

IT is universally acknowledged that freedom of expression is the very basis of democracy. And freedom of expression can be put to use when coupled with education. One of the best definitions of education that I know is the following: education is that which sets you free - *Sa Vidya, Ya Vimuktaye*. I dream of a future for India when the education that our children receive shall set them truly free from all that blocks their mental growth and capacity to develop courage.

Education, as it exists in India today, mostly ties children to nameless fears, traumatises their minds for life, and sets them against the very idea of true freedom of expression. Pick up the morning's newspaper during the so-called 'exam season,' and you will see what I mean. You are sure to come across at least one article that tells parents and children how to cope with the debilitating stress of exams, in particular the Board exams. Psychiatrists tell us that the level of such stress is rising alarmingly high among school children, and social scientists say some of the behavioural aberrations among our urban young today can be traced to the fear of classrooms, and of facing tests.

My mother was one of the fortunate children in her generation. She was sent to Tagore's Shantiniketan just after it was founded. The guiding principles of that institution, she told us, were the students' emotional well-being and the expansion of their intellectual horizons.

Great emphasis was given to honesty, considerably less to how often you attended class. If students, therefore, did not feel like attending a class on a given day, and

MY VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Where the Mind is Without Fear

○ Mrinal Pande

could furnish a good enough reason for doing so, they could take time off to enjoy the beauty and bounty of nature around them. This philosophy of education runs counter to the prevalent orthodoxy. Had Tagore proposed to found his Shantiniketan in India today, neither the pushy and over-ambitious middle class parents, nor the unimaginative babus of the education departments, would consider such a pedagogy anything other than a crazy dream that cannot work in the real world of e-commerce and global netizenship. Is it any wonder, then, that we see no Satyajit Rays, Mrinalini Sarabhais, Ramkinder Bays or Shivanis being shaped even in our most expensive private schools, with all those smart uniforms, computer classes and FTJEE and NUT linkups?

In Shantiniketan, where the above people discovered themselves, children did not have to attend classes *ad nauseum*, nor cram for exams if they didn't want to. But what they did during those hours when they took off with permission from their immensely wise and kind teachers was to let their curious young minds roam fearlessly through the wonderfully creative setting. This, and the genuine gender sensitisation that they imbibed in their mixed campus brought about a miraculous charging of minds. And one must underscore that there were few incidents involving perverse ragging, attempted rapes or the use of drugs. "The absence of fear is the finest thing that can happen to a child," the eminent British educationalist, A.S. Neill, wrote. It was this rare gift that Tagore gave

Share Your Visions

In the last issue of manushi we started a new column: *My Vision For the Future*. Unfortunately, we got very few responses. Those that came, tended to deal with very immediate and elementary challenges facing us today such as providing education to girls, improving the garbage clearance in our cities. It seems we were not able to effectively communicate the very idea behind this column:

- To go beyond ordinary mundane expectations and dream big. In short, we would like to attempt grand visions.
- To think far ahead and project likely scenarios for the future. These could be either negative or positive, funny or serious, inspiring or frightening.

We hope many more readers will share their dreams, visions, fantasies or even fears of the future through this column.

his students. It is this gift we are denying the young today.

So I dream, foolishly perhaps, of a future where the education system once again begins to work on the basis of mutual trust between teachers and students. Such a system can be built only by great minds that have retained a childlike sense of wonder and unceasing curiosity. Is there anyone in our huge Human Resources Development Ministry today who remembers having been a child, or who truly loves them, who has the desire to promote the kind of learning that encourages Indian children to think for themselves, not fear free thought, and not devote their time to

cramming for exams to make it into an IIT or a medical school or a good college?

Our educational system is still, by and large, outdated. It idolises learning by rote and worships 'family tradition' and inherited wisdom. It mostly sneers at the work ethic and true creativity of the sort that requires us to work with our hands. This is why vocational training is placed so low in the system, and business administration enjoys such a high status. The dilemma of our educational system has been an intractable problem in our search for self-respect and self-confidence as a democracy.

It is only when our children can voice their boredom or desire for freedom from a market-driven education system, and their parents refuse to be led by the nose by the system all the time, that we are likely to see the possibility of a dialogue that may, in time, lead to student-friendly education and the birth of campuses where the mind may roam without fear.

Ma Bhairi! (Do not be afraid!) the Vedas advise the seeker of the knowledge. Buddha too counsels his disciples to roam fearlessly as a rhino does in a forest. Our children need freedom from fear. I hope god and destiny lead us in that direction. □

Women Bhakt Poets



*"No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermillion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy."*

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