

# Reflecting before Teaching

A K VERMA

Unless we take a holistic view of education and infuse it with the right values, we cannot hope to reap the harvest of a humane society that can integrate with global culture and yet maintain its own identity.

This is with reference to Geetha Venkataraman's 'Teaching Students to Think' (EPW, August 25). The onset of a knowledge society has resulted in the proliferation of educational institutions all over the country. Acquiring a good education has become the gateway to a bright future. After 60 years of democratic life, we are on the threshold of a social transformation that seems congruous with our dream of becoming a developed nation by 2020. The desire of the prime minister to open more centres of excellence in higher education seems to be in order.

But, as we venture in that direction, we are faced with a very piquant situation: a situation where we see a great divide in the educational world. On the one side, we have institutions which can compete with the best in the world, on the other, we have "starving and staling institutions" both in terms of infrastructure and resources. Most of our policy planners have been alumni of institutions in the former category; hence, they have hardly any idea of the plight of the latter category. That plight is in spite of the huge resources made available to such institutions: resources which are mostly consumed on paper and cleared through audit by well known methods.

We cannot defer revamping our educational system because of that divide. The time has come to think hard and take bold action. If we defer that for long, we may miss the bus. It is true that unlike China and other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, we have to do it democratically. How to convert our weaknesses into our strength is an important issue and before we can produce a "thinking generation", we ourselves have to think first and fast.

We have to think about several questions. Are we taking a holistic view of education which integrates primary education with school, college and university education? Do we have any sense of direction? Is it alright to make education bereft of values?

Are we preparing a dehumanised generation or do we have to reap the harvest of a brotherhood society which can integrate with the global culture and yet maintain its identity? And finally, how can education address the callings of the present and the future?

## Looking Within

Besides these substantive issues, some more mundane aspects too may have to be urgently attended. With the government rolling back investment in education and the private players coming in a big way, the focus in private educational institutions has shifted from the academic to the commercial. With a burgeoning neo-rich middle class, such places have become "educational malls" where they can offload their wealth for the benefit of their wards. But what about the multitude which remains captive in government and government-aided schools and colleges? At both the places, "thinking" is the first casualty; in the former, money substitutes thinking; in the latter, thinking flounders due to a highly pauperised academic environment.

After teaching for three decades, I can see all-round deterioration in university and college education. The entire scenario is so inimical to teaching and research that most of the students have started abstaining from classes. And why should they not? The irrelevance of school and college education forces students towards tuitions for professional examinations. Two, market orientation has encouraged evaluating even teaching for the value of money; the cheap university education encourages students to skip that as they want to derive full value of the high fees that they pay to the coaching centres. Three, most of the teachers are so indifferent to studies and research that they hardly inspire students to attend classes. And interestingly, those students who do not turn up in the classroom still manage good marks in the examination – thanks to our questionable evaluation system.

In most of the universities and colleges, conducting examinations has become first priority; teaching and research have taken a backseat. How can this be reversed? Why cannot we think of building up incentives

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and disincentives, motivations and demotivations which can push up good students and teachers? Why not develop some form of accountability for everyone? Why do we force examinations on students not ready for them? Why cannot we give them a choice to take the examination any time in the year that they feel best prepared? And why cannot we make the evaluation totally transparent? Why fail anyone? Do we have any reliable data about suicides by students simply because they failed, maybe owing to an undesirable examination and faulty evaluation? Who really must take the blame for all this?

### Bringing Back Sports

And why has sports been banished from the educational domain, be it schools or colleges and universities? On the one hand, it is perhaps the only arena where the entire nation celebrates victory or mourns defeat. But neither parents nor institutions do anything to encourage good sportspersons; and those who excel do so in spite of them. Corruption and nepotism in the sports bureaucracy are virtually killing genuine and budding sportspersons. How can we bring back sports into the educational mainstream? It is important to develop "a healthy mind in a healthy body" and the team spirit which is so necessary to cope

with moments of victory and defeats in life. It is also important to amalgamate the head, heart and hand in everyone.

What is the purpose of making students study for so long? Get a job? But, they find a long endless wait there. The professionally qualified may get jobs, but what about the ordinary graduates and postgraduates in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in pure sciences? Are they just destined for call centres or other exploitative jobs in the private sector with tremendous insecurity? Is it by any stretch of imagination proper to take the best of their youth and golden moments for a pittance? Why don't we encourage our students from the plus-two stage to start exploring an entrepreneurial idea after schooling or graduating or even postgraduation? Why cannot we make our weakness our strength? Most of our youth is consuming one-third of his/her life just in a job hunt that in most of the cases, ends up in deep despondency. What thinking can we expect from a youth caught in this quagmire? Money making or a job hunt is the only thought occurring to such students at the end of a long tunnel.

### Great Expectations

Do we realise that such a youth is at war not only within the self, but with the entire society and mankind? Can we

expect socially-oriented behaviour from him/her? How easy it is for them to fall prey to the nefarious designs of the detractors of the nation is anybody's guess. With the "tiranga" draped around the victorious twenty20 world cup team at Durban, the pride of India knew no bounds. But, is our educational system doing anything to conscientise our youth to the callings of the tricolour? It is so painful to see independence day and republic day celebrations in schools, colleges and universities without students. Can we do anything to revive the value of nationalism and ancient culture: certainly that is not the exclusive domain of the saffron brigade.

We must refuse to produce a breed which is devoid of nationalism, bereft of values, terribly atomistic, socially deviant, and at war with everybody. Such a breed will become a social liability and danger to humanity at large. The only ray of hope is a political leadership which puts educational reforms on the top of the agenda. Producing a thinking student is fine, but more important is producing a human who can think about his/her family before self, who can think about the society before family, and who can put the nation and humanity above all.

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