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# Looking beyond good schooling

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AS another academic session approaches, one begins to reflect on the meaning of education — particularly, the kind of education available for children. Indeed, in a society like ours that has tasted modernity and its, implicit mobility, formal/school education is seen as a pretty worthy capital contributing to the process of one's achievement in life. Not surprisingly, all concerned parents are thinking of the quality of schooling their children need. Without 'proper' education, one's future, it is feared, is going to be bleak; 'good' schooling alone can rescue one from the danger of being marginalised in the coming age.

What is, however, ironic is that one of the functions of 'good' schooling is to negate the egalitarian idea of a modern society. 'Good' schools, it appears, are based on the principle of exclusion. Enough has already been said and written about the economic constraints that prevent many from sending their children to these schools. But what is equally significant is that these schools, far from showing any interest in exploring the undiscovered zones, address themselves to the same privileged classes.

An example would suffice. Many schools while admitting children for nursery classes expect the parents to be interviewed, in English. Not solely that. It is also expected that they should have a 'good' family background ('goodness' is measured in terms of one's position in the hierarchy of social classes or in terms of one's formal educational qualifications). This is nothing but excluding all those who do not possess these "necessary" qualifications. It is assumed that they cannot afford to think of sending their children to 'prestigious' schools. As a result, the prevalent inequalities remain unchallenged.

There is another way in which these schools perpetuate elitism. The socio-linguistic skill which 'good' schools seek to cultivate amongst the students is not generally rooted in the cultural traditions of Indian people. For instance, if one is encouraged to speak the mother tongue in the family, one would invariably see a cleavage between what one is supposed to do in the school and what one does in the family. Again, the school manners do not always coincide with the everyday life practice of the average Indian. And ultimately when the 'schooled' personality triumphs, one tends to develop contempt towards ordinary people. That is the irony. Knowledge, far from emancipating one, alienates one from the rest of society.

See how these schools marketise their products. The schools which are not sufficiently sophisticated do it in a thick fashion: they propagate their narratives of "success", "distinctions" and "record breakers". And the sophisticated ones marketise not just academic excellence, but also their 'extracurricular' activities. Children play, children are encouraged to feel 'concerned' about the poor and the downtrodden, children participate in music, theatre, sports and even yoga classes — everything has to be advertised and marketised to enhance the prestige of the schools.

Isn't it quite natural that children should play and sing? Isn't it quite natural that in schools there should be a celebration of togetherness? Why is it then that all that appears to be normal and spontaneous is reduced into something 'special' to be marketised? The fact is that the logic of the market denies even the naturalness of children and their activities. And that is the beginning of a corrupt, artificial, marketised milieu.

One thing is, however, certain. Another system of education prevalent in innumerable ordinary/municipality/government schools cannot be a solution. If 'good' schools perpetuate elitism, all these ordinary schools perpetuate darkness, indifference and cynicism. The lack of basic facilities apart, there is no motivation, no collective spirit, no innovation. Not surprisingly, many parents experience an acute dilemma. What to choose — elitism of "good" schools or defeatism of ordinary schools?

As this is essentially a sociological problem (no longer a private trouble, but a public issue), this requires a collectivistic endeavour. And this must begin with a firm conviction that education is every child's right. Children are not intrinsically good or bad, intelligent or stupid. Every child is a possibility and given a conducive environment everyone can accomplish the impossible. This egalitarian faith should be accompanied by another conviction: good education is essentially people-oriented and the aim is not to separate but to unite. Only then would it be possible to unlearn all that we have learned from the prevalent system of schooling.