



Divaswapna by Gijubhai Badheka – The daydream of a visionary educator

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'I had to throw myself courageously into my experiment. That is the way to blaze a new trail'

These lines reflect the essence of the book *Divaswapna*, considered a milestone in the field of Indian education. *Divaswapna* translates into daydreams and echoes the crux of the story, a teacher's (day) dream of liberating primary education from the shackles of predominant colonial influences and unsuitable pedagogies. The book was originally published in Gujarati (language native to the Indian state of Gujarat) in the year 1931 and since then has been translated into 11 languages, including English.

The author, Gijubhai Badheka (1885-1939), an eminent Indian educationist, was one of the first activists to focus on the early years of care and education and bring attention to the importance of this developmental stage. He took inspiration primarily from Maria Montessori's philosophy, which he adapted to suit the indigenous context of imperial India. The roots of his educational experiment lie in his personal dissatisfaction with the existing schooling experience, the birth of his son, his travels to Africa, study of the Montessori Method, and research in education at *Dakshinamurti Balmandir* (a pre-primary school founded by the author and his colleagues in Bhavnagar, a coastal city in the western state of Gujarat in 1910).

The book holds great value for the education system in India. As a result, it has become an essential reading for teacher education programmes. Importantly, this book is a seminal work as it reflects the author's liberal educational ideas while India was still under the British rule. It challenges the status-quo and encourages a culturally appropriate pedagogy. Through the story, the author narrates his 'experiment' with education, an attempt to carve out a new path for child-centred education, which is just as relevant in any context even today. For instance, similar ideas are echoed in *Te Whāriki*, the Aotearoa early childhood curriculum, where the curriculum framework 'foregrounds the *mana* of the child and the importance of respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships' (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 7).

The semi-autobiographical book is a fictional account of a teacher who rejects the prevalent orthodox educational practices in favour of experimenting and reinventing educational pedagogy. The narrative extends over a complete academic year wherein the newly joined teacher plans and conducts his

'educational experiment' with Grade IV (9-10 year old) students in a boys' primary school. The four sections of the book describe the four phases of the experiment beginning from the conception of the experiment, the struggle to get it approved, its implementation, to the result at the end of that particular academic year. He includes descriptive episodes and anecdotes to portray his struggles, students' initial shock and reluctance to change, as well as resistance from parents, colleagues, the headmaster, and other educational authorities.

Through the story, the author explores, tests, and promotes educational and pedagogical ideas unheard of in the Indian classrooms at the time. He was a believer in student autonomy, independence, self-reliance, and critical thinking, all notions trialled by the protagonist in his classroom. The teacher creates a democratic learning environment and begins to involve the students in various decision-making processes within the classroom, giving them opportunities to make collective decisions, adhere to those decisions, and take responsibility for the same. Akin to the Māori concept of *ako* (Ka Hikitia, 2009), the teacher and the students learn together and from each other by virtue of productive relationships and mutual empowerment.

In spite of the fact that the book was written in the pre-independence era, the ideas put forth in the book are equally or even more relevant and inspiring today. Gijubhai Badheka's experiment probes and culls out significant challenges and issues that ailed the imposed imperialist early/primary education system then, remnants of which can still be seen today. While he does that effectively, the book is not just a story about these predicaments. It is an inspiring tale of how one teacher, when faced with these trials, perseveres and finds ways to overcome hurdles to facilitate children's learning, focusing on the needs of the children rather than the curriculum and the system.

Although based on the experiences of a primary school teacher in India, the relevance of the message is local as well as universal for teachers of all age groups. It is meant for every teacher who attempts to break moulds, to nurture children's curiosities and let their imagination soar to new heights of knowledge and fulfilment. It is an extremely relatable story where teachers can identify with the protagonists' experiences of entering a new classroom for the first time, unsuccessful attempts at building a rapport or relationship with students, resistance from parents, and constant negotiations with authorities.

The story reads quite like a teacher's diary where the inspirational narration reflects a teacher's passion for education and pursuit of extending children's thirst for knowledge and wonder into the world beyond the classroom. Considering that the book was written as an experiment from a teacher's viewpoint, it reads just as it is meant to—an experiment. It is about trial and error, thinking, pondering, deciding, trying and testing. It could be any teacher's journal and would be best read as that.

Divaswapna was a ground-breaking contribution to Indian education and pedagogy, and it remains a beacon of light even today. To put it succinctly, it is a book by a teacher for teachers. It is a successful attempt to explore ways to fit the education system to the child rather than the child to the system. The author's idea behind the book is best surmised in his own words. When asked about the students he thought 'unfit' for school, the teacher replies, 'It is not that they are unfit for the school. Rather the school is unfit for them. The school is unable to teach them what they have the aptitude for' (Badheka, 1931/2022, p. 157).

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