

An optimistic future for Indian Education

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Learning of our students in schools and colleges is imprisoned in disciplines and does not allow wandering around their interests and passions as they develop

A FEW DAYS ago I received a call from someone who seemed as disturbed as I sometimes get about the state of our education. This person demanded that I do something of the kind I had done a few years ago to save our children from intellectual violence. After a brief conversation I became aware that he was referring to the Public Interest request I had made to the Supreme Court about sudden sprouting of a large number of universities in Chhattisgarh. With the help of a number of worthy public interest lawyers it became possible to abolish a significant number of spurious universities. I am sure many students who had enrolled suffered, but the young have a lot of resilience. The abolished universities did not disappear but found a new life with the help of state politicians and other well wishers, and many of them were back with greater vigour than before. It had been discovered by some entrepreneurs that some

type of education is extremely lucrative.

The gentleman who had called me wanted me to get back into a similar act! I am not in a mood to get into that kind of a fight again. I thought about the intense thinking done by a committee set up MHRD and the fact that the deep and beautiful Report, called the National Curriculum Framework, submitted by it was generally admired in the country and by many academic circles around the world. It seemed possible that finally a change was in the offing.

The vigour shown by a large number of individuals, from various organizations, led by NCERT, in creating new teaching learning material was unprecedented and specially tuned to the present day world. It was suited to the new understanding that learning is acquired by the learner and not delivered by teachers acting as courier agents. The role of the teacher was elevated to that of a scholar who engages in a continuing

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interaction with the students to stimulate learning while learning herself.

Curriculum renewal would be a continuous process. There would be learning from what has been done elsewhere, in the country or abroad, there would not be a fear of being left behind or mindless catching up exercises.

Since the student was to be involved in constructing his/her knowledge, the gap between the school learning and learning from life would be narrowed if not eliminated! This would lead to creativity. The attending problem of testing students in a regime of increasing variety would need to be assessed. One hopes that this task would be undertaken while recognizing the value of variety and not demanding a dead uniformity.

We are past many significant developments. Perhaps I should call them achievements:

- We have a National curriculum Framework developed after deep thinking and widespread involvement. This framework had a national political approval.
- It is generally believed that this curriculum applies only to school level education. I believe, on the other hand, that many salient features of that deep academic engagement have validity at all levels!

It is well known that breaking up knowledge into steel walled narrow disciplines tends to make all learning sterile. Therefore

boundary crossing has to be encouraged as a requirement for all creative work. Unless we get into such a habit no other initiative is likely to be of any help.

It has become fashionable on the part of some people to proclaim that our education is substandard – right from school level to the highest university level. We do make a concession in this regard for a few brand name institutions like IITs and IIMs. Also, some private universities and institutes that spend enormous resources to advertise on television and other media about their great prowess, their scholarship and placement schemes and occasional foreign teachers associated with them as honorary professors. Names of these institutions get to be known like some brands of toothpaste, hair creams, soaps for fighting dandruff and other beauty aids. Our great communication revolution is mostly propagating such educationally useful information. And all this employs much talent and script writing and definitely adds to our GNP.

I have visited thousands of schools and interacted with hundreds of thousand children. I am personally not so disappointed by the quality of the genetic pool of students in our schools and colleges. I find urge, passion and curiosity – particularly curiosity that unfortunately withers away with age. There is will to learn and also to go off in tangential directions which, they often cannot.

Learning of our students in schools and colleges is imprisoned in disciplines and does not allow wandering around their interests and passions as they develop. They are also circumscribed by our examination system and forced to compete in mindless races to get high marks. To help in competitions we have a large industry of coaching classes, which is very effective in killing curiosity and creativity.

Meandering through subject areas should be positively encouraged, not prohibited. We should remove all obstructions against such meandering and discipline crossing.

Schools, colleges and universities should become effervescent places, exploring and often going in different directions. They should be noisy places, not dead quiet. Demand for absolute uniformity turns students and teachers into stones that need to be polished and cut the same way. Young humans should not be subjected to such benevolent aggression.

All that I have said above is highly desirable and we have to eliminate all impediments against movement towards a life of discovery and exploration. We should realize that, while information can be delivered, each child creates its knowledge almost autonomously.

What must we do to encourage a freedom movement for education?

- Universities should be academically autonomous.

- They should work independently or in cooperation with other colleges and universities.
 - No organization should lord over them.
 - No one in UGC, AICTE or other such councils should give them orders or enforce courses of study.
 - Such courses should be developed autonomously or by working together with other academics anywhere in the world.
 - Diversity should not frighten us.
 - No university can be great if it is just a cubical for a single discipline. There is none such in the world. Many of them might have started as disciplinary institutes in engineering, humanities or as seminaries of one kind or another but their greatness started when they burst out to cover a large universe of knowledge. Indeed then they truly became universities. This can be said of places like MIT, Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, Rome, Paris and many others.
 - We have a large explosion of professional colleges and universities which have very little to do with philosophy, linguistics, psychology, making or writing poetry or worrying about the bulk of people living in a world of poverty, discrimination and oppression.
 - Our IIT's and Institutes of Management can graduate into the class of great universities if they venture out to include subjects in humanities and sciences.
 - We have a large number of institutions called Deemed Universities. Fate of many of them is uncertain. It is unlikely that they would generate and spin out ideas that might change the world – or India for that matter.
- To summarize, following are the few areas with which I have tried to engage with some passion. I confess that the degree of success in each of them is perhaps inversely proportional to its importance. There is a long road ahead, at least for some of these areas. The end may never be reached. But I do believe that being engaged in these aspects is a 'Karma' no scientist can avoid. In retrospect, I could say that my passion has been to replace the impenetrable walls and boundaries with two-way permeable membranes in following areas:
1. Walls between Universities and Research Laboratories, between Industry and Academic Institutions.
 2. Walls between the Subterranean Learning and Innovation and Formal Education and Research.
 3. Walls between Disciplines and the resulting Infertility of Information. How not to imprison ourselves in Disciplines.
 4. Walls between Instructing and Learning from Children.
 5. Thick Walls between Intellectual Understanding and Societal Brain Washing.

Foreign universities

There should be no problem welcoming excellent people from all over the world, including large number of NRI's to come in and join us in creating institutions in which they can make their own careers while creating new knowledge. A new class of education entrepreneurs, for whom education is only a business proposition, should not dominate.

We cannot import whole, fully dressed, foreign universities, sometimes with Ivy on their walls! This has never been done anywhere. When a hundred years ago Americans found that their universities needed vigour and excitement they did not set out to import some of the great universities of Europe. However, they did persuade a large number of truly excellent and creative individuals to come to American institutions to change their climate and make their own careers. That is how the great Graduate Schools of America were developed. Importing academic talent in our midst for energizing some of our universities is the way to go forward and not to get the managers and provosts to come and direct us. □

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