



the newsletter

The School KFI, Chennai

Special Issue

May, 2015

From the Editor

As the country celebrated its 68th Independence Day with great fervour and the tricolor was seen as a brand in everything from cookies, sandwiches to mugs and cushion covers, not to mention the tricolor balloons and the themed attires that marked the festivities, The School, KFI chose to explore what the day marked 67 years ago – FREEDOM!

We bring you the happenings of August 15, 2014 at The School campus, not as a snapshot in our regular issues of The Newsletter but as a special issue in itself that attempts at reproducing the words and thoughts that flowed that day.

Independence Day 2014

Schedule

- Opening Words by a teacher
- Songs
- Student speaker
- Teacher Speaker
- Songs
- Student Speaker
- Guest Speaker
- Songs
- Hoisting of the Flag



Freedom is not a reaction; freedom is not a choice. It is man's pretence that because he has choice he is free. Freedom is pure observation without direction, without fear of punishment and reward. Freedom is without motive; freedom is not at the end of the evolution of man but lies in the first step of his existence. In observation one begins to discover the lack of freedom. Freedom is found in the choiceless awareness of our daily existence.

J Krishnamurti, London, 1980



Freedom of Expression

As a run-up to the occasion of India's Independence Day, the junior, middle and senior school students explored their individual relationships to and understanding of freedom – through verse, art, essays, stories, illustrations and any form of creative expression that appealed to them.



Voices on Invitation

"Take up the white man's burden,
Send forth the best ye breed,
Go bind your sons to exile,
To serve your captives' needs,
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild...
Your new caught sullen peoples,
Half devil half child"

- White Man's Burden by Rudyard Kipling

A class 12 student's reflections on cultural imperialism in colonial times and its continuing relevance today - an excerpt from the speech:

The practice of promoting and imposing a culture of politically powerful nations, over less powerful ones is called 'cultural imperialism'. Kipling, like many British imperialists believed that the British had a moral obligation to rule 'backward civilizations', like the Indian people. He believed that it was the British's duty to rule India because Indian people were barbaric and uncivilized, and that ideally, the colonized should recognize their inferiority and accept their governed position. It has been pointed out that Kipling conveniently ignores the economic motivations of British colonization, to focus instead on moral rhetoric.

A prominent cultural imperialist who preceded Kipling was Thomas Babbington Macaulay, a member of the Viceroy's executive council, who proposed that educational policy in India must be focused on western thought, and that funding for traditional Indian education must be vastly reduced. The most frequently quoted statement that Macaulay made was that the purpose of English education must be to produce "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect".

In India, perhaps elsewhere too, westernization is confused with modernity. While modernity stands for western progressive ideas, westernization stops with cultural aspects like music, clothing and entertainment.

Political domination of the west ended with successful nationalist movements in the non-western world. Colonies became nations, at different points between the 1940's and 1960's. However, cultural domination of the west continued and still continues in contemporary times. Of late, in the name of globalization, what we see is homogenization leading to much of the world imitating the west.

I would like to conclude that, this western cultural hegemony, which is subtle, has not been adequately challenged.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the leader who successfully led the Indian Nationalist Movement for freedom from British Rule has been and continues to be a source of inspiration for thousands around the world. I wondered if there were people who had inspired Gandhi. You will be surprised to know that a teenager had inspired him in his political struggle. She was Thillayadi Valliammai.

A class 12 student traces the journey of an Indian teenage activist in South Africa, her influence on Gandhi and the message her life holds for teenagers today. Excerpts from the speech:

Valliammai and a few others were arrested as vagabonds and in December 1913 were sentenced to three months' imprisonment with hard labour. Valliammai fell ill after her conviction. The food in the prison was unfit for consumption. When she was released from prison she was very weak and could barely walk. As she was leaving the prison she heard a South African prison officer yelling at her saying, "Why don't you people register and become South Africans instead of remain Indians. Your India does not even have a flag and it is not even a country; what are you really fighting for?"

"If having a flag is what would give form to India then here it is", she said tearing off a piece of cloth from her saffron-white-green saree and waving it triumphantly she cried, "My flag! My Motherland!" It was these three colors that Gandhiji used to design the Indian flag later on.

On 22nd February 1914, on her 16th birthday, eleven days after her release from prison, Valliammai breathed her last. Valliammai was buried in Johannesburg.

As a child she sought no special comforts nor expected any favours. Mourning Valliammai's death, Gandhi wrote, "Miss Valliammai Munuswamy is a woman who sought imprisonment in protest against a marriage law that dishonored her parents' marriage and cast a stigma on her own birth". In 1915 when Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, he visited the ancestral home of Valliammai in Thillayadi, Tamil Nadu. Years later, Gandhi once remarked that it was Valliammai's sacrifice that strengthened his resolve to fight for India's independence.

I would like to conclude by sharing what impressed me the most about Valliammai – her courage and conviction at an age when one would be thinking of mundane matters. Here was a person, a teenager, who had the moral strength to stand up to oppressive and discriminatory laws and practices and did not mind giving up her life fighting against them. I feel that she deserves to be better known amongst us.

*It is customary at the school to invite a guest to speak to the students, teachers and parents of the school every 15th of August. This year the guest was **Ms Rasheeda Bhagat**, a senior journalist, editor Rotary News and Editorial Consultant for The Hindu Business Line. She writes on 'gender, social sector, interesting people, politics, traveland life!' On August 15th 2014, Ms Bhagat got the audience thinking about India's role as an example in the developing world. She asked the India which keeps looking west for benchmarks and goals to look to the strife ridden neighbours and the middle-east which see India as a remarkable example of democracy. She recounted some very moving tales from her travel and work over the years when she had witnessed Indians being regarded with faith and love by the people of countries like Afghanistan and Iran. When she spoke of how a restaurant in Iran refused to let her pay because she was from India which took a stand in support of Iran against the US, one had to think of the vanishing Indian pride that built this nation post independence. However what left an indelible impression was her experience with the women in Afghanistan who opted for a gym when asked by the organization that was helping rehabilitate them. The Afghan women explained that they had forgotten that they had bodies!*

I wish to talk about three things this morning. They might seem unrelated but there is a common thread that runs through them.

A teacher's tryst with Freedom – the complete speech

The first is about something that happened about 10 years ago when one day I found myself out of work. I was suddenly unemployed. I went to the beach and thought about what I should do next. I found myself wondering if I could find work of my own choice that I could do whenever I wanted to and wherever I wanted to. That sounded like true freedom in work.

I started developing websites as a freelancer and a couple of years later I had saved enough money to buy myself a laptop. When I brought the laptop home I decided to name the laptop "Freedom". It was rather odd to name a laptop anything at all and at that 'Freedom', but that is what I felt that my laptop had enabled me to have.

Ironically, as the years went by, I found that freelance work was not as "free" as I had originally thought it might be. I found myself not doing what I wanted to whenever I wanted to. Rather I had to learn to do whatever came my way whenever it came my way. While I took to freelance work to experience 'freedom', what I actually learnt was discipline.

The second part also has to do with something from the past. About 7-8 years ago, I hurt my back quite badly and was unable to do any of the normal activities – sitting down was painful, standing up hurt, lying down was not easy and climbing stairs was just pure agony. I could not imagine how such immense pain would ever subside and that I would ever get better. At the age of 33, life ahead looked bleak.

I remember coming to school one day and Akhila Akka asked me if I would do folk dance for some of the students and I responded sharply "No way!" It was not just that it was physically impossible for me to dance at that point of time but I felt that the sense of abandon that comes with dancing was lost for good.

There are all these various things we do in our lives – talk, walk, sit under these trees on a bright morning like today, sing, dance, play on the games field – and we don't think of any of these as "freedoms". Until we lose them. We take them for granted. Yet there are many, many people in the world, right now, who are denied these very simple freedoms. For example, the bombings in the West Bank over the past few weeks have left most Palestinians living a life wondering whether the next bomb would land on their house. As another example, many years after Independence, there

are several children in our country who still work as bonded labourers in horrific conditions.

For the third part, I want to talk about Nelson Mandela. Many of you know that Mandela was the first black president of South Africa. When he was young, he fought against apartheid – a system of racist, systematic oppression of blacks in South Africa. While he was drawn to the Gandhian concept of non-violence, he also supported a militia group. He was captured and sent to prison on charges of terrorism.

Mandela spent 27 years in a prison cell not much larger than this space around me here. Twenty seven years is a long time in any one's life – it is almost the double the number of years of the children sitting here and almost half the number of years of the adults sitting there. If you see photographs of Mandela when he was much older, you will find a wrinkled face and a kind smile. I have wondered how a man who spent 27 years of his life in a prison cell could end up with a smile like that. Was he not bitter, angry and hateful of those who imprisoned him?

Mandela himself answered the question when he said, "As I walked towards the gates of the prison, beyond which I knew my freedom lay, I knew if I did not give up the anger and hatred that I did feel in my heart, I would continue to remain imprisoned."

If someone were to come up to me and tell me, "Why don't you give up that hurt that you are carrying within you?", I would get defensive and perhaps resentful that the one who has been hurt must let go while the one whom we think has hurt us does not need to do anything. We carry our hurts as if they are precious jewels and we hold onto them with great tenacity.

It seems to me that our greatest bondage lies in these hurts, beliefs and prejudices that we carry within us. The idea that 'I have had a difficult life' is as much of a bondage as the idea that 'I must be successful'. They are both ideas that hold us.

It seems to me that perhaps that is where freedom lies – in allowing life to be lived as it will, rather than be held down by thoughts of what has been or what will come.

Freedom Means . . . from the students' notice board

"If a bird is in a cage and you open a cage, that means freedom" – Class 4

"Freedom is a lot of joy to me. It is something that I always want. Freedom means the power to act, think or speak as you wish" – Middle School

"When I am alone, I have full freedom" – Middle School

"I feel freedom means to be free and enjoy your life" – Middle School

"Freedom means to be able to ask any question" – Middle School

"Freedom means that I can go anywhere I want to go and wear any clothes that I like to wear" – Middle School

"Freedom is being who you want to be, believing in yourself and doing what you wish regardless of what people around you may say" – Senior School

"Freedom is not something that is earned, bought or grabbed. It is just there! You just have to push past the illusionary boundaries set by others" – Senior School