

# Colonising the Child

## Education as an Instrument of Prejudice

By Chitra Padmanabhan

Decades ago, Rabindranath Tagore said that a nation is not territorial, but ideational. He had grasped that humans build communities first — communities sustained by shared and complementary patterns of living; the idea of nation-state as a political entity comes much later.

Look at a child's excitement as she creates the world on paper — mountains, clouds, rivers, birds, a house, a peeping sun and, perhaps, a child — herself. She does not draw the territory of a country, but instinctively places the human in the context of nature.

In childhood, she touches soil and is closest to the earth, moving away from it as she grows up. America, or India, is the same as her home or locality. And the prime minister can't be more powerful than the mali who makes the sunflower bloom so bright!

She plays with clay, and hears stories from her mother or grandmother; talks to clouds, sees leaf green change to russet in tandem with festivals, customs and seasons. She instinctively absorbs ideas of interconnectedness in life: Between humans and nature.

Drawing her first lines on paper, colouring a new universe, and modelling clay figures, she takes several steps in understanding the world around her and her place in it. Her first steps in creativity — doing simple things — are joyously learnt in the lap of nature. Osmotically, she absorbs the rhythm of co-existence and harmony that she sees in nature, and become a part of it, so much so that gradually everything develops into a relationship of friendship. This is among the joyous discoveries made by veteran artist Devi Prasad in his 15-year experience as an art teacher at Gandhiji's Nayee Talim Educational Institute at Sewagram, which was articulated in his pioneering work, *Art: The Basis of Education*. Thus begins the evolution of human values in a child's psyche, laying the foundation for an aesthetic mindset characterised by openness.

Her learning process is cut short when she enters the formal education system; a system which seeks to carve the political, territorial entity of a nation on her mind; which pins her in a prescriptive straitjacket to ensure her evolution into a 'responsible' citizen. No more discoveries for her, reinforcing the complementarity of processes with humans at the core of every activity. Her world is discarded for an adult universe, teeming with hierarchy, segmentation, and prejudice.

Among the early effects of socialisation is to overwrite her creative and communicative impulse with comments which suggest that her drawing of the sun, flower, cat or house is not correct, and ought to be done some other way.

These mistakes are powerful signs of the child's individualistic expression and the result of their erasure is calamitous. Art

historian Herbert Read puts it aptly: We sow the seeds of disunity in the nursery and the classroom, with our superior adult conceit. We divide the intelligence from the sensibility of our children, create split men — schizophrenics, to give them a psychological label — and then discover that we have no social unity.

The split psyche is the focus of the nation-building project. In *Prejudice and Pride*, Prof Krishna Kumar has brought out this perspective. To make loyal citizens of children, the school becomes a tool, courtesy the state, of socialising the young into an approved national past or history. Problems start when ideas of nationalism and nationhood are increasingly built on prejudice vis-a-vis a demonised other. Krishna Kumar compares the master narratives of the freedom struggle, especially Partition, on both sides of the border, and finds that the rival treatments of these events in school text books are designed to keep misgivings alive. Here, past is not source of understanding but of exaggerated pride, and, of course, its counterpart, prejudice.

In today's age of the mass media, nationalism is easily encrypted in symbols such as the flag. Couched in a simplistic language of good and evil, prejudice enters the child's mind. No distinction is made between the knowledge of an event and awareness of its context.

The Kargil episode showed up most schools as bugle posts for jingoism. A friend was summarily called to her daughter's liberal school to explain the six-year-old's unpatriotic statement that soldiers were 'bad'. Told on an earlier occasion that killing is bad, the child, on hearing that soldiers were killing the enemy, put two and two together. Instead of understanding the child, the teacher gave the parent a lecture on patriotism. No thought here for the impact of value-loaded terms on young minds ill-equipped to understand context-related events so early on in life.

Infusing prejudice in young minds, which reaps a contentious future, seems totally counterproductive when education systems can encourage an inclusive world view. Like a game of building blocks, this world view must start from the level of the child — from nature to the way people live, work, interconnect, practise their diverse customs and build a network of communities.

An education system that builds upon a child's first triumphant channelling of positive energies as a doer will create a society of individuals who have achieved a sense of unity within. Individuals, who seek inter-relatedness, not isolation; plurality not conformism. Individuals, who seek to resolve conflict within humane parameters and build a nation or commonwealth that grows out of the life breath of communities in the most natural manner, like a bud becoming a flower.