

The Parrot's Training (retold)



Hacking the Education System Series

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PROLOGUE

"You're killing the things for whose singing I yearn!" - Rainer Maria Rilke

In short bursts of poignant irony, this tale, adapted by Manish Jain from an exquisite short story by Rabindranath Tagore, brings us face to face with charged edges and excluded yearnings for different visions of what it means to learn today. In 'The Parrot's Training', Tagore tells the story of – you guessed it! – a parrot, whose chirpy, flighty unsophistication inspires a benevolent king to educate 'her' (I use 'her' as a pronoun for the parrot to foreground its feminine subservience to the masculine dominion of the king).

With every effort by the Raja's pundits and experts to keep her under, to stabilize her feathery wildness into tame passivity, to 'improve' her, to convert her to the excellent 'principles of Education', and make her amenable to the courts, the parrot shines as a stark figure of the 'inappropriate other' and of the 'promising monstrous' – even when her caged soul-feathers wither up, and she dies.

At the end of the story, Tagore beautifully highlights the tragedy of form without spirit, when he writes: "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 bookleaves rustled” (emphasis mine).

His tale – even more relevant in our times when the imperatives of a techno-rationalistic monoculture are silencing other cosmo-visions of power, other ways of being with and knowing the world – poetically touches on colonial disruptions of vibrant ecosystems, indigenous livelihoods diagnosed as ‘inadequate’ or ‘compromised’, sacred alliances with lithic landscapes and learning spaces converted to commoditized relationships, and cultural blind spots masqueraded as universal laws.

Manish Jain, passionate about his daughter – whom he affectionately calls ‘Kanku’ – and about nameless numbers of children across India and the world, who have been branded failures by institutionalized schooling because their beauty is considered too unwieldy to fit the anorexic instrumentality of a global politico-educational paradigm, adapts Tagore's tale for a modern milieu. In a sense, he ushers us into the wily contraptions of our own shiny cages – now adoringly fitted with grade point averages, draconian policies like ‘No Child Left Behind’, the exclusionary dynamics of celebrated measures like ‘One Laptop per Child’, the modern frenzy for job security in an increasingly random, white-water world, and video

surveillance for good measure. Like Tagore's original writing, Manish's story is just as urgent: we inhabit and are inhabited by practices that are sucking away our vitality – condemning us to magnanimous islands of pitiful scavenging where entire continents of possibilities are pressingly nearby.

As such, like Tagore before him, Manish urges us to take a closer look at the invisible, to consider the impasses of a system too exhausted to hold aloft the emerging aspirations and hopes of many. This tale invites us to consider how ‘we are being stressed by what we've repressed’, how in demonizing ourselves, fixing ‘nature’, and perpetuating a ‘single story’ about what it means to be alive, we are continuously blind to other ways of framing ‘learning’. As such, it is only natural for the reader to respond to this with a dose of generous scepticism, and to insist that questioning the orthodoxies of education is a privilege only the educated have. I urge you to stand for a while in the space of the inconvenient and uncomfortable questions the story raises.

While this tale isn't about feel-good solutions, best practices or ready-made prescriptions, it should not be interpreted by the reader as a cynical text. In fact, a breaking of the shackles of hope might lead to a keen awareness of other worlds. It is an invitation to our wildest

imaginations; and boldly questioning the fundamental structures that undergird today's educational system.

Manish knows this thrilling alterity. Having once worked with UNESCO, hoping to help children in the Global South with spanking new learning initiatives he was co-developing, Manish soon learned that the many peoples he hoped to save didn't in fact need his sermon. They already had vibrant learning relationships, embodied and contextually potent forms of knowing, and questions of their own – even though they had been represented as needing intervention within the political nexus of his convenient workspace in Paris. Manish later left his job, and returned to India – to learn at the feet of his ‘illiterate’ grandmother, whom his education had told him does not deserve an audience. With his wife, Vidhi, Manish is now co-learning with unschooled Kanku – and all the many grateful ‘khojis’ (or seekers) decolonizing themselves at Manish's ‘Swaraj University’ – a place unlike any university you've ever known.

Just before I became a father, I once asked Manish a question over a conversation via Skype: “So who is likely to do better at mathematics? Your daughter, who has never been to school, or mine – if we eventually decide to send her to school?” Without missing a beat,

Manish replied, his pixelated voice sharp as a whip: “Yours. But that's the point: I'd rather risk her knowing nothing about calculus or trigonometry than seeing her divorced from the rich wisdoms of her land, from the support of many keen worlds only accessible to the ‘unschooled’, from the many wondrous possibilities of collective being and abundance that opens up when life isn't framed as an educational trajectory to indentured servitude.” Well, to be accurate, he wasn't half as poetic as that. I have taken many liberties in embellishing faint memories. But what he said was no less potent.

Today, we will not be compelling our daughter, Alethea, two years old, to go to school.

Read the story that follows these introductory comments. Perhaps you too will find – as many around the world are realizing – why in naming the colour, we blind the eye.

Bayo Akomolafe is a Poet. Philosopher. Psychologist. (Recovering) Professor. Passionate about the Preposterous... who is originally from Nigeria but now living in India. He is globally recognized for his unconventional, counterintuitive, and indigenous take on global crisis, civic action and social change. He is the co-founder of The Emergence Network. <http://bayoakomolafe.net>

The Parrot's Training *(retold)*

I would like to share a story that I adapted from the Nobel prize-winning poet and visionary freedom fighter, Rabindranath Tagore, in which he tried to warn us of the dangers of 'McEducation for All' almost 75 years ago.

In 'The Parrot's Training', we are told of a golden cage that is built to imprison the wild and uncivilized parrot so that she can be properly 'educated' by the king's pundits under the Ministry of Animal Resource Development (MARD).

The king was keen that she learn the 3Rs : reading, (w)riting, and (a)rithmetic. In addition, she should learn how to believe in and obey his authority, be proud of her newfound nationalism and borders, know enough English to identify with all the latest corporate brands (and work at a call centre) and be a good global netizen. She should be well-trained to be an engine of economic growth.



12 times TABLES learn by HEART

after me
 $12 \times 10 = 120$

$12 \times 9 = 108$

$12 \times 8 = 96$

$12 \times 7 = 84$

$12 \times 12 = 144$

$12 \times 3 = 36$

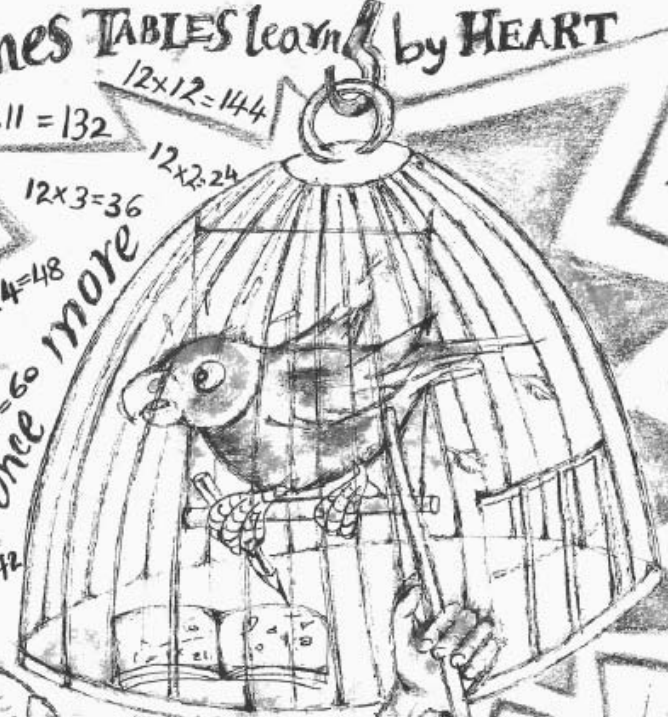
$12 \times 2 = 24$

$12 \times 4 = 48$

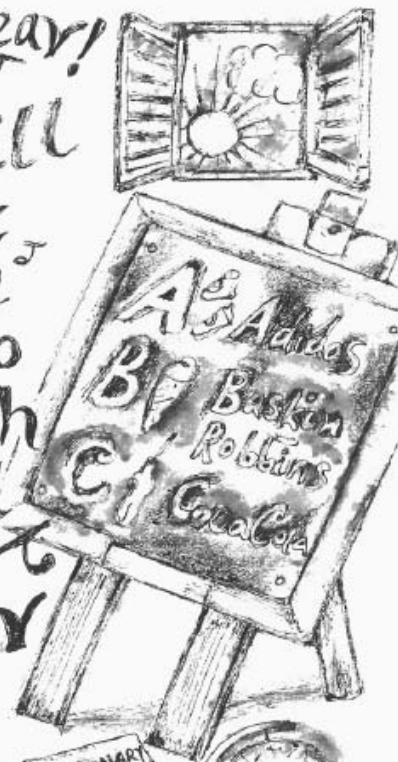
$12 \times 5 = 60$

$12 \times 6 = 72$

once more



Repeat, dear!
Jack & Jill
went
up the
hill to
fetch
a pail
of
water



First, the teachers tried stuffing the bird with pages of knowledge from the official government textbooks. When she did not cooperate, she was prescribed Ritalin to improve her concentration and tame her ‘hyper-activity’. Extra private tuition classes were also given and time for free play was drastically reduced. That did not work.

Then, a UNICEF project came with all kinds of child-friendly and joyful teaching-learning materials and training programs for the teachers. A special Happy School leadership training was given to the principal. They also taught the girl-child parrot about her child rights. That did not work.



ANCESTOR 16325



UGH!

SPONSORED BY
WORLD BANK

She wanted to leave the cage but was not allowed. The World Bank gave a loan to the king (with austerity conditionalities, of course) to build a bigger cage with a nice toilet. CCTV cameras were also installed to ensure discipline of the teachers and the parrot. 'Big Brother' was grinning incessantly. But even that did not work.

Harvard researchers were invited to conduct studies on the parrot's brain and multiple intelligences. Many research papers were written. The parrot was bombarded with every latest theory after theory. With time, she started losing confidence in her own gift of song.



SILENCE



A Walnut a DAY Keeps the BRAIN CELLS GREY

NO ENTRY

Who built the GREAT WALL of CHINA?
The NATIONAL BARD of INDIA
Who was AKBAR'S FATHER?
Peacock
Rabindra Nath Tagore
- National BIRD??
15 August
2012
SILENCE
ANTONYMS
1857
Mela BHARAT Mahatma
BATTLE of PANIPAT
15 August
2012
SILENCE
HARAPPA
nina pinta santamaria
SIT D...
SILENCE

MR. PATIL

Tarek Jaber

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 1^{BIG} Mac =
 a HAPPY
 Snack!
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 24x7



22 CARAT
 PURE GOLD



FLYING SCHOOL
 Report
 Term 1 Good
 Term 2 a.k.
 Term 3 BAD
 Term 4 FAIL



@rae's

In a great display of public-private partnership, Coca-Cola Foundation helped to set up a special Happiness Coke vending machine in the cage. McDonald's too decided to help out by offering a mid-day Happy Meal for the parrot. The parrot started to become obese from all the empty calories and could no longer fly.

Then, the OECD came with the PISA standardized tests and a new national policy white paper was written. The king and his ministers lined up to take lots of photographs celebrating their renewed commitment to educate poor, backward, illiterate parrots.

These photos were published with great fanfare in newspapers around the world. But even that did not work.

Government Takes A Big Leap in Educating the Poor

OECD
in collaboration

The New National Policy
on How to
Educate Poor Backward
PARROTS

with PISA

Kamchor Baba & Head Pundit (a) King (a) & Business Lobby
File Photo: Ministers of Education & Culture (b)

PHOTO BY NINE © 2015



KNOW YOUR HEROES

FATHER OF THE NATION

ANCESTOR NO. 198

INVENTOR PASOULLAS

CHACHA Nehru

THE MONKEY GOD

THE MONKEY GOD

Facebook
FRIEND LIST
Hello!
Tu-He

WORD & FINDER
OXFORD

LAYS

Coke

CRANK ACADEMY

WOMAN RIGHTS

Then, technology gurus from Apple gave her an iPad and a free high speed WIFI connection to access the cloud. She was made to watch videos from Khan Academy. Soon, they even set up a Facebook account for her and encouraged her to make thousands of 'friends'. That only left her feeling more alone and depressed.

The parrot was not allowed to leave the cage despite her obvious distress. In fact, she was scolded for being ungrateful and impertinent. Time and again, she was reprimanded and made to feel guilty. “We have spent a lot of money for your education and you do not even care. You are wasting your life. You are spoiling your future.”

1...2...3...4... Swallow the chapter on
idioms... HURRY UP!!

A
Haldiram
I
iPhone
J
Johnson
Johnson



Fun With Figures
Elementary
ARITHMETIC
EARLY BIRD ENGLISH





BRAIN DOLIA
500ml TONIC

The Ultimate
anti-Depressant
PERK UP PILLS
UNDER DOCTOR'S GUIDANCE

Dr. FEELGOOD'S
NERVE
Capsules
1mg

SMILE TABLETS
Destress in
Minutes

Psycho 1
Psycho 2
Psycho 3
Psycho 4
Psycho 5
Psycho 6
Psycho 7

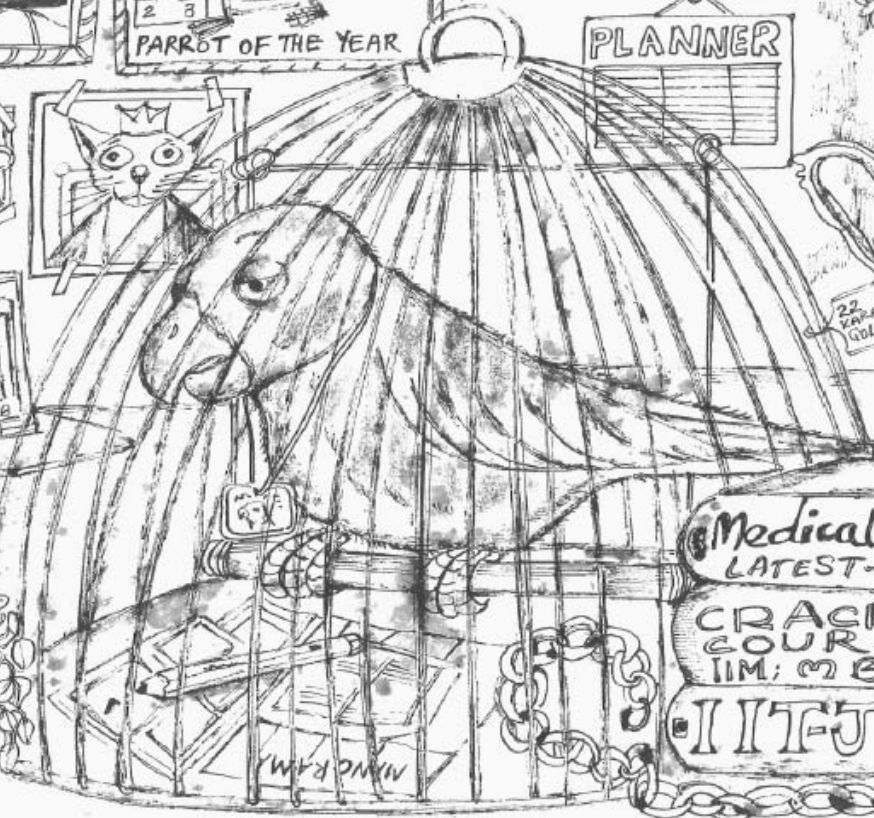
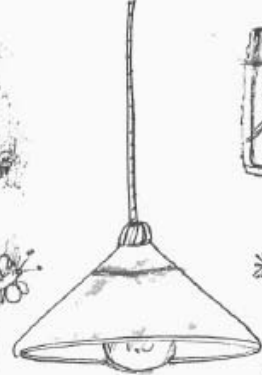
When that didn't work, an hour of mindfulness training was instituted to release all her built-up frustration and aggression.

After all these years of being locked up, the parrot was diagnosed with Nature Deficit Disorder. The king was told that the parrot (and the cage) should be taken to an expensive organic eco-resort during summer holidays to 'experience nature'.

Later, anti-depressant drugs had to be prescribed as the parrot was caught slitting her wings.

As the parrot was overstuffed with information and tormented by the pressure 'to achieve', she internalized her label as a 'slow learner' and 'failure', and lost confidence in her ability to communicate with the wild and profound intelligence of nature.





MANGRAM

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She slowly became totally dependent on the cage. One day, the cage was accidentally left open but she was afraid to venture out. She had lost confidence in her natural capacities to learn without institutions.

Her dreams were reduced to being a rat trapped in the rat-race. A deep loss of purpose ensued. Slowly, her spirit withered away.

In the end, a lot of people made a lot of money on the parrot's education. Everyone benefited except the parrot...

So, the United Nations decided to launch the 'No Parrot Left Behind' Campaign. They lobbied kings from all over the world to commit to all parrots being caged and educated by 2030 (and all their lands being taken over and mined through public-private partnerships) as part of the Sustainable Development Goals. Now everyone could enjoy the fruits of progress.



How to train a parrot in 13 steps
Points 1 to 40
Sticks & carrot
SWOT Analysis
Grades or Marks?

No Parrot Left Behind
CAMPAIN
U N

LUNCH SPONSORED BY UNHEALTHYRAM BAUTIAWALAH

Excuse me!! Can we use this method to train emus and canaries?

Who cares? What a BORE!

When is lunch?

Sniff! I smell foul play!

Delegate Count of KRUSSIA

Delegate Queen of Baazi bakar

Delegate King PIN of CONland

The SHAM of Gabalaba DELEGATE

CHIEF MUAHME DELEGATE

EPILOGUE

Today, the business of cage has become more important than our children. But, if we truly care about our children and the future of the planet, the time has come to more deeply understand the nature of the 'cage' and its impact on each of us and our communities in both the global South and the global North – beyond what the slick World Bank economists, McKinsey consultants and UN technocrats tell us.

One can add all the 'bells and whistles' reforms that you can imagine, but the cage will always remain a cage. The logic and design for factories, armies, prisons and schooling is basically the same. I invite you to understand how the 6 C's of the cage – Compulsion, Competition, Commodification, Compartmentalization, de-Contextualization, and mono-Culture – conspire to create a hidden curriculum that is devastating for the spirit of learning. They create the conditions for 'institutionalization' i.e., the submission of human conscience, wisdom and love to the will and logic of institutions, rules, authorities.

In our attempts to 'reform' and 'fix' the system, are we not making the cage more influential, more pervasive, more powerful?

What damage does trying to fix the system do? : Entraps more children into the cage?... Instills more fear, arrogance and competition into them?... Makes them more dependent on

being spoon-fed bytes of information?... Makes them more susceptible to propaganda and advertising?... More efficiently destroys their creativity and sense of self-worth?...Breaks the profound connections with their land, community, language, ancestors?...Makes them more enslaved to the money system and the global economy?...

This has been pretty much the story of mass education for the entire planet over the past 100 years, regardless of religion, political party, capitalism/communism, etc. Tagore and Gandhi saw it coming and tried to warn us. The parrot today is taught to question within the system, but not to question the system itself. Tagore and Gandhi's questions and ours are brushed aside as being 'overly-romantic' or 'not practical' - there are more urgent problems to deal with like over-population, climate change or paying the monthly bills.

But, as my brother Bayo likes to remind us, how we are dealing with the crisis is part of the crisis.

The real tragedy is that people still believe that bringing more children and communities into this cage is somehow going to liberate them and us.

We need to pause and re-think how to make visible, resist, break free from and dismantle the cage. For this, it is important to crack open and re-examine our definitions of

(and shadows around) 'progress', 'success', 'happiness' and to deeply look at how our imaginations for social change and education have been colonized by the cage (so much to the point, that either we can't see the cage, or we don't believe we can live without it). We also need to stop recycling educational reforms, solutions or techno-gimmicks from the West (most of which have even failed in their own context). Co-creating our own visions of a learning society will start with appreciating and re-valuing our own unique cultural gifts and the magical learning spaces and abundant learning resources which surround us all the time. Reclaiming the spirit of laughter, love, gratitude and playfulness is essential to decolonizing our selves.

This story is also a reminder that if we can connect with the pain of the parrot, all is not lost yet. Despite whatever labels the cage has inflicted upon us, each of us still has the power to walk-out and walk-on, to reclaim our own ways of learning and to start rebuilding our diverse local learning systems. We are not born to be bricks in the Wall, cogs in the Machine, human resources, etc. This life we have been given is wild, magical and precious...

I invite you to join us in hacking the education system.

ORIGINAL STORY

THE PARROT'S TRAINING

Rabindranath Tagore

Once upon a time, there was a bird. It was ignorant. It sang all right, but never recited scriptures. It hopped pretty frequently, but lacked manners. Said the Raja to himself: 'Ignorance is costly in the long run. For fools consume as much food as their betters, and yet give nothing in return.' He called his nephews to his presence and told them that the bird must have a sound schooling. The pundits were summoned, and at once went to the root of the matter. They decided that the ignorance of birds was due to their natural habit of living in poor nests. Therefore, according to the pundits, the first thing necessary for this bird's education was a suitable cage.

The pundits had their rewards and went home happy. A golden cage was built with gorgeous decorations. Crowds came to see it from all parts of the world. 'Culture, captured and caged!' exclaimed some, in a rapture of ecstasy, and burst into tears. Others remarked:

‘Even if culture be missed, the cage will remain, to the end, a substantial fact. How fortunate for the bird!’

The goldsmith filled his bag with money and lost no tune in sailing homewards. The pundit sat down to educate the bird. With proper deliberation he took his pinch of snug: as he said: ‘Textbooks can never be too many for our purpose!’ The nephews brought together an enormous crowd of scribes. They copied from books, and copied from copies, till the manuscripts were piled up to an unreachable height. Men murmured in amazement. ‘Oh, the tower of culture, egregiously high! The end of it lost in the clouds!’ The scribes, with light hearts, hurried home, their pockets heavily laden. The nephews were furiously busy keeping the cage in proper trim. As their constant scrubbing and polishing went on, the people said with satisfaction: ‘This is progress indeed!’ Men were employed in large numbers and supervisors were still more numerous. These, with their cousins of all different degrees of distance, built a palace for themselves and lived there happily ever after.

Whatever may be its other deficiencies, the world is never in want of fault-finders; and they went about saying that every creature remotely connected with the cage flourished beyond words, excepting only the bird. When this remark reached the Raja's ears, he

summoned his nephews before him and said: 'My dear nephews, what is this that we hear?' The nephews said in answer: 'Sire, let the testimony of the goldsmiths and the pundits, the scribes and the supervisors be taken, if the truth is to be known. Food is scarce with the fault-finders, and that is why their tongues have gained in sharpness.'

The explanation was so luminously satisfactory that the Raja decorated each one of his nephews with his own rare jewels. The Raja at length, being desirous of seeing with his own eyes how his Education Department busied itself with the little bird, made his appearance one day at the great Hall of Learning. From the gate rose the sounds of conch-shells and gongs, horns, bugles and trumpets, cymbals, drums and kettledrums, tomtoms, tambourines, flutes, fifes, barrel-organs and bagpipes. The pundits began chanting mantras with their topmost voices, while the goldsmiths, scribes, supervisors, and their numberless cousins of all different degrees of distance, loudly raised a round of cheers. The nephews smiled and said: 'Sire, what do you think of it all?' The Raja said: 'It does seem so fearfully like a sound principle of Education!' Mightily pleased, the Raja was about to remount his elephant, when the fault-finder, from behind some bush, cried out: 'Maharaja, have you seen the bird?' 'Indeed, I have not!' exclaimed the Raja. 'I completely forgot about the bird.'

Turning back, he asked the pundits about the method they followed in instructing the bird. It was shown to him. He was immensely impressed. 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. It sent a thrill through one's body to watch the process. This time, while remounting his elephant, the Raja ordered his State ear-puller to give a thorough good pull at both the ears of the fault-finder. The bird thus crawled on, duly and properly, to the safest verge of inanity. In fact, its progress was satisfactory in the extreme.

Nevertheless, Nature occasionally triumphed over training, and when the morning light peeped into the bird's cage it sometimes uttered its wings in a reprehensible manner. And, though it is hard to believe, it pitifully pecked at its bars with its feeble beak. 'What impertinence!' growled the kotwal. The blacksmith, with his forge and hammer, took his place in the Raja's Department of Education. Oh, what resounding blows! The iron chain was soon completed, and the bird's wings were clipped. The Raja's brothers-in-law looked black, and shook their heads, saying: 'These birds not only lack good sense, but also

gratitude!' With text-book in one hand and baton in the other, the pundits gave the poor bird what may fitly be called lessons!

The kotwal was honoured with a title for his watchfulness, and the blacksmith for his skill in forging chains. The bird died. Nobody had the least notion how long ago this had happened. The fault-finder was the first man to spread the rumour. The Raja called his nephews and asked them, 'My dear nephews, what is this that we hear?' The nephews said: '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 sepoy 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.

Banyan Tree <banyantreebookstore@gmail.com> publishes and distributes multi-lingual books in English, Hindi and other Indian languages. Our books establish the relationship between the living and the non-living and question the predefined notions of an institutionalised world. They offer an understanding of the power of our traditional and cultural roots, which run deep, much like the roots of a Banyan Tree.

At Banyan Tree the reader will find books that challenge the institutionalisation of knowledge, culture and traditions; the control and adulteration of food; conventional chemical farming practices and lifestyle habits that are harmful to health. We offer books on learning, sustainable development, health, natural agricultural practices and ecology.

We strongly believe that ‘nothing can be taught’ and that ‘work is the best teacher’.

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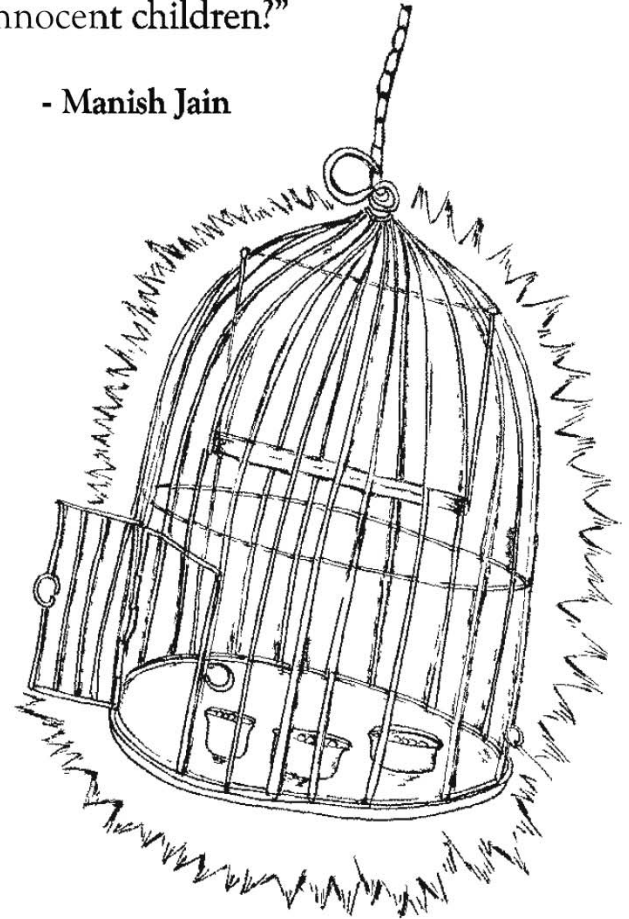
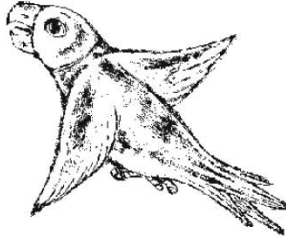
Atreyee <atreyee.day@gmail.com> currently lives in Belgaum town and collaborates with her artist better half, Blaise, in art workshops. Besides hand illustrating graphic stories she also writes, stitches, draws and reads.

Manish Jain <manish@swaraj.org> is deeply committed to regenerating our diverse knowledge systems and cultural imaginations. He has served for the past 17 years as Coordinator/Co-Founder of Shikshantar: The People's Institute for Rethinking Education and Development and as co-founder of Swaraj University, Creativity Adda, Learning Societies Unconference, Swapathgami Walkouts-Walkon network, and the Ecoversities Network. He has edited several books on Vimukt Shiksha (liberating learning). Prior to Shikshantar, Manish worked as one of the principal team members of the UNESCO Learning Without Frontiers global initiative. He has also been a consultant to UNICEF, World Bank, USAID in Africa, South Asia and former Soviet Union. Manish worked as an investment banker with Morgan Stanley in the belly of the beast. He has been trying to unlearn his Master's degree in Education from Harvard University and a B.A. in Economics, International Development and Political Philosophy from Brown University. He and his wife Vidhi have been unschooling themselves with their 13 year old daughter, Kanku, in Udaipur, Rajasthan.

Shikshantar Andolan, a jeevan andolan (life movement), was founded to challenge the culture of schooling and institutions of thought-control. We are committed to creating spaces where individual and communities can together engage in deep dialogue to: 1) generate meaningful critiques to expose and dismantle/transform existing models of Education, Development and Progress; 2) reclaim control over their own learning processes and learning ecologies; 3) imagine (and continually re-imagine) their own complex shared visions and practices of Swaraj. Shikshantar is based in Udaipur, Rajasthan, India and collaborates with friends all over India and around the world. Visit <www.shikshantar.org> to learn more.

“The modern factory-schooling education system is one of the greatest crimes against humanity. One hundred years from now, we will look back at the violence of schools and ask how we could have done this to innocent children?”

- Manish Jain



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