspiration from the management of inmates of a prison - appoint some 'stooges' from within the prisoners, and set them free to inflict a reign of terror on the rest of the prisoners.

Even if one does come out relatively unscathed from this 12-year process of socialisation, our schools have systematically transformed learning from an exciting and active accumulation of experiences, to a tedious and passive process in which the student is just little more than a recipient of second-hand 'knowledge', a process that completely bypasses the experiences that the students bring to the classroom.

The 'resurrection' of **Danger: School!** more than 20 years after it was first published in Geneva by

the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, brings to us a book that that grabs us by the throat and thrusts the reality of our schools into our disbelieving faces. The book is a product of intense debate that took Europe and North America by storm in the 60's and 70's when nearly every institution, from the school to the state was scrutinised by questioning minds like Ivan Illich, John Holt, Paulo Freire and many others. While the featured edition is an effort by the Goa based Other India Book Press, which has brought to life many other priceless books, intrepid science educator Arvind Gupta's first reprint on this work, in 1984, is a fine example of how a group of people can by-pass the obstacle course set up by the book publishing mafia.

Chancing upon **Danger School!** in the Kishore Bharati library in Hoshangabad in the '70s for years Gupta circulated photocopied versions of the book to friends. He finally came to the conclusion that the book needed to be put into wider circulation. To his aid came Sujit Patwardhan who owns the Mudra press in Pune. He offered to print the minimum print run of 1,000 copies at a cost of Rs 15 per copy, the lowest he could quote, considering that binding itself cost Rs 2. With Rs. 15,000 to raise, Gupta persuaded nine like-minded friends to invest in this venture. The method was simple. Each person, including Gupta himself, would invest Rs. 1500. Once the 1000 copies were printed, each 'investor' would receive 100 copies of the book -- their share - to distribute as they pleased.

Despite the fact that the second edition, published this year, and featured on this page, does not boast a similar co-operative effort, it is still an intrepid effort, considering that the book is priced at an impossibly low Rs. 60 per copy (at a time when even a Harold Robbins reprint costs more). The publishers have made an effort to add bits relevant to India with statistics of schooling in India, a chapter on Gandhiji's concept of 'Nai Talim' and illustrations depicting the rural-urban and gender divide in education in India.

If **Danger: School!** ever goes beyond the limited readership it presently enjoys, it will probably happen because of the concerted efforts of people like Gupta and his like-minded friends who pursue their work with the premise that a good idea only gets better when it is spread around. Through endless photocopying, begging, pleading, even demanding reprinting rights, and in extreme cases, even pirating a book if necessary, translating classics on education into other Indian languages, constantly cajoling (sometimes, successfully) organisations like the National Book Trust and the Department of Science and Technology to print these books, and writing for whichever science magazine they can lay their hands on, Gupta and his friends are constantly reaching out to students, parents, and educators.

The reprint of **Danger: School!** a pioneering attempt at reaching out, could rekindle the dormant discussion on the direction in which schooling in India is headed, as competitive fervour seems to be submerging even the much vaunted alternative modes like Montessori, Summerhill and Krishnamurty.