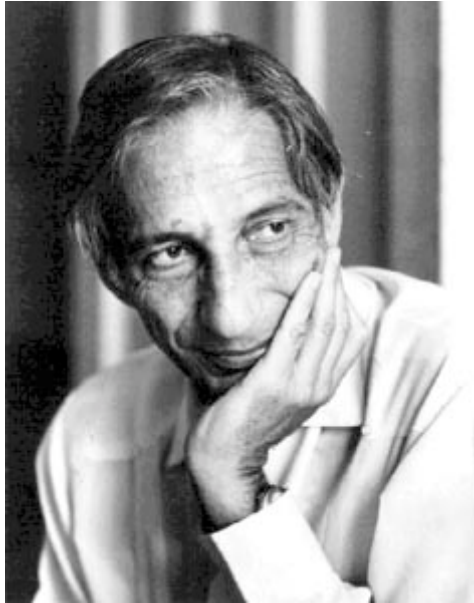


## The forgotten hero

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### Illich: Celebrated and forgotten

It is not surprising that the death of Ivan Illich on December 2, 2002 was not noticed in India. He was 76 and he was suffering from cancer. It is not just that we are riding the euphoric wave of economic liberalisation. Even those who are opposed to market economy would not feel comfortable with the ideas of Illich. He was as merciless about traditional, dominant ideas as with weak-kneed romantic criticism of the established ways of thinking and doing.

Most people associate Illich with his 1971 book, *Deschooling Society*. Even the alternative lifestyle-wallahs also did not really grasp the intent and meaning of his critique of learning as it has been institutionalised in the modern world. He was arguing in that book that "childhood" was an invention of the industrial society — an idea that would shock and repel the radicals as well as the respectable bourgeoisie — and that school restricted learning, which should be a lifetime activity, to a brief period and to a hierarchical situation. Even the most revolutionary educationists in India do not often refer to *Deschooling Society* because the implication of that book is that educationists are just pompous souls.

Unlike other radicals in contemporary India, Illich was a very learned man, and he used his learning in a very scholastic manner to make his arguments.

He was deeply rooted in ancient and medieval history, and he could readily trace the evolution of all the perversions of modern life that had emerged in the last 500 years.

In a series of essays called *Vernacular Values*, which formed the basis of his 1981 work, *Shadow Work*, Illich argues in a compelling fashion the problems in modern thinking. He traces skillfully the idea

of "development" from the ancient idea of how settled societies like China and Greece defined "strangers", and connects it with the way that the Roman Empire and the early Christian Church looked at the stranger. Both ancient China and ancient Greece had no place for the outsider. But the Roman Empire was willing to let in "outsider", who was known as an "alien". The early Church too wanted to bring in the outsider as a convert. So, it invented the term, "pagan". But when the Church found that it could not convert the Muslims, it coined the term, "Infidel". Similarly, Europe's colonial enterprise which began with Columbus' voyage in 1492 gave rise to the idea of the stranger as "the wild man", who was beyond the pale of known civilisation. But the outsider was renamed a "native" when the Europeans wanted to incorporate him into Western civilisation. And the decolonisation at the end of Second World War gave rise to the idea of "development" of "undeveloped societies". That is, societies outside the pale of the industrial West were to be incorporated.

And he goes on to show in sharp language, the immense damage done to the beneficiaries of development: "Defense against the damages inflicted by development, rather than access to some new "satisfaction", has become the most sought after privilege. You have arrived if you can commute outside the rush hour; probably attended an elite school; if you can give birth at home; are privy to rare and special knowledge if you can bypass the physician when you are ill; are rich and lucky if you can breathe fresh air; by no means poor, if you can build your own shack."

And he exposes through his merciless logic, the hollowness of the Marxists: "Slogans about the dignity and joy of wage-labour sound tinny. Unemployment, a term first introduced in 1898 to designate people without a fixed income, is now recognised as the condition in which most of the world's people live anyway — even at the height of industrial booms. In Eastern Europe especially, but also in China, people now see that, since 1950, the term, "working class", has been used mainly as a cover to claim and obtain privileges for a new bourgeoisie and its children."

Illich argues his case with passion and immense learning, and it is an intellectual delight to argue with him, and even differ from him. It is difficult to come across a learned dissident like him in this country at the present moment.

He argues in an equally convincing manner the primacy of the vernacular mode language, an aspect which not many sociologists, socio-linguists and educationists have paid any attention. He writes : "Even today, the majority of people in poor countries learn all their language skills without any paid tutorship, without any attempt whatsoever to teach them how to speak. And they learn to speak in a way that nowhere compares with the self-conscious, self-important, colourless mumbling that, after a long stay in villages in South America and Southeast Asia, always shocks me when I visit an American college. I feel sorrow for those students whom education has made tone deaf; they have lost the faculty for hearing the difference between the desiccated utterance of standard television English and the living speech of the unschooled." And he recognises the importance of spoken tongue in a much more direct way than the pretentious French deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida, who is in the habit of degrading "written texts", can ever do.

Why is that India has failed to produce a radical thinker like Illich despite the fact that there has been a tradition of alternative traditions in his country? One of the reasons could be that many of the ostensible Gandhians, who blindly followed the great man, did not ever develop their own minds, and they did not ever come to Gandhian conclusions based on their own thinking. There were honourable exceptions like J C Kumarappa, but there are not as many as there should be in vast country like ours.

It seemed that Illich was not more fashionable. But a rereading of his works shows that though the fashionable folk of the 1970s might have celebrated him and then forgot about him his true worth survives the change in intellectual climate. He has contributed to the basic critique of modernity, and his critique is superior to that of Gandhi's in his Hind Swaraj because Illich was much more of a learned man than Gandhi. It is interesting, however, that Illich admired the Gandhian simplicity and its spiritual implications for the sane society he was talking about.

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