Education and Democratic Citizenship: Beyond the Textbook Controversy

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> [T]he object of education is the freedom of mind which can only be achieved through the path of freedom – though freedom has its risk and responsibility as life itself has.
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> Tagore, "My School" (lecture published in Personality)

It is a distinct honor to be invited to deliver the Ravinder Kumar Memorial Lecture. I never met Ravinder Kumar, but during the past months, as I prepared for this occasion, I have had the great pleasure of becoming acquainted with his extremely impressive writings, on topics ranging from the careers of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and both Jawaharlal and Motilal Nehru, to reflections on the discipline of history itself, and, finally, to the massive project on the history of science, philosophy, and culture in Indian civilization. Like so many of you here, I have found his civilizational conception of the unity of the Indian nation extremely convincing and congenial; I have also been impressed by his delicate balancing of a critique of historical positivism with a determined emphasis on empirical fact and evidence. Finally, as I read Romila Thapar's powerful tribute to the man himself shortly after his death, I felt as though for a brief time I could enjoy the presence of the man himself, with his probing intelligence and his keen awareness of the sensitivities of others. I shall have occasion to allude to some of his ideas in what follows. For now let me simply record my sadness that this gracious and powerful mind is no longer among us.

I. Education: Two Contrasting Pictures

Let me begin with two descriptions of education in India. First, a typical example of education for the rural poor, as conducted by one of the countless NGO's that work on this issue. It is late afternoon in the Sithamarhi district of rural Bihar. I am visiting a project run by Adithi, a Patna-based organization run by Viji Srinivasan. Because of the bad condition of the roads, it has taken us two days to go from Patna to this area near the Nepalese border, even in a jeep. First, we visit the adult literacy program for working women. Called "Reflect," its aim is to promote both literacy and critical thinking. With around twenty women from the village, we sit on the ground in a barn (where rats occasionally run across our feet). The women have made a map of the power structure of their village, and we discuss this map, as they identify possible points of intervention that may change the deal they have from the landlords for whom they currently work as sharecroppers. Everyone is animated, and the idea of criticizing entrenched structures of power has obviously led these women to attach great importance to the associated task of learning to read and write. At the end of the meeting we all sing a song that is a staple of the women's movement here. It begins, "In every house there is fear. Let's do away with that fear. Let's build

a women's organization." And it goes on to sing the virtues of education, as an antidote to fear and oppression.

Next, we move to a shed next door. The girls of the village, goatherds by day, are starting school. They come together, ages from about six to fifteen, for three hours of after-work education. There are no desks, no chairs, no blackboards: only a few slates that are passed from hand to hand. Viji and I sit on the ground to watch the class, which, like the one-room schoolhouses I read about as a child in stories of the American West, covers all levels and subjects at once, with about fifteen students. Somehow, it all seems to work, through the resourcefulness and responsiveness of the teachers, themselves poor rural women who have been assisted by Adithi's programs. Proudly, the girls (who look surprisingly well-nourished) bring in the goats that they have been able to buy from the savings account they have jointly established in their group. (Math is taught in part by focusing on such practical issues.) Then they act out a play that they recently performed for their village. It concerns dowry, and the way this institution makes female life of low worth. Playing male and female roles themselves, the girls tell a story of how one young woman refused to be given in marriage with dowry. Her parents are shocked, and the father of the prospective groom becomes extremely angry. After much discussion, however, including a description of the way dowry is associated with the malnutrition and death of girls, and the murders of adult women, the groom himself refuses to take anything. He stands up proudly against his father, and the tall young girl who is playing the part stands up all the more proudly. Eventually even the parents say that this way is better. Teachers tell us that the whole village turned out for the play, and they think it did some real good. Meanwhile the girls giggle with pleasure at the subversive entertainment they have cooked up. One little girl, too young for the play, sits by the window, her hair lit up by the setting sun. On her slate she draws, a large and improbable flower. "Isn't she wonderful?" Viji whispers with evident zest.

There are many points of interest in this scene, which I have seen replayed with small variations in many different parts of rural India. But let me mention a few only, to which I shall be returning: first, the close linkage between education and critical thinking about one's social environment; second, the emphasis on the arts as central aspects of the educational experience; third, the intense passion and investment of the teachers, their delight in the progress and also the individuality of their students.

Now let us turn to another generic story, a story of government schools. This is a story I have heard again and again, in many different regions: from Amartya Sen's Pratichi Trust, which has done an extensive study of primary education in several districts of West Bengal;[1] from the rural activists whose non-governmental work I have just described, as they contrast their work with government schooling; from students at JNU, when I asked them about their prior education; from parents who send their children to government schools; from many Indian-Americans, including Indian graduate students in Chicago, when I ask similar questions. Of course it is not a

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[1] The Pratichi Education Report, with an Introduction by Amartya Sen, number 1 (2002), Delhi: TLM Books, 2002.

universal story; later I shall mention some government programs that work against it. But it is depressingly common.

First, teachers often do not show up to teach at all. When they do show up, they often do little real teaching, because they are waiting to offer "private tuition," when the richer families hire them for after-school instruction. This lucrative employment would be drastically undercut if they really did good teaching in the classroom. The Pratichi report emphasizes the magnitude of the influence of these two factors. Teacher absenteeism in the districts studied was at 20%, and 31% of children surveyed, asked what was taught on the previous day, said that no teaching had taken place. Only 7 percent of children from classes 3 and 4 who did not hire private tutors could even write their names correctly; among those who did hire private tutors the rate was 80%.[2] Asked, "According to you, what are the main problems of primary schooling?", the sar panch of a Panchayat in Puruliya answered immediately, "Teachers do not teach."[3] Although these issues are crucial, I shall not dwell on them further.

Third, my central concern in this lecture, even when responsible teaching is done in the classroom, it is still primarily focused on rote learning, as students are crammed with facts and routinized answers for the various examinations they are going to sit. Students report that the experience is quite deadening. It stimulates neither imagination nor critical thinking. Students who have gone on to have some independence of mind typically credit this achievement either to an elite private school (but many of these also stress rote learning) or to a family that worked to keep the mind alive and growing.

Nothing could be more crucial to democracy than the education of its citizens. Through primary and secondary education, young citizens form, at a crucial age, habits of mind that will be with them all through their lives. They learn to ask questions or not to ask them; to take what they hear at face value or to probe more deeply; to imagine the situation of a person different from themselves or to see a different person as a mere looming threat to the success of their own projects; to think of themselves as members of a homogeneous group or as members of a nation, and a larger world, made up of many different people and groups, all of whom deserve respect and understanding. So it is not in the least surprising that education has been so pivotal in India's recent political struggle. It is perfectly appropriate that in the struggle between contending visions of the Indian nation each side has placed great emphasis on an educational ideal, and on books that go with it.

Much of this debate, however, has been taking place on a very narrow terrain, that of textbooks in general, and history textbooks in particular. There is no doubt that this controversy is important. It is indeed important that young people read a complex and nuanced version of Indian history, one that stresses the agency and interaction of many different groups throughout India's history, and one that presents an accurate picture of how these groups have interacted at various times in the past. The simple narrative to which many members of the Hindu right are

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[2] Pratichi Report, pp. 30-31.

attached, of an idyllic Hindu civilization rudely broken up by Muslim aggression, punctuated only by the wonderful triumphs of Shivaji, is surely not either accurate or helpful.

In the light of the whole huge question of how to develop the minds of young children, however, this textbook controversy seems extremely narrow. It ignores some issues that are so urgent that they are ignored at everyone's peril. The emphasis on the content of textbooks is understandable: it is the factor, among the genuinely important factors about education, that intellectuals are particularly well equipped to talk about and do something about. It is also something eminently adjustable. Put Zoya Hasan in charge, and we can expect things to make progress quite rapidly! And yet, whenever I hear one of these excellent and highly sophisticated discussions about textbooks, especially after hearing and reading so many before, I am strongly inclined to borrow a remark Nehru once made while arguing that Gandhi's obsession with the khadi movement had distracted him from the larger problem of rural poverty. Nehru said: "He pities the plumage, but he forgets the dying bird." [4]

III. Education for Freedom: Three Abilities

About one dead bird in particular I shall have more to say in what follows. First, however, let me describe rather schematically a normative model of education for democratic citizenship on which I shall be drawing in my discussion of schools in India. It is a model I have already elaborated in my book Cultivating Humanity,[5] which focused on the U. S. It has a close relationship to ideas about the reform of education worked out by certain Greek and Roman philosophers, including Socrates and the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca, in his famous letter on liberal education. It also has affiliations with the ideas of the great American philosopher and education-reformer John Dewey; both my daughter and my partner's daughter have been educated in schools closely modeled on the Dewey ideal. Finally, though, it has a very strong resemblance to, and influence from, the educational ideas of Rabindranath Tagore. I shall focus on these affiliations in developing my model here.[6] Just so that you will see how close the relationship is between Tagore and Socrates, and how the two mingle together in American education, let me tell you a story of an encounter I had while I was writing my book on education.

On a dark afternoon in February, I go to my gym. There is a young man behind the check-in desk whom I hadn't seen before -- tall, beefy, red cheeked, late teens, wearing a red baseball cap and a bright purple sweatshirt with "Washington" in silver letters across the top and a glow-in-the-dark picture of the White House. He tells me his name is Billy. He is reading Plato's Apology and Crito. So you're reading Plato, I say. "Yeah. You like that stuff?" he asks, and his eyes light

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[3] Pratichi Report, p. 66.

[4] Jawaharlal Nehru, Autobiography (Delhi: Oxford University Press, centenary edition 1989), 534. Nehru in turn borrowed the remark from Thomas Paine, who directed it against Edmund Burke.

[5] Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

up. I tell him I like that stuff a lot, and I ask him about his class. It's at Bentley, a college in nearby Waltham, Mass., focused on business education. Who's the instructor? "I don't remember, he says, " She's foreign." The syllabus reads, "Dr. Krishna Mallick". Krishna Mallick, originally from Kolkata, has written some wonderful study questions about Socrates' mission of self-examination, his obedience to the laws of Athens, his willingness to die for the sake of the argument. Soon students will go on to use the techniques they have learned from Plato to stage debates about moral dilemmas of our time. Before I head for the treadmill, we talk for a while about why Socrates did not escape from prison when he had the chance, and it's plain that Krishna Mallick, with her Tagorean background (as I later discovered when I met her) and her Socratic text, has produced real excitement. "You know, I really like this philosophy," Tucker says. "Most courses, you have to remember lots of little facts, but in this one they want you to think and ask questions."

I shall later return to Billy Tucker and Krishna Mallick. The question I now want to pose, to which my model is an answer, is, "What abilities must an education develop in children, if they are to be effective citizens of a pluralistic democracy in a complex interlocking world?"

Three capacities above all, I would argue, are essential to the cultivation of democratic citizenship in today's world. First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions -- for living what, following Socrates, we may call "the examined life." This means a life that accepts no belief as authoritative simply because it has been handed down by tradition or become familiar through habit, a life that questions all beliefs and accepts only those that survive reason's demand for consistency and for justification. Training this capacity requires developing the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgment. Testing of this sort frequently produces challenges to tradition, as Socrates knew well when he defended himself against the charge of "corrupting the young." But he defended his activity on the grounds that democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves rather than simply deferring to authority, who can reason together about their choices rather than just trading claims and counter-claims. He compared himself to a gadfly on the back of a noble but sluggish horse: he was stinging the democracy to wake it up, so that it could conduct its business in a more reflective and reasonable way. Modern democracies, like ancient Athens, but even more so, given the nature of modern media, are prone to hasty and sloppy reasoning and to the substitution of invective for real deliberation. We need Socratic teaching to fulfill the promise of democratic citizenship.

Critical thinking is particularly crucial for good citizenship in a society that needs to come to grips with the presence of people who differ by ethnicity, caste, and religion. For we will only have a chance at an adequate dialogue across cultural boundaries if young citizens know how to engage in dialogue and deliberation in the first place. And they will only know how to do that if they learn how to examine themselves and to think about the reasons why they are inclined to

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[6] I am convinced that Dewey, who was Tagore's contemporary, was influenced by Tagore's ideas and educational practice, but since biographers of Dewey are, like most Americans, ignorant about India, I have not yet found solid evidence of this fact.

support one thing rather than another -- rather than, as so often happens, seeing political debate as simply a way of boasting, or getting an advantage for their own side. When politicians bring simplistic propaganda their way, as politicians in every country have a way of doing, young people will only have the hope of preserving independence and individuality if they know how to think critically about what they hear, testing its logic and its concepts and imagining alternatives to it.

Let me return to Billy Tucker's case, since it stands in many ways for others, showing how basic a contribution that sort of critical thinking makes to citizenship. I met Tucker right at the beginning of his course with Krishna Mallick, and I talked to him periodically throughout the process. At the beginning, he had thought that philosophy was something remote and elite, certainly not something for him. His introduction to the life and death of Socrates grabbed him, however, and made him fascinated by that strange man, walking around and talking with everyone, even at the cost of life itself. After this, the course turned to formal logic, and Tucker was exhilarated to discover that he got a high mark on a test in this. He felt really good about himself, and, with a new sense of pride in his own mental self-command, set to work on the next phase of the course, in which Mallick asked the class to practice detecting logical fallacies in newspaper articles and political speeches. Finally, in the last phase, he did research for debates on issues of the day, and way surprised to discover that he was being asked to argue against the death penalty, although he actually favors it. He had never understood, he said, that one could produce arguments for a position that one does not hold oneself. He told me that this experience gave him a new attitude to political discussion: now he's more inclined to respect the opposing position, and to be curious about the arguments on both sides, and what the two sides might share, rather than seeing the discussion as simply a way of making boasts and assertions. The following year he took another course from Mallick, not part of his requirement, on Gandhi and the philosophy of non-violent resistance.

It seems to me that this transformation is precisely what Socrates, and Tagore, had in mind. The idea that one will take responsibility for one's own reasoning, and exchange ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason, is an essential ingredient of a democracy that aims to resolve ethnic and religious differences peacefully and to exchange ideas with other nations in a world increasingly torn by faction and divisive differences. Tucker was around 17 years old, but it is possible, and essential, to encourage critical thinking from the very beginning of a child's education. The girls in rural Bihar had such an experience. From the very start, their education was aimed at developing their critical and self-critical capacities, at freeing them from the authority of tradition to think for themselves. This freedom is of particular urgency for women, who are so often encouraged to be passive followers of tradition.

But now to the second part of my proposal. Citizens who cultivate their capacity for effective democratic citizenship need, further, an ability to see themselves as not simply citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern. They have to understand both the differences that make understanding difficult between groups and nations and the shared human needs and

interests that make understanding essential, if common problems are to be solved. This means learning quite a lot both about nations other than one's own and about the different religions and other groups that are part of one's own nation. The international part of this ability is particularly difficult to cultivate in America, since Americans are so resistant to serious learning about any other country. Because of America's size, wealth, and power, they feel perfectly able to go through life without this learning. Indians are less likely to go through life with this degree of ignorance. To that extent, the educator in India begins with an advantage; but that is not to say that a great deal of work does not have to be done in education to make the understanding of other nations and cultures complex and nuanced, rather than based on fear and prejudice.

However, I want to focus from now on on the related task of understanding differences internal to one's own nation, an area in which both India and the U. S. have similar challenges to face. An adequate education for living in a pluralistic democracy must be a multicultural education, by which I mean one that acquaints students with some fundamentals about the histories and cultures of the many different groups with whom they share laws and institutions. These should include religious, ethnic, social and gender-based groups. Language learning, history, economics, and political science all play a role in pursuing this understanding, in different ways at different levels. Awareness of the history of cultural, economic, religious, and gender-based differences is essential in order to promote the respect for another that is the essential underpinning for dialogue and in order to identify problems correctly and think well about their possible solutions. There is no easier source of disdain and neglect than ignorance and the sense of the inevitable naturalness of one's own way.

This is where good textbooks are indeed important. A good textbook will convey fact in a balanced and accurate way, and will give all the narratives their place. That must include showing students how and why different groups interpret evidence differently and construct different narratives. This means, I would argue, that the understanding that forms the second part of my proposal must be cultivated in a close relationship to the first part: history needs to be presented together with a pedagogy that fosters critical thinking, the use of multiple sources, and an understanding of the difficulty of constructing a historical narrative.

In his illuminating book Prejudice and Pride, Krishna Kumar has argued that even the "good" history textbooks used by Indian children are much too neglectful of pedagogy and much too intent on fostering adherence to a single party line about history. He shows that this emphasis has its roots in colonial practice, the aim of which was to get Indians to swallow a particular derogatory narrative about their own place in history. Now, even if the aim is more benign, the mistrust of the student's own powers of mind unfortunately lingers. Although the NCERT series had at its inception a progressive orientation, including admiration for rational thinking, the approach of the authors, Kumar argues, "provided little room for children to participate in historical analysis and judgement…Neither the authors nor the critics seemed much

bothered about the strategies used in the texts for communicating with young readers."[7] The idea that a central aim of a good textbook should be to further the correct "ideology" is common, to some extent at least, to both the right and the left. To the extent that they endorse this aim, neither respects the mind of the child sufficiently. Teachers all too often teach to the book, encouraging students to produce exam essays that simply recapitulate.

Textbooks are a small part of the teaching of pluralistic citizenship. A good teacher can teach well even from a bad book, encouraging students to think critically about it. And even the finest textbook is dead unless enlivened by good teaching. But, since textbooks are currently so much in the spotlight and so relatively easy to change, more thought can still be devoted to the pedagogical aspects of the books themselves. An Indian engineer, now living in America, praises the intellectual quality of some of the textbooks he used in the 1980's, but deprecates both the pedagogical qualities of the books and the stultifying quality of the accompanying pedagogy. He then talks about how his sister's little son in Virginia learned about the U. S. civil rights movement by participating in a play in which some children, playing the parts of African-Americans, were forced to sit in the back seat of the bus. The boy was deeply moved by this exercise, and understood something about prejudice and what it does to the soul. "We have nothing of this sort in India," he concludes. "The textbook material itself is so large in extent that there is barely enough time to complete it through classroom teaching Project work, plays, trips to historical places are just out of question. The emphasis on cramming textbooks (without the need to consult original sources) has had a telling effect on the reading habits of Indians as such."[8] Of course this man's nephew was lucky: not all American schools are this lively. But John Dewey's experiments have had a very broad influence, and many government schools in the U. S. show at least some traces of Dewey's idea that children learn by active participation rather than by rote learning. In India, so far as I can tell, Tagore's similar experiments, which stressed understanding of other religions and cultures through active participation and through the arts, have had far less impact on the way history is taught.[9] So: textbooks are a part of the story, but even they must be sensitive to pedagogy; and they cannot stand alone. Indeed, too much reliance on them is very likely to deaden the students' minds.

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[7] Krishna Kumar, Prejudice and Pride: School Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan (Delhi: Penguin, 2001), 54.

[8] V. Agarwal, e mail communication, used by permission.

[9] Amita Sen's writings about Tagore remind us that students in Santiniketan learned to respect other religions less by reading books than by participating in the ceremonies of each, as the appropriate holidays came round. (Amita Sen, Joy in All Work, translation of Ananda Sarbakaje (Kolkata: Bookfront, 1995), 14.) Amartya Sen emphasizes the fact that understanding the variety of world cultures was deeply embedded in the curriculum in Santiniketan as he experienced it: there were strong "local" elements, including the use of Bengali rather than English as the language of instruction, but "At the same time there were courses on a great variety of cultures, and study programs devoted to China, Japan, and the Middle East." (Amartya Sen, "Tagore and His India," The New York Review of books, june 26, 1997, 55-63.) And Satyajit Ray emphasizes the way in which Santiniketan's type of locally rooted cosmopolitanism revealed to students too inclined to focus on European art the "splendors of Indian and Far Eastern art," making him "the combined product of East and West that I am." (Satyajit Ray, Our Films, Their films (Kolkata: Orient Longman, third edition 1993).

This brings me to the third part of my proposal. As the stories of the dowry play in Bihar and the civil rights play in Virginia indicate, citizens cannot think well on the basis of factual knowledge alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to the first two, can be called the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. The narrative imagination is not uncritical: for we always bring ourselves and our own judgments to the encounter with another, and when we identify with a character in a novel, or a distant person whose life story we imagine, we inevitably will not merely identify, we will also judge that story in the light of our own goals and aspirations. But the first step of understanding the world from the point of view of the other is essential to any responsible act of judgment, since we do not know what we are judging until we see the meaning of an action as the person intends it, the meaning of a speech as it expresses something of importance in the context of that person's history and social world. The third ability pupils in a democracy need to attain is the ability to decipher such meanings through the use of the imagination. As Tagore wrote, “We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy…But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed.”

The narrative imagination is cultivated, above all, through literature and the arts. Reliance on the arts was the most revolutionary aspect of Tagore’s curriculum, as it was also of John Dewey’s; but Dewey was himself a bad writer with no first-hand artistic abilities, whereas Tagore had the advantage of being an artist of the first rank, not only in poetry but also in painting, music, and choreography. Therefore the artistic part of my proposal received a richer development in Santiniketan than it ever has in America, in a way that has, I believe, important implications for the formation of young citizens. Preparing citizens to understand one another is not the only function of the arts in a curriculum, of course, but it is one extremely important function, and there are many ways in which such courses may focus on the requirements of citizenship. Through the imagination we are able to have a kind of insight into the experience of another group or person that it is very difficult to attain in daily life -- particularly when our world has constructed sharp separations between groups, and suspicions that make any encounter difficult.

Children love music, dance, and stories. Good NGO’s know this. The arts also offer children opportunities for learning through their own creative activity, something that Dewey particularly emphasized. To put on a play about dowry is to learn about it in a way that is likely to seem more meaningful to a child than the reading of a sociological account. Learning about hardship and discrimination enters the personality at a deeper level.

The arts are also crucial sources of both freedom and community. When people put on a play together, they have to learn to go beyond tradition and authority, if they are going to express themselves well. And the sort of community created by the arts is non-hierarchical, a valuable model of the responsiveness and interactivity that a good democracy will also foster in its political processes. When I talk to Amita Sen, who danced in Tagore’s dance-dramas, first in Santiniketan

and then on the Kolkata stage, I see the revolutionary nature of what Tagore had done for young women in particular, urging them to express themselves freely through their bodies and to join with him in a kind of profoundly egalitarian play. The scandal of this freedom, as young women of good family suddenly turned up on the Kolkata stage, shook convention and tradition to their foundations. So too with the dowry play: to have young teenage girls get up in front of their entire village to perform that play was a deeply subversive act of social criticism.

Finally, the arts are great sources of joy for children, and indeed for adults as well. Participating in plays, songs, and dances fills children with joy, and this joy carries over into the rest of their education. Amita Sen's book about Tagore as choreographer is aptly entitled, in English, Joy in All Work, and it shows how all the "regular" education in Santiniketan, the education that enabled these students to perform very well in standard examinations, was infused with passion and delight because of the way in which education was combined with dance and song. Children do not like to sit still all day; but they also do not know automatically how to express emotion with their bodies in dance. Tagore's extremely expressive, but also extremely disciplined dance regime was an essential source of creativity, thought, and freedom for all pupils, but particularly, perhaps, for women, whose bodies had been taught to be shame-ridden and inexpressive. This is her general description of what Tagore was trying to convey for and with children through dance:

> His dance was a dance of emotion. The playful clouds in the sky, the shivering of the wind in the leaves, light glistening on the grass, moonlight flooding the earth, the blossoming and fading of flowers, the murmur of dry leaves – the pulsing of joy in a man's heart, or the pangs of sorrow, are all expressed in this expressive dance's movements and expressions.[10]

We should bear in mind that we hear the voice of an older woman recalling her childhood experience. How extraordinary that the emotions and the poetry of the child live on so vigorously in the woman, and what a tribute this is to the capacity of this sort of education for a kind of enlivening of the imagination that continues on in one's life when all specific learned facts are forgotten. Furthermore, Amita Sen makes it perfectly clear that the dance experience was itself highly disciplined and a fine source of the understanding of discipline for children, and at the same time closely interwoven with learning of more traditional types, not just a kind of distracting fun and games.

There is a further point to be made about what the arts do for the spectator. As Tagore knew, and as radical artists have often emphasized, the arts, by generating pleasure in connection with acts of subversion and cultural criticism, produce an endurable and even attractive dialogue with the prejudices of the past, rather than one fraught with fear and defensiveness. The great African-American artist Ralph Ellison, for example, called his novel Invisible Man "a raft of perception, hope, and entertainment" that could help the American

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[10] Amita Sen, Joy in All Work, 35.

democracy “negotiate the snags and whirlpools” that stand between it and “the democratic idea.” Entertainment is crucial to the ability of the arts to offer perception and hope. It’s not just the experience of the performer, then, that is so important for democracy, it’s the way in which performance offers a venue for exploring difficult issues without crippling anxiety. We see this, as well, in the play in Bihar, which the entire village found delightful rather than deeply threatening.

One of the many pleasant aspects of my encounter with the writings of Ravinder Kumar was learning that he shares my enthusiasm for the arts as modes of understanding that are not reducible to other forms. In his wonderful essay “Historical Literature on the Struggle for Freedom in India,” going through the different narratives of the freedom struggle, he concludes that the social sciences are not fully adequate to offer a complete understanding of such a struggle, particularly where communal and religious conflict are concerned:

> The creative writer…seeks to grasp reality through cognitive processes different from those of the social scientist or the historian. His perception does not depend upon an initial process of disaggregation, for purposes of ready analysis, and the subsequent aggregation of fragmentary insights into a mechanical whole. Instead, the imaginative writer seeks to explore reality as a totality. He, therefore, reveals a sensitivity to problems of consciousness and identity which is seldom equaled by the more formal disciplines of the social sciences.[11]

It is typical of Kumar, in my experience, to produce such a compressed and challenging statement on a fundamental issue more or less as an aside, with no fanfare. How I wish he were here, to criticize the formulations that I have been trying to offer.

IV. The Bird Nobody Noticed

Those, then, are the three elements of my educational proposal: critical thinking, understanding of plurality and difference and their histories, and the narrative imagination. We can go directly to the heart of the matter if we observe that the education I propose is above all an education for freedom: the mind’s freedom to think, imagine, and criticize on one’s own, without deference to tradition or authority, and, we should add, the body’s freedom to move effectively and confidently in public space, with self-respect and without the anxiety that so often leads to demonization of others. (Women, of course, are particularly likely to lack the bodily sort of freedom.) The Roman philosopher Seneca began his famous letter on liberal education, in the first century AD, by describing a traditional sort of education, which consisted of getting together some wise books expressing the wisdom of tradition and then getting students to absorb the content of those books. That education was called “liberal” because it was an education for well brought-up young gentlemen, who were called the liberals, the “free-born.” He himself, he now observes, would use the word “liberal” very differently. In his view, as in mine, an education is only “liberal,” “connected to freedom,” if it is one that “liberates”, encouraging students to take

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[11] Ravinder Kumar, “Historical Literature on the Struggle for Freedom in India,” in The Making of a Nation: Essays in Indian History and Politics (Deli: Manohar, 1989), 75-76.

charge of their own thinking and choice, and this requires precisely not stuffing them up with books, but asking them to criticize as they learn. Almost two thousand years later, John Dewey made the same contrast, between the usual sort of education, which was "one of imposition from above and from outside," and his own scheme, which focuses on "expression and cultivation of individuality."

But there is no greater writer about educational freedom than Tagore, and no more wonderful depiction of what is wrong with an education based on rote learning than his sad story about one very dead bird. "The Parrot's Training" is familiar to most of you, but I believe it may not be known to absolutely all, since my own Indian graduate student research assistant, who went to school and university in Mumbai, never heard of it. So I venture to narrate it briefly here. Of course Tagore's full version is much better.

A certain Raja had a bird whom he loved. He wanted to educate it, because he thought ignorance was a bad thing. His pundits convinced him that the bird must go to school. The first thing that had to be done was to give the bird a suitable edifice for his schooling: so they build a magnificent golden cage. The next thing was to get good textbooks. The pundits said, "Textbooks can never be too many for our purpose." Scribes worked day and night to produce the requisite manuscripts. Then, teachers were employed. Somehow or other they got quite a lot of money for themselves and built themselves good houses. When the Raja visited the school, the teachers showed him the methods used to instruct the parrot. "The method was so stupendous that the bird looked ridiculously unimportant in comparison. The Raja was satisfied that there was no flaw in the arrangements. As for any complaint from the bird itself, that simply could not be expected. Its throat was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper."

The lessons continued. One day, the bird died. Nobody had the least idea how long ago this had happened. The Rajah's nephews, who had been in charge of the education ministry, reported to the Raja: "'Sire, the bird's education has been completed.'

> 'Does it hop?' the Raja enquired.
>
> 'Never!' said the nephews.
>
> 'Does it fly?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'Bring me the bird,' said the Raja.
>
> The bird was brought to him, guarded by the kotwal and the sepoys and the sowars. The Raja poked its body with his finger. Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled.
>
> Outside the window, the murmur of the spring breeze amongst the newly budded asoka leaves made the April morning wistful.[12]

This wonderful story hardly needs commentary. Its crucial point is that educationists tend to enjoy talking about themselves and their own activity, and to focus too little on the small tender

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[12] From V. Bhatia, ed., Rabindranath Tagore: Pioneer in Education (New Delhi: Sahitya Chayan, 1994).

children whose eagerness and curiosity should be the core of the educational endeavor. Tagore thought that children were usually more alive than adults, because less weighted down by habit. The task of education was to avoid killing off that curiosity, and then to build outward from it, in a spirit of respect for the child's freedom and individuality rather than one of hierarchical imposition of information.

I do not agree with absolutely everything in Tagore's educational ideal. For example, perhaps because I come from a very cold place, I think it less essential than he did that education should take place outdoors, in close proximity to nature. More relevant to my argument here, I am less anti-memorization than Tagore was. Memorization of fact can play a valuable and even a necessary role in giving pupils command over their own relationship to history and political argument. That's one reason why good textbooks are important, something that Tagore probably would have disputed. But about the large point I am utterly in agreement: education must begin with the mind of the child, and it must have the goal of increasing that mind's freedom in its social environment, rather than killing it off. And I connect the fact that the rural poor played a crucial role in changing the course of government in the last election to the fact that, although they have had less education than other citizens, they have had less of the stultifying deadening sort, and, if they are lucky enough to be in the vicinity of a good NGO, more of the enlivening sort.

V. What Can Be Done?

To what extent has education for freedom, as I have described it, become a reality in India today? Tagore's actual influence has not, I think, been widespread. Several reasons can be found for this: the relatively narrow reach of the Bengali language and the poor quality of many English translations of Tagore's work; Tagore's own personal charisma and artistic distinction, which made it difficult to convert Santiniketan into a mass movement; and his distaste for bureaucracy, which meant that, unlike Dewey (who was not a creative artist but who was a capable entrepreneur), he did not try to have a mass movement. Even in Santiniketan today, education is routinized; even the dance performances contain little creativity.

Similar ideas, though, are widespread in the NGO sector, as I have said. And there are at least some state-sponsored initiatives that do have a promising focus on the renewal of pedagogy and on critical thinking. Some aspects of the DPEP can be mentioned here, and to a lesser extent its successor the SSA. These programs have, however, had very uneven regional effect; they have also been undesirably mixed with neoliberal ideas about the withdrawal of central government funding. At the state level, again, there are some success stories – I have heard particular praise for Sheela Dixit's attention to pedagogy in the Delhi schools and textbooks (the latter superintended by Krishna Kumar). I want to learn much more. ON the whole, however, these issues seem to have had less attention than their importance warrants.

Why? Culturally speaking, India seems like just the place where all three parts of my model should be flourishing. No nation, perhaps, is more given to disputation and critical thinking. Fre nations have had such a long awareness of a tremendous range of internal differences, ethnic,

cultural, and regional. Few have had such distinction in the arts or contributed so much to the life of the imagination. So why do these glories of the Indian tradition not play a more central and structuring role in primary and secondary education today?

One factor is surely that progressive experiments in education emphasizing critical thinking and imaginative learning always exact higher financial and human costs than education as rote learning. It is understandable, if not commendable, that progressive reforms were neglected in the effort to jump-start education on a mass scale, and especially to build the educational basis for progress in industry and science.

Another related factor, I believe, is a general neglect of the humanities that goes straight back to Nehru, who paid little attention to cultivating the humanistic side of education, but pinned his hope on scientific and technological progress. Indira Gandhi went to Santiniketan, and had her only happy time at school there. So both father and daughter knew the good in progressive education. They simply did not focus on it when thinking about what most people would learn. And even more blame belongs, today, to the millions of middle-class Indians who think of science and technology as the avenues of progress and enrichment, who share this disdain for the humanities, and who don't complain about the education their children are getting, whether in public or in private schools. If computer science were taught as poorly in schools as critical thinking is now, then what a scandal there would be. But people don't raise a complaint about what they themselves don't care about, and so the neglect of imagination, poetry, the arts, and even critical thinking in history and other subjects has been accepted with little parental complaint. Tagore reminds us that the person who is most victimized by this neglect, namely the pupil, cannot be expected to complain, for precisely what is wrong is that the pupil's faculties of criticism and complaint have been dulled.

This neglect of the humanities reaches from elementary school to the highest reaches of the academy. As you all know, the humanities disciplines are not the fields of highest prestige in Indian universities. Bright young students are encouraged to go for science, economics, even political science, rather than philosopher or literature. The most talented young scholars, too, are often steered into political science or economics, rather than literature or philosophy. A vicious cycle is thus created: if fewer top students enter a field, the field will indeed become less exciting, thus less attractive to the best students. This story is becoming more and more true all over the world, where the humanities are concerned. In my own country, funding for humanities in universities is being widely cut, since these disciplines are often thought "useless." I have argues that they are far from useless. They are crucial to the health of democracy. Fortunately, the humanities are not neglected in education run by NGO's. If women's education groups are not singing and dancing, they are expressing their experiences through quilting and other traditional art forms.

What might be some good steps to take to bring to government scools the excitement and life that is found in the best of NGO education? In Cultivating Humanity, I now put my analysis to work to develop proposals for education in the United States. I hesitate to do the same for and in

India, since my relative ignorance and my outsider status make advocacy unwise. Nonetheless, very tentatively and in the spirig of opening a discussion:

First, I would urge that a national dialogue be continued at the highest levels, with considerable emphasis and the attention of the best people, about how education can enliven rather than deaden. Representatives from the teaching professions, from NGO's, from the academy, and from government, can come together and talk about this problem. If as many words were devoted to the dying bird as to the plumage of textbooks, good ideas would be bound to surface. I would urge that students themselves be part of this dialogue, and university students who were recently in school.

Second, this national dialogue needs to include, and focus on, the question of how to revive the humanities, so that, from primary education to the university research level, they make the social contribution they are capable of making. Much can be done to make humanities careers more attractive to talented and thoughtful young people: awards, publicity, all these things have their influence, especially on trend-conscious middle-class parents.

Third, government needs to make funds available for districts that want to reform and to carry out good experiments in teaching: the best aspects of DPEP and SSA, consistently and not tokenistically applied. Pilot projects scattered around the country in different regions can yield a lot of information about what can work and what may not work; but they will not happen without funding, and I can't think of any better use to which to put government money.

Fourth, government must focus on how to impart new visibility, prestige, earning power, and dignity to the teaching profession. Professions have a life of their own. If they are backwaters, and are held in low esteem, lazy and unimaginative people will go there. That is what has happened to a great extent with schoolteaching in the U. S., which is poorly paid and of relatively low prestige. I think something like this has begun to happen in India. There is nothing necessary about this, it's just a matter of fashion. It is not so, for example, in France and Germany. So somehow teaching must be made more fashionable, and government can think of creative ways to do this: by focusing on ways to raise teacher salaries; by conducting national seminars for schoolteachers that give them a sense that ongoing learning and debate is what their life is about, and that this is a dignified activity, encouraged at the highest level; by offering awards for excellent teaching that include a lot of publicity for the teacher's creative work with students. (These awards would be utterly counterproductive if they were based on the scores of the students in national exams.) Teacher salaries need to be raised as well, if there is to be a general sense that this is a dignified profession worthy of the most creative minds.

Then, fifth, a more contentious proposal, government and universities need to think of ways to assess student performance that depend far less on rote learning and the ingestion of textbook materials. A number of the nations of Europe have thought about this recently. What it means is that much more staff and more time will need to be involved in the university admissions process, since it will have to be a process of individualized assessment based upon interviews, essays that are more individualized and less based on textbooks, letters of recommendation, and so forth.

But that can be done, and some countries do it. The United States has suffered in some ways from the extreme degree of decentralization and local control that we have always had: children can get widely different degrees of support and expenditure depending on where they are born. But the good that has come of it is that universities have no quick and easy way to make admissions decisions, no short-cut. They have to look at the whole person, and to hire large staffs of people who are trained to make such nuanced assessments.

Should there be national standards at all? I'm inclined to think that the very presence of national standards always leads in the direction of ossification and death, as we are now beginning to see in the US with Bush's moves in that direction. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" act has the ostensible purpose of evening out the discrepancies in learning and opportunity that are the main flaw in our decentralized system. But already the urge to standardize has crept in in a baneful way. For how can one compare student performance in different regions but through some kind of standardized tests? And then, of course, teachers, knowing that their school's funding depends on the performance on that test, teach to the test, not to the student. I have not talked to a high-quality educator who is not greatly distressed by these changes. Could decentralization work in India? The same sort of vigorous decentralization that the panchayat system represents might work better than national standards in education too, although it is also possible that this would simply leave too many loopholes for laziness and corruption. At any rate, the sort of national standard that makes sense is the sort that encourages the ability to think and write independently, to express a personal viewpoint with good arguments, and to show a grasp of the complexity and difficulty of real historical thinking.

Sixth, to the extent that education is still based upon textbooks, these should be books that stimulate critical thinking, a sense of intellectual complexity and divergence, and the ability to work with primary sources.

Seventh, and in some ways most important of all, the arts should be given particular emphasis in education at all levels. The many great artists of whom India is justly proud can be brought together to generate ideas for how this can best be done.

I do not believe that Tagore's experiments work only in the presence of a charismatic leader, or that they require the unusual beauty of Santiniketan. The imagination is a hardy plant. When it is not killed, it can thrive in many places, as it thrives in the Sithamarhi district of Bihar, as it thrives in similar projects I have observed in other regions. If NGO's that have no equipment and no money, no computers and no paper, only heart and mind and a few slates, can accomplish so much, there is no excuse for government schools to lag so far behind. I can best summarize my wish for the future of education in India, and end this talk, with a poem of Tagore's addressed to his country:

> Where the mind is without fear
> And the head is held high,
> Where knowledge is free;
> Where the world has not been broken

Up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving
Stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason
Has not lost its way into the
Dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward
By thee into ever-widening
Thought and action –
Into that heaven of freedom,
My Father,
Let my country awake.