

by Vijay Sanghvi

AN old farmer asked a straight question 'Tell me why long holidays are only in the months of May and June each year?' 'Because of the hot summer,' I told him.

'But, should not children be kept in a cool class-room rather than let loose to roam around, bare feet, in the scorching heat of the summer?' said the old farmer. I could not find fault with his logic. Only then I also realised that we have been following the academic calendar that the British had left with us. They could not withstand the sweltering heat in the months of May and June. They were forced to migrate to hill stations with their children. So schools all over the country were closed for the summer vacation.

How many Indian families can afford to spend the entire summer on hill stations now in independent India? Then why are we continuing with the practice of closing schools in the months of May and June?

[We have also not given a thought to another valid and pertinent question that the old farmer had. Why not close schools when there is work on farms so that farmers can take their children to the farm and teach them farming? But exams are held when there is work on farms and schools reopen again when there is work on farms.

In our education system, we have not given any weightage to the vocational, occupational, climatic, cultural and social needs of the population. The British adopted the academic calendar and we are, even after 50 years of their departure, continuing to follow the same. This may be one of the main causes for a high proportion of drop-outs at middle-level schooling. None of several committees that examined the issue of the heavy drop-outs recommended a change in the academic calendar to suit the needs of the population

There are numerous definitions of education. But broadly speaking, it is meant to serve two ends: to train the new generation in skills which will enable it to

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Our education system fails to equip the students to face 1

find employment in occupations that contribute to production, and also get some leisure for developing its higher faculties, so that the new generation can make the right choice of the direction of growth,

"Mahatma Gandhi was far ahead of his times when he had, in 1939, outlined his concept of the system of basic education—*Buniyadee Talim*. 'By education, I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man—body, mind and spirit. Literacy itself is no education. I would, therefore, begin the child's education by teaching it useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training.'"

He had rejected the idea of adding handicrafts as a subject to the general school curriculum. He wanted the craft to be the door to a concrete understanding of other disciplines and he illustrated how it could be done with the example of the *takli*—a very simple tool for spinning.

"Unless I know arithmetic, I cannot report how many yards of yarn I have produced on the *takli*... I must learn figures to be able to do so, and I must also learn addition and subtractions and multiplication and division. In dealing with complicated sums, I shall use symbols and so get my algebra... take geometry next. What can be a better demonstration of a circle than the disc of the *takli*? I can teach all about the circle in this way, without even mentioning the name of Euclid," he wrote in *Harijan* on February 18, 1939.

He proceeded further to show how this would lead to understanding of various disciplines such as agriculture, geography, commerce, foreign trade and, ultimately, humanities, history and political science so as to understand why the English managed to dominate India for

150 years. It would lead to an awakening of the minds of the masses, he claimed.

There has been extensive research in the past six decades which establishes conclusively that schooling is little help in acquiring useful vocational ability. A child learns more from outside the school classroom. This incidental education, acquired by taking part in ongoing social activities, should have been the chief means of learning—not what is learned in the secluded environs of schools which function as if they were secure camps that

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needed to be segregated from the influence of society. College training should follow the entry into a profession and not precede it for providing better learning through practical training.

Instead of fashioning the education system that would meet the core requirement of the vast and poor population, we adopted a system that would meet requirements of the better off—mass formal education for all. The formal schooling abstracts from real situations in living, goes for theoretical instruction, and expects students to apply lessons learnt in artificial, theoretically structured, neat contexts to the contingencies of real life. It tends to ram the prefabricated knowledge into the minds of the young and the grading system implicitly makes more important those aspects of learning that

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can be measured, like the accumulation and recitation of factual matters.

The main architects of the Indian education system in the post independence era, Jawaharlal Nehru rejected the concept given by Mahatma Gandhi for basic education as impractical and suffering from several limitations. Nehru, born in the cosmopolitan household of a prosperous legal luminary, had received the best liberal education then available at home and not in schools. He benefitted from individual attention and not through the

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He committed India to the path of becoming an industrial giant with planned economic development through emphasis on extensive exploitation of metal and machine. Hence the character and role of education system that he adopted was to generate enough technical skills and talents necessary for achieving the objective of rapid industrialisation.

Hence the curriculum adopted in the modern India was only an improved version of what the British rulers had imposed to provide rudimentary mechanical skills that put a premium on learning by rote so that there were enough men available to transact business at the lower levels of administration. The new curriculum was oriented to the attitudes, values and habits that undergird a consumer oriented, mate

rialistic, bureaucratic schooled society

The planning and management of education also suffered from lack of coordination and the necessary institutional infrastructure at the national level as education was made a state subject. Even at the centre, the political weight of a politician determined the rank of the minister who was put in charge of the department and not the importance of education. Rhetorical pronouncements and the proliferation of reports and blueprints for reforms were not followed up by action.

The New Education policy introduced by Narasimha Rao in 1986, is not even mentioned now in any political discussions. This is the importance of this vast, vital and complex subject that determines the future of the new generations.

Modern education has degenerated into a frustrating failure because we rate an individual in terms of material possessions. The basic function of the education has become the selection of winners and losers in society. The education system has turned into the most powerful instrument for sorting out the children of the better-off and equipping them to assume different positions of power in the occupational hierarchy.

We adopted the western concept of identifying happiness with material prosperity related closely to the industrial society that we are in the process of building up. The main function of education now appears to be to train the bulk of the population to receive instructions, follow instructions, keep records, and to train managers, engineers and civil servants required to operate the system.

In the post independence era, obtaining a university degree became the prime objective of education as it was directly related to jobs it has led to an unrealistic scramble for university degrees that has only resulted in an increasing number of educated unemployed, Manual labour has been relegated to a position of inferiority.

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