

STALIN IAS ACADEMY - BEST IAS COACHING IN CHENNAI

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The impact of violence on a child's mind

Maria Montessori would have felt amused by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's resolve to finish off Hamas by bombing Gaza. She wrote classics such as *The Secret of Childhood* and *The Absorbent Mind*. But she also gave some hard-hitting lectures on war and peace during the 1930s. Collected under the title *Education and Peace*, these speeches elaborate on her life-long mission to make the world recognise the significance of early impressions. A child's encounter with violence – personal or collective – sets in motion a cycle of revenge. Montessori saw this cycle as the root cause of war. A few thousand children have been killed in Gaza, but many would have survived. Montessori's arguments suggest that these survivors will prove Mr. Netanyahu's hope a folly.

Vulnerable to violent roles

A similar argument was presented by the celebrated Jewish philosopher and writer, Elias Canetti. In the book *Crowds and Power*, he devotes a section to the child's mind. Canetti points to the seed of revengeful thoughts that the experience of violence lodges in the young mind. Over time, it grows into a full-blown motive to resist social norms. When the child becomes an adult, the resistance mutates into rebellion in many cases. Often induction into violence during adolescence occurs when historical circumstances, including technological forces, create the ground. Poverty also adds to the factors that make children vulnerable to violent roles. In a study of Nepal, Sanjeev Rai presents an interview with child soldiers who became victims of this combination of factors. In several reports, UNICEF has discussed how difficult it is to rehabilitate children who have experienced or participated in violence, into civic life.

Israel's retaliatory assault on Gaza will have several unpredictable outcomes, but one outcome that can be easily predicted is its psychological impact on Palestinian children, especially adolescents. Thousands are reported to



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have been killed. The rubble in the streets shown on television is extensive, but no one is looking for survivors buried underneath. Those who survive and migrate (under the Israeli army's orders) to the southern part of Gaza must be facing an awful uncertainty about their future, along with the agony of forced displacement. No matter what efforts their parents make in the post-conflict scenario, the children who have lost all semblance of childhood will fulfill Montessori's worst prophecy: the perpetuation of violence.

Violence and Children

In *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori underlined the role of peaceful circumstances in a child's upbringing. First published in 1936, this book presented her thesis that all major individual and social problems have their roots in childhood. Montessori was not the first to argue this line, but she developed it into a full-scale pedagogic philosophy and strategy that might enable society and the state to break the cycle of the influence of historical circumstances on children's mind and behaviour. The implications of this perspective were drawn out in her lectures on peace and liberation from the reproductive cycle of war. Driven by anger and internal political compulsions, Israel's leaders have chosen to ignore the message that Montessori had given to the world during and after a horrific global war.

Montessori was part of an inter-war movement, initiated by eminent educators of the time, for using education to fight the culture of war. Rabindranath Tagore was also involved in this international effort. Although it could not prevent the Second World War, the movement has left behind a rich legacy of ideas for us to engage with in our turbulent present. One aspect of this legacy is to worry about children who grow up in a war-infested world. Technology of communication has dispersed the Gaza battle all over the world. News of the killing of Israeli civilians by Hamas at the beginning of October and heart-rending scenes of human misery caused by Israel's armed forces in Gaza have

reached children everywhere. No one can guess or predict what consequences this exposure to aggression and violence will have in the long run.

Education and peace

Can education mitigate the effects of this massive dose of violent imagery? In principle, education has this potential, but most systems of education today lack the energy required to harness this potential. In fact, frustration with education is common across the world. Many believe that education cannot reverse the political impact of dangerous ideologies. Disappointment with education has grown in recent years. Russia's war with Ukraine and the ongoing destruction of Gaza raise serious questions about the power of education to inculcate basic good sense. Russia, Israel, and the U.S. are among the most educated nations of the world, but they have failed to use education to nurture peace. Current discussions about the future of Gaza are focused entirely on politics. They must include the future of education in Gaza – and in Israel as well.

Those concerned about children in Palestine will have a tough time deciding their future course of action. In Israel too, education has not played a peace-building role. Two decades ago, I attended a workshop on peace education in Jerusalem. The headmistress of a school for Palestinian children in Old Jerusalem was invited to talk to us. I wanted to visit her school, but the organisers did not agree to arrange the visit – due to security concerns, I was told. The children in her school were studying textbooks presenting a very different view of the past from the ones I had seen in the school on the campus of Jerusalem University.

Contrasting portrayals of the past are common in contiguously located hostile nations across the worlds. They are just one more factor that keeps old hostilities alive. Conciliatory histories are rare in such cases. No wonder education reinforces and perpetuates divisive ideas, preparing the adult mind to accept such ideas as the only way forward.

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A \$5 trillion economy, but for whom?

Last week, at an election rally in Chhattisgarh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that he is extending the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojna, a scheme providing 5 kg of foodgrains free every month to beneficiaries of the National Food Security Act, by five years because he does not want any citizen to sleep hungry. This means that 80 crore Indians will still be receiving free foodgrains to stave off hunger in 2028. This is the year the government expects India to become the third largest economy in the world, with a GDP of \$5 trillion. Will large swathes of Indians still be hungry with a GDP of \$5 trillion? Who will benefit from the five-year dash to these targets?

The story of Japan's growth

For reference, let's take a look at Japan today, the third largest economy by GDP in the world. In Japan, there is reportedly a death by suicide every 20 minutes. About 15 lakh Japanese have not left their homes for years, a form of severe social withdrawal known as *hikikomori*. Old parents rent actresses who come in on Sunday to call them 'Mom' and 'Pop' because their own daughters don't visit any more. Every day, dead people are discovered in tiny apartments days or weeks after they died; these are called *kodokushi* or lonely deaths. Clearly, Japan's climb to the third position economy-wise has not lifted all boats equally; it has tossed the weak to the margins where they languish because economic growth on steroids has unpicked the safety catch of family and community ties.

For 40 years, Japan was the world's second largest economy, powered by manufacturing and exports. But after the 2008 world financial crisis, the wheels came off the Japanese economy. Japan's population started spending less, exports shrank, and government incentives dried up. On the other hand, China enjoyed a manufacturing boom and dislodged Japan to become the world's second-largest economy by GDP.

On losing rank, however, Japan displayed remarkable ego-free economic diplomacy. As soon as the economy plunged to the third position, Japan's leadership publicly welcomed China's ascent, stating that sustained demand from the (then) most populous country could



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While India is set to become the third largest economy in the world in 2028, 80 crore Indians will still be receiving free foodgrains to stave off hunger

only be good for Japan's exports. Even if this statement was made partially to save face, the two economies intertwined immediately. Today, China is Japan's largest trading partner, proving that in the world political economy it pays to embrace your main competitor, even if you are *Vishwaguru* (global teacher). This ego-free 'activism' has ensured that Japan has held on to the third position in world GDP rankings for the last 14 years.

But let us return to the parallel story in Japan. As the high-value industrial economy took centre stage, the strength of personal and professional relationships withered and the multi-generational family and social structure became atomised. This was a perfect storm in the lives of the traditional, semi-skilled workforce. Workers moved from the countryside and satellite towns to cities expecting 'salaryman' jobs, but many discovered that they were not trained for the technological tsunami sweeping the high-growth sectors. They fell through the cracks into financial collapse and social withdrawal.

A deep divide

Today, the Government of India claims that the country is on the cusp of an economic tsunami. How does the sprint to the target of \$5 trillion bode for citizens, especially the 80 crore who will still be on free rations in 2028? India's economic growth pivots on capital, productivity and labour, and data show that for over four-fifth of Indians, the \$5 trillion economy is a bridge too far.

Consider capital: in 2021, 1% of the population owned about 41% of the nation's wealth, while 50% owned 3% of its wealth, according to Oxfam. In such an environment, the dash towards a \$5 trillion economic trophy lies in the grip of the resource-rich power brokers who will seize the initiative. But ironically, it is the low-resource citizens who are funding the investment for the proposed \$5 trillion economy: approximately 64% of the total Goods and Services Tax (GST) came from the bottom 50% of the population, and the top 10% contributed 3% of GST. At the same time, the contribution of labour, the other driver of growth, is hamstrung due to dubious educational and skill attainments and halting digital literacy. Productivity is just beginning to

get a boost through the creation of digital and physical infrastructure.

The government is aware that the rich are moving into pole position to deliver the \$5 trillion target just before the 2029 general election. Clearly, this will bolster upscale India's influence and power abroad, and the Prime Minister's primacy in the world.

The government's tools and sectors for achieving this goal were identified by the Minister of State for Finance, Pankaj Chaudhri, in Parliament on August 2023 as "digital economy, fintech, energy transition, climate change... GST, Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, decrease in corporate tax, Make in India, Start-Up India, Production Linked Incentives", all prefaced by the mandatory mantra "inclusive growth". But these cutting-edge sectors and tools are not native to the 80 crore marginalised citizens and to crores of others. They cannot seize the opportunities on offer in Artificial Intelligence or data science or robotics or fintech – either now or in the next five years.

There are also other issues with Mr. Modi's guarantee that India will be the third largest economy in five years. First, with a per capita income of \$2,400, India ranks 149 among 194 countries in 2022. Since per capita income is a keen index of a population's well-being, note that the average Japanese at \$34,000 is considered better off than the average Chinese at a \$13,000, even though China has outstripped Japan in world GDP rankings. What is India's per capita income projected to be at \$5 trillion? There are no official estimates available.

Second, the nub of the chase to \$5 trillion GDP is in its distribution, or the inequality index. This index, generated by World Economics, is on a scale of 0-100. A high value indicates a more egalitarian society. The values of both China and Japan are more than 50. These countries appear to be sharing their economic fortunes more evenly than India, which has a value of 21.9.

Will the divide between the two Indias deepen with the \$5 trillion target? India might be on its way to achieving this goal, but most of the population still remains marooned in the slow lanes of an older India, watching as the new caravans storm past.

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