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SO, WHERE SHOULD WE HIDE OUR LESS CLEVER CHILDREN?

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RECENTLY I received, from a friend and colleague, the annual chronicle of his school.

The bulk of the issue is a celebration of the fantastic IIT results attained by several of the school's students, including that of the national topper. On closer examination, we saw that 20 girls and boys had qualified from among 191 children and that in the school's board exam results, eight children scored between 89% and 93% among whom were three IIT qualifiers ranked 337, 3286 and 1487.

These statistics are similar to those published, from time to time, by tutorial shops and are, for me, dauntingly impressive. I have often felt they were nails on my professional coffin, certifiers of my failure as a headmaster. Until I tried a little bearding of lions.

I am extremely relieved to report with some authority that most schools, consistently trusted by parents, have about 10% of their children going in for each of the various tertiary options, through colleges and institutes and, later, professions. This means that about 10% opt for engineering, 10% for medicine, 10% for other professional areas and so on. And that other than the occasional under-achiever, by and large, the number of credit and distinction cases in an outgoing Class XII batch are pretty much the same.

So what should we conclude from this?

That the hype, tension and paranoia are genies of our minds. They are spectres that we conjure through hypothesis and rhetoric, giving them shape and form through publicity and circulation. Rumour and legend feed on one another and grow to become myths. Myths are presented as truths. And if they go unchallenged, that's what they become.

And what are these myths?

That "everyone" wants to make it to IIT.

That if you do get in your life is made.

That the best career is in the IAS and the best route is via IIT or medical.

solutions and answers, for day-to-day situations and the human circumstances and the bizarre strangeness of individual situations.

That it is the primary responsibility of a school to train its students for a lifetime of worth.

That such training cannot be secondary to tuitions and examinations. It is like quality becoming secondary to profit.

That in order for such training to prevail, a school has to make provisions for facilities that will promote and provide opportunities for breadth, depth, the conjunction of scientific enquiry with literary and aesthetic criticism as well as for a spirit of adventure. The best counter for human arrogance is the humility that Nature dictates and the bigness of a man is seen when he knows what it means to be small.

That as a country we have beggared our own wealth by taking away training from literacy and distorted education to mean marks, marks and more marks.

That we have achieved this by downsizing content, not in the chapters but in testing by becoming more specific, virtually to the exclusion of research, presentation, comprehension and analysis. It is no wonder that our certifications are yet to be as globally accepted as say, the A levels of Cambridge or the International Baccalaureate. And no wonder six out of every ten aspirants for a job are unemployable.

That far from being undervalued, the ICSE/ISC is a highly respected exam. Tertiary institutions and employers know that the ICSE/ISC in conjunction with a school, which has a broad curriculum, makes a candidate worth investing in.

That the best career is in the IAS and the best route is via IIT or medical.



That unless you are a physics or maths type, you are not at the forefront of the academic world.

That if you are not an academic topper you are inadequately educated.

That without the right credentials life is pretty hopeless.

That the credentials can be obtained by hard work or by hours and hours of mugging.

That nothing should come in the way of one's academic pursuit.

That life is worth nothing unless you make it big, in power and pelf.

That the best route is the competitive exam.

That for this CBSE is better, since the ICSE/ISC syllabus doesn't address competitive exam requirements.

That the ICSE/ISC has no takers and all parents want CBSE.

That colleges down grade ICSE/ISC marks.

And how may these myths be challenged?

By enquiry, statistics and study By refutation from concerned professionals. And by appreciation of instances of relativity and relevance.

And what may the challenge state?

That for as many students who want to get into IIT about five times the number have no wish to.

That even if you get in, your life will only "be made" if you are bright, creative multi-skilled, responsible and have a healthy respect for God and your fellow beings.

That the IAS is as good a career as your professionalism will make it. And as bad as you make it, if you don't have what it takes.

That power and pelf are the least lasting, the least respectable, when life's course is run.

That to have what it takes means a varied intellect embellished by skills and ability, the skill to read, understand, interpret and deduce. The ability to transfer learning to differing situations and to think creatively, not only for art and aesthetics but for products,

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That the CBSE is also striving towards flexibility and empowerment of the students but the efforts of both these and other progressive state boards are hampered by the confining dictates of the schools themselves. We flout norms, defy systems and ignore instructions. Principals overrule supervising examiners in the conduct of examinations and encourage dishonesty. In contravention of Supreme Court directives, they refuse to take back low grade pass candidates, they "weed out" weak students after "selection" tests and put up as perfect a class for the board examination as their conscience will allow. Examiners disclose evaluation and confidential marks and paper-setters take tuition and tutors prefer not to teach in

class. What is it all for? Some massive cover up or some pathetic illusion?

Are we trying to hide away our less able children? Do we prefer not to acknowledge them because they are an embarrassment? Or are we ashamed that we are not doing enough for them and don't know how to go about correcting this without losing our image of success?

All too often we sneer at the Government schools, think of them as a bad joke, appalled by stories and sights of neglect. However, it is also humbling to know that there are hundreds of Government schools which, without discrimination or favour, impart a more grounded and catholic education to thousands of children, despite daunting and crippling disadvantages ranging from enormous numbers in a single class (would you believe 600 in the science section of Class XI? Because you can't refuse or turn away or choose?) to absolutely no facilities whatsoever.

And yet in the midst of all this, despite our best efforts, the children are irrepressible. They carve spaces for themselves even in the worst of circumstances of deprivation, exploitation and brutality, brought about by the terrifying pace of change and the mindless selfishness that it has generated.

They refuse to be put down and demand much more than we give. And perhaps that will be our saving grace, to learn how to give by learning that we don't.

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