



Readers' Forum



Tribute to Tarabai Modak

No single woman has contributed more to the field of pre-school education in India than Mrs. Tarabai Modak. Along with other dedicated educationalists, she pioneered a new approach to teaching underprivileged rural children by adapting Montessori methods to Indian conditions. Her outstanding performance and original contribution to the field won her the Padmabhushan in 1962.

Born in Bombay on April 19, 1892, into a well-educated middle class family, she completed her graduation from Bombay University in 1914. She was married to Mr. Modak, a well-known lawyer in Amaravati. Because of her husband's drinking habits and the quarrels that would follow, they decided to separate in 1921. With her education, Tarabai got a good job as Principal of Government Barten Female College in Rajkot. During that time she was exposed to the ideas of Maria Montessori, and decided to follow these principles in bringing up her only daughter.

Around 1923, she gave up her job and comforts to join an experimental pre-primary school in Bhavnagar started by Mr. Gijubhai Badheka, applying Montessori's principles. She worked in this school till 1932.

At the same time, she began to popularise pre-school education in India. In 1938, she started her first



Teacher's Training School to train teachers in pre-primary education. In 1945, with the help of a new co-worker, Anutai Wagh (who was widowed at the age of 13), she started a new educational institute at a seaside village in Thane district. Here she developed the concept of *anganwadi* schools, believing that if children cannot reach school, school should reach them. Considering all the problems faced by the poor in India, she adapted Montessori principles, made required alterations and wrote books to guide teachers and parents. The project to educate *adivasis* began

when Tarabai was 65 years old and Anutai, 45. It was approved by the then government of Maharashtra. After Tarabai's death in 1973, Anutai and others continued her work with zeal and enthusiasm.

Geetanjali Ranade, Mumbai

Talent Gone Waste

Have a look at the annual examination results flashing across the newspapers and you will find that more girls than boys figure in the merit list. But look around for them on stages and podiums anywhere on any august occasion—in scientists' meetings or in national committees or commissions, in courtrooms or in parliament—and you are sure to be disappointed. In the process of growing up to become women, the girls and their talents seem to disappear into thin air.

No doubt society likes the girl child getting gold medals and laurels. But it appears as if society does not like the same child to grow up to be a leader, thinker, engineer, scientist or entrepreneur. Most people prefer her to be more beautiful and less intelligent. Ask young men everywhere, including the *creme la creme*. A common joke doing the rounds in one of the best educational institutions in the country is: "Ninety per cent of the women in the world are beautiful; the rest of them are in this Institute." There

are many other such seemingly harmless jokes along these lines which subtly show the woman her place—either in the kitchen or in the showcase.

A 1992 study by the Department of Science and Technology on IIT graduates showed that men's expectations regarding their spouses diverged widely from women's career aspirations. Male graduates preferred "non-employed but educated wives". If this is the attitude of the cream of society, the mindset of the rest of the male population is anybody's guess. If such is the aspiration of the best of men, how will a woman who has reached that same level find a match for herself, especially when the unwritten social law dictates that the husband be superior to the wife? Couldn't that be the reason for the low number of girls in IITs? Even the career aspirations of young women are cleverly moulded by society such that they do not become achievers. Husband-hunting for successful women is a hard task for parents.

Society does not appreciate achiever wives and achiever mothers. Little girls, therefore, are trained to grow up to become unambitious wives and mothers. They can achieve as long as they are daughters. In some parts of the country, they are not even allowed that. Of course, if she is at all allowed to indulge in any other activity, a girl is simultaneously expected to train herself adequately in all culinary, nursing and housekeeping skills for the sake of some little boy growing up somewhere who will be her husband years later.

In the land of female abuse and wife-battering, cartoonists are obsessed with women sporting *chapati-rolling* pins in their hands. Women seldom become cartoonists, either because their sorrow is far too deep to bring to comic expression, or because the strict kitchen grooming they get allows little leeway

for them to develop a sense of humour. Therefore, the tragedy of the married woman goes unsung and unwept—or, more aptly—unheard.

Let alone intelligence, many other factors like wit, sense of humour and political savvy are considered uncouth in a woman. The girl learns as she grows that if she wants a man's approval, she must not display her knowledge, not crack jokes, not laugh as loud as she likes,

not voice opinions on matters apart from food, fashion and clothing. The boy learns as he grows not to touch the broom except to kill a cockroach, not to touch vegetables before they are cooked, not to do so many other things that "only girls are supposed to do". Few escape such taboos and, ironically, mothers themselves play an important role in inculcating and promoting them.

Kudlu Chithrabha, Pune

Sisters

*We didn 't drive back in silence
But in rage, Rage is quieter.
Your hand, a hammer from your cuff.
And when you tipped back the seat
And shut your eyes, imitating Buddha
In a pale dress, I thought of a cabinet
Fallen backwards, compartments
And locked drawers jammed
Into themselves where a sorcerer
Might hide his grammar, his ring
Of spitting fire. I can't imagine
Where you 've buried that night
Or what transformation into
Righteousness you've made. I only know
When I pull out that memory, another
Grabs at its heel: I am seven
And you five years older
Hovering over my bed, silhouetted
In front of our night window, crawling
The black spiders of your fingers,
Twisting yourself into a colossus
Of wheezing cackle. Witch.
Drinker of pigeon's blood.
Root eater in the ogre's garden.
Medusa at twelve, and I a stone
Fastened by an umbilical cord
To the foot of a drowning child.
Don't think I didn't know you:
Mother's practice baby. The message
In a bottle. The older sister in a tale.*

Alice Friman