

The campus has

Happily, liberalisation does finally seem to be on course. It is interesting that in spite of all the political uncertainties that the Congress has been going through, there has not been the slightest doubt aired that the future of liberalisation could perhaps hinge on the fortunes of Mr PV Narasimha Rao's motley conglomerate.

Complete convertibility on the current account has followed full convertibility on the trade account. Tariff barriers are slowly but inexorably being pulled down. A good number of *Fortune* 500 companies have already chalked up firm investment plans for India. With compact discs and digital tapes, with pagers and cellular phones, India that is Bharat is fast getting on line with the global village.

But while the bhavans housing Union Government departments are trying to keep pace with the bazars, and a whiff of the fresh air of liberalisation is beginning to blow through even the State secretariats, one segment of the body politic that is still sailing along with Noah's Ark is our educational system. Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay is supposed to have conceived of our educational system to create a nation of babus, or, more precisely, a community of clerks. We are still actualising that dream of that illustrious member of the British House of Lords. Reforms may come and reforms may go, but I go on for ever—so says our educational system!

Mind you, we are not talking here of any superficial tinkering with academic system. The indirect and implicit suggestion is certainly not that we introduce Sanskrit into the curriculum to put us in touch with our roots and our core competence. We are not cogitating on the idea of introducing our epics in the curriculum. Nor are we bandying brainwaves

regarding introducing computers in primary education.

Take a very crucial aspect of how our educational system could have culturally re-oriented itself with the advent of liberalisation, but sadly has not. One of the immediate and importunate imperatives of liberalisation has been for our companies to become leaner and flatter. As an implied corollary of the advent of global competition, Indian corporate enterprises have had to take a hard and close no-holds-barred look at their manpower needs and costs at all levels.

Naturally, as a result of this and scrutiny of manpower structuring at all levels of the Indian corporate sector, narrow fields of professional specialisation have been viewed adversely and frowned upon. Thanks to liberalisation, the generalist has come to enjoy a premium over the specialist. The multi-skilled professional has come to have an edge over the single-skilled professional. Remember Albert Einstein's famous quip about politicians as people blind of both eyes, leading specialists, who are blind in one eye?

Blinkered focus

Specialising in finance as a branch of management was bad enough; but corporate India's finance managers were segregated between short-term working capital finance and long-term project finance. What was sauce for the goose was not necessarily sauce for the gander. What was grist for the mill of the

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*Critic and
commentator*

short-term working capital finance manager was not grist for the mill of the long-term project finance manager. But the canon of the learner and flatter corporation does not take kindly to such blinkered specialisation.

But have our academic institutions been responsive enough to introduce management courses with combinations of various specialities? Or have they at least introduced any innovative course in keeping with the emerging professional needs of the post-liberalisation economic era? Most certainly not. They are content to wallow in the slough of an antediluvian aeon. They are mightily pleased to ambulate within the confines of the notes and guide books of yesteryears. The groves of academe are more happy to preach than to reach out to the outer spaces of future. Academic specialisation, if anything, is splitting further in a process of cellular mitosis into sub-specialities. Specialisation in ENT should hopefully subdivide itself in the foreseeable future into the right and left nostrils respectively.

Subject knowledge is still the subject of hackneyed stress in our cliché-ridden educational institutions. With a blinkered focus on the job content of a prospective career, we concentrate to death on the fine print and technical nitty-gritty of one's field of professional study.

We forget for a moment that increasingly in today's and tomorrow's corporate environment, management is all about getting jobs done through people. Even if you do not know the last bit of technical detail about the internal combustion

engine, there is nothing preventing you from becoming a successful manager on a factory manufacturing combustion engines. But you cannot become a good manager if you are found wanting in the capacity to build interpersonal relationships, in communication skills and the ability to show leadership qualities.

A long way to go

Sadly, however, our schools and colleges do not make it a point to teach communication skills, or put students through experiential exercises in learning how to show leadership qualities. We therefore end up producing mute inglorious Miltons and silent Shakespeares. The point that Thomas Gray makes is relevant in the Indian educational context: *"Full many a gem of purest ray serene/ The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear;/ Fully many a flower is born to blush unseen/ And waste its sweetness in the desert air."* Our educational system refines and makes us sweet, but it

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does not teach us ways of communicating that sweetness to the outside world.

Look at it slightly differently; you learn to read; you learn to write; you learn to even speak in public if you are lucky. But does your school or your college teach you how to listen? Yet one of the most important qualities that you need to cultivate to succeed as a manager, in other words, to succeed in getting things done through people, is the ability to listen. Even Wordsworth had said; "*Come forth, and bring with you a mind/ That watches and receives.*" It may sound rather simplistic, but it is true that most problems in your professional life can be tackled easily if only you can sit quietly and actively listen. Simmering labour problems have been known to have evaporated into thin air merely because someone sat and listened. If you measured the ability to listen on a scale of zero to five, you would be surprised to discover that the most attentive listeners did not score above 2.5.

To cope with the increasingly harrowing pressures of fierce market competition, the need to cultivate the habit of lateral thinking to solve the problems that arise in our work-a-day lives is of paramount importance. Lateral thinking is the amazing habit of throwing up ideas at random from all directions, without being constrained by the tight leash of logic which does not generate any strikingly new insight. It is this ability to think laterally that is desperately needed to sort out real life shopfloor problems. But in our institutions we continue to swear by deductive logic. The cultivation of the capacity to think rationally, in a cause-effect sequence, continues to be the Bible in our training of young minds. Obviously, the classroom still has a long way to go to catch up with corporate reality.