

EVEN those few, who have donewell for themselves as individuals, despair about India's future as a society primarily because our political leaders seem to have followed mindlessly disastrous policies in every field. It is as though they were leading the country on a suicide mission. This death wish is nowhere more evident than in the way our policy makers have handled school and higher education as well as development of other skills required for running a well-functioning society.

Societies which have put vast amounts of energy and thinking into providing good quality education and opportunities for acquiring diverse skills for their people are today not only prosperous but also well ordered. We seem to have done the very opposite. On the one hand our policy makers have helped destroy through wilful neglect and contempt the vast reservoir of indigenous skills and knowledge systems acquired and nurtured over centuries by our own people. On the other hand they have failed to create a viable system for the acquisition of modern skills and education for all those who are abandoning their traditional occupations. Consequently, it is not just corruption but also sheer incompetence which is leading to a breakdown in our society.

The New Colonisers

So far the world knows India primarily as a country which has earned the dubious distinction of producing the largest number of illiterate people in the world. In the next 50 years we will also be able to claim that we are among the distinguished few nations of the world which has the largest number of people illiterate in their own mother tongue! By retaining English as the medium of elite education, professions and government functioning even after being formally

Destroying Minds and Skills

The Dominance of *Angreziyat* in Our Education

Madhu Kishwar

freed from colonial rule, we have ensured that the schism that was deliberately created by our colonial rulers between the English educated elite and the rest of society has grown even further and acquired deadly dimensions. A hundred years ago our intelligentsia, even when it learnt English, still remained rooted in its respective regional languages and mother tongues. Tagore knew English but chose to write in Bengali, thereby nurturing his language as well as the overall intellectual climate of Bengal. Likewise, Mahatma Gandhi could express complex ideas in English more simply, elegantly and effectively than most British. Yet he wrote with even better grace in Gujarati and even Hindustani. However, the great-

grandchildren of our Tagores, Ranades, Premchands and Gandhis are today all writing mostly in English. Worse still, even our scriptures and ancient literary texts are read by our educated elite mainly in English. Consequently, the mental, emotional and intellectual colonisation has proceeded with greater rigour and pace in post-Independence India than during colonial rule. The brown sahibs of the British era spoke English only in office. The brown sahibs of today have let English become their language for love making, talking to their infant children and even scolding their pet dogs!

However, this does not mean that they have acquired enough proficiency in the language for it to



act as an effective instrument of knowledge acquisition and communication. Far from it. Teaching quality is so poor even in our English medium schools that, barring a few exceptional institutions, too many of our students are ill-equipped to make sense of even newspaper reports, leave alone read serious books in English. The few who have a good command over the English language consequently behave and get treated like an imperial race and others who cannot are viewed as a sub-human species. The former are largely cut off from the lives, feelings, problems and aspirations of the non-English knowing population. Their aspirations are directed either towards migrating abroad or attempting to create small pockets of affluence for themselves so that while being situated, for example, in New Delhi, they can pretend they are living in New York.

In well-functioning societies, the educated elite tend to provide intellectual leadership to the rest of society. In our case, our colonised intelligentsia is so alienated from its own people that it has made our society resemble a body whose head has been severed from its torso. However, the head is arrogant enough to pretend it can manage on its own. In reality, both are rotting, the headless body and the bodiless head.

This communication gap exists not just between different strata of society but also within families. The elderly, especially grandparents, have traditionally played an important role in the socialisation of children, giving them *sanskars* and an initiation into their community's culture, values and knowledge systems. Today's English educated children tend to treat their non-English speaking relatives as ignorant and illiterate. Tarzan comics and cartoon films are taken more seriously than grandmother's stories.

Thus the future generations of the educated minority may be more information rich about computers and business opportunities but will grow up lacking wisdom which can best be imbibed from a close intergenerational interaction.

This dual system of education has taken away so many opportunities from the vast mass of our people that the new generation which is being denied good quality English education is going to grow up feeling even more demoralised, incompetent and inferior than the present cohort. In the next few decades, as India integrates more with the global economy, the lifestyles of the Indian elite will become even more alienated from the rest of the people. Since the moneyed elite of today flaunt their opulence more and more before the deprived through television, cinema and even the print media, the anger and rage of those excluded are going to get far more explosive than at present. They will avenge themselves in the Laloo Yadav way through politics. A person who knows no English at all is virtually unemployable except as a peon or labourer. However, he/she can, like Phoolan Devi, become an M.P. or like Yadav hope to become a chief minister and get power and money through politics because he/she cannot hope to get it through education and talent.

Deskilling of India

The tragedy we have created for our society through this educational policy is of epic proportions. India was not too long ago known the world over for its industrial skills and crafts. Indian steel was world famous and so much in demand that ancient Roman historians are known to have expressed concern that their coffers were getting emptied buying steel swords (and silks) from India. Our architectural tradition created many

more wonders than the famous Taj Mahal, the temples of Khajuraho and Konarak, perhaps more than the rest of the world put together. Our weavers produced fabrics which have been the envy of the world for centuries. Our craftsmen produced jewellery, icons and art objects which are unparalleled in beauty of design and exquisite workmanship. Yet none of our engineering colleges would condescend to admit sons of *lohars* even as students, leave alone teachers, in their metallurgy departments. This, when their practical knowledge, honed through centuries of practising that craft would be far superior to that of our formal degree holders. Why? Because they do not have the English education necessary for "studying" today's science and technology books. Likewise, our traditional *sthapathis* who inherited the skills required to design and make architectural wonders like the Jantar Mantar, the beautiful ancient temples, *havelis* and palaces found in every corner of India - that too made with environment friendly materials - have no place in modern colleges of architecture. They have been degraded to the level of masons, *mistris* and labourers at the lowest rung of our building industry only because they do not have access to English medium public schools. Similarly, our traditional weavers capable of designing and making fabrics of a spectacular variety, do not find jobs as textile designers and engineers in the modern factories because they could never hope to get the degrees required for those jobs. Our agricultural universities can be blissfully ignorant about the vast knowledge reservoir of our farmers whose produce - long staple cotton, varieties of spices and fruits, wheat and rice - have eager buyers in the world market. Their knowledge of food storage, soil conservation, use of safe pesticides, biodiversity and

medicinal values of plants has hardly any takers in the scientific establishment because they cannot write research papers in English. We learn to value *neem* and turmeric only when the international scientific community endorses their many wondrous qualities.

Thus, by making English education the hallmark of qualification for careers, we have marginalised and impoverished all those who carried the rich legacies of our traditional skills and technologies. We have destroyed the self respect of the majority of our people, making them feel worthless and despised. All we are giving by way of “social justice” to a few among these deprived millions is reserving a few thousand government jobs of peons and clerks.

The children of these skilled technologists are deserting their inherited occupation at a rapid speed because they earn pitiful wages in them. The makers of Kanjeevaram sarees would rather have their children get a peon’s job in a government office. Children of our traditional metallurgists have taken to menial unskilled jobs like rickshaw pulling and street vending. Those who merely buy and sell gold make crores of rupees but a skilled goldsmith, after 20 years of being on the job, even in a city like Delhi, would not be earning more than Rs 3,500 a month. A bank clerk earns at least four times as much. His only advantage: he has acquired a smattering of the English language.

When sons of skilled weavers turn rickshaw pullers, children of *sthapathis* become bus drivers, and skilled shipbuilders take to vegetable vending, it amounts to a genocide of skills. Stalin destroyed the economic base of his country by physically exterminating the peasantry in the name of collectivisation. We may not have physically killed our farmers and other skilled groups, but we have, by undermining their skills and knowledge, destroyed their self-

respect, marginalised them economically and destroyed their capacity to compete by making English the magic key which opens the doors to opportunity. If we take away the disadvantages that ignorance of English brings with it, our traditional technologists - ironsmiths, weavers, carpenters, *sthapathis* and other metallurgists - would fare much better in gaining entrance to scientific and engineering institutions as well as in the world of manufacturing.

The Costs of Neglect

The entire society is paying for this crime. Our modern architects functioning with borrowed knowledge make unlivable and ugly buildings and homes. Our modern offices need to use artificial lights even in broad daylight in a country where sunshine is abundant. There is no provision for ventilation, with windows sealed for air conditioning in a country where power breakdown is a daily occurrence. All these stupid

buildings result from simply copying designs from western books and magazines. Our Ambanis and Singhanias produce fabrics whose designs are either straight copies of western designs or so garish that their own wives would not be seen dead in those sarees. In fact, they are seen proudly wearing the “ethnic chic” produced by our traditional weavers. It is not a coincidence that only the products of our illiterate or semi-educated, poor artisans have eager buyers in the international market. India’s foreign exchange earnings come primarily from exporting cottage crafts, handloom textiles, traditional jewellery, leather goods, handmade fabrics, spices, raw cotton, mangoes, basmati rice and other farm produce.

It is our traditional artisans’ products which act as reminders that we were once a great civilisation. The famous iron pillar of Qutab Minar in Delhi made centuries ago by our traditional *lohars* still stands proudly without rusting or corroding. The

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Dependent Yet Estranged

My Growing Discomfort with English

This article will look strange coming from someone who earns her living teaching English literature, does most of her writing in English, edits **Manushi** in English and could not keep alive its Hindi edition for more than nine years.

Closing Hindi **Manushi** was a source of great grief for me. Its publication had to be suspended because we could neither mobilise enough subscriptions for it nor get good writing to fill up its pages. As long as it survived, the Hindi **Manushi** lived off the English edition. Most of the articles were translated from the English edition; its printing and related costs were also subsidised from the funds mobilised by the English edition. Had we kept it going longer, it would have killed the English edition as well.

However, this set back with the Hindi edition cannot simply be attributed to **Manushi's** failure. The last 15 years have seen the progressive collapse and closure of almost all serious magazines in Hindi — *Dinman*, *Dharmyug*, *Saptahik Hindustan*, *Sarika*, *Ravivar* and so on. Even a half serious magazine like *Vama* could not be kept alive by the Hindi world. Many small magazines in Hindi were started but died prematurely. Today, apart from *Hans* which is indeed an important and serious literary forum for the Hindi readers, the market is dominated by magazines that cater to the needs of housewives or supply gossip about film stars or semi-pornographic

sensation mongering types of glossies.

We too could have kept Hindi **Manushi** going if we had opened our doors to grants from the government or international aid agencies. However, I am convinced that the long term consequences of taking that route are more harmful even though in the short run it seems to pay off. Hindi and other regional languages will become vehicles for serious thinking, learning, analysis, higher education and planning only if English is put in its proper place, as a language of communication and understanding developments in different countries of the world, a language for accessing the latest in science and technology. The Chinese, Japanese, Thais, the Koreans and the Germans all use English in that way without becoming slaves of it as we have become.

I came to understand the full implications of the great harm being done by the dominating position of English in India as I went through the process of acquiring proficiency in it. For all my English based education, I find myself a linguistic cripple. Even today, despite years of working in it, writing or even speaking in English does not come easily to me. I make all kinds of silly mistakes and find myself groping for words, unable to fully express my ideas and thoughts in English. I rarely make such mistakes when I write or speak in Hindi or Punjabi. English has not become the language of my dreams, my

prayers or even humour. I find it really hard to crack a joke in English. At the same time it has seriously impaired my ability to write in Hindi or my mother tongue Punjabi because most of the information giving material on important issues as well as literary writings from other languages are available only in English. Hindi and regional languages starve for want of such material.

As someone educated in English medium public schools, I too grew up thinking that the English language opened many new windows to the world and took for granted a whole range of new opportunities it provided to those of us who acquired some skill in using it. Yet, I was not prepared to downgrade learning Hindi as well as my mother tongue Punjabi in the way our school system encouraged us to do. For instance, we were given black marks every time any of us was caught speaking in Hindi. I got golden stars for everything else but persevered in earning occasional black stars for relapsing into Hindi while conversing with friends. This was still the way convent and other elite schools operated, even when the days of Irish nuns were over and we were being taught by South Indian “sisters”. This discouragement was institutionalised in other ways too. As a school affiliated to the Indian School Certificate system modelled after the British Senior Cambridge exam system, we were offered a choice of

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steel being produced by our modern degree holders is of such poor standard that even the not too quality conscious railway ministry has alleged that tracks made of SAIL steel crack up and corrode within months of installation, causing numerous rail accidents. Temples and houses made by our traditional *sthapathis* have withstood the ravages of centuries. Even as ruins they look aesthetic and grand. The housing colonies designed and constructed by our modern degree holding architects look like eyesores from the day they are built and start falling apart before they are occupied.

The modern sector of our economy is not an earner but a guzzler of foreign exchange. Our industries have become a dead weight on our economy and dare not face international competition. They are either grovelling for government protection or foreign collaborations — often both, and yet not able to put their act together. This is the reward our western educated elite get for treating their own people like colonial subjects. There was a time when only the West treated us with derision and contempt. Today, even our Asian neighbours laugh at the pretensions of our educated elite. The Japanese, Chinese and Korean elites may not speak as good English as the products of our Doon School and St. Stephen's, but they communicate much better with the world and are more respected in international fora than our self-styled representatives. After all, what do they represent? Grovelling poverty, mass illiteracy, a sickly malnourished population, a rich land turned into one of the worst environmental disasters, an inefficient and corrupt government! And it's a callous elite which does not even believe in sharing a language with its own



people, leave alone wealth and education. Today, we are merely ridiculed and spurned in international forums, treated as pompous failures and self-righteous beggars. If we continue in the same manner we will be treated as virtual untouchables by the rest of the world. Our leaders will be put through quarantine before being allowed to attend international meetings for fear that they may be carrying the many deadly disease germs India is so famous for. Today, our educated elite laugh at and express disdain for the likes of Laloo Yadav, his rustic manners, his *dehati* accent, his strong-arm tactics, his semi-literate wife brought in as a dummy chief minister. If we don't start fixing our education system immediately we will be saddled only with such tragi-comic figures for our leaders. Our Chidambarams and Jaswant Singhs might as well forget about coming to political power through the electoral route. After all, a man like I. K. Gujral could not win a seat in the parliament on his own strength. He has to be beholden to Laloo Yadav for his present seat and to Akali Dal for winning his previous election.

From Clerks to Peons

Actually, the problem is not just that the educated elite are divorced and alienated from their country's people. Our education system is poor even from the point of view of the elite themselves. The British are accused of having introduced a system of education designed primarily to promote an army of clerks, Indian in colour but English in habits, tastes and values. They at least functioned to a purpose and produced efficient clerks. However, our post-Independence schools and colleges are not even producing clerks but people whose skills don't qualify them for anything more than a peon's job. The following extract from a letter we received from the secretary of an NGO gives an idea of the communication skills of our college educated:

Yours consolatory and collaboration may kindly be solution to the [XYZ] Yuvak Sangha... Which works in the filed of education, Adult Education, pre School Health and Family Planing. Forest and Environment to check the

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“lower” or “higher” Hindi on reaching class IX. The lower Hindi course was the obvious choice of *all* my classmates because it was absurdly easy — as though designed to give a smattering of knowledge of Hindi to a foreign tourist. Therefore, it was easy to score high in it for those who had a working knowledge of Hindi. I insisted on opting for higher Hindi even though my school refused to provide me a teacher for the relatively far more difficult course. From class IX to XII, I studied Hindi on my own and scored very well despite lack of any guidance.

Even before this option of “lower” Hindi was offered to us, I was among the very few in my class - perhaps the only one - who chose to read serious Hindi literature for pleasure while most of my classmates swooned over Mills and Boon romances or “school girl” comics. That made one feel somewhat isolated but I did not think much of it nor aggravated myself over the issue. Till then I saw studying or reading Hindi a matter of personal choice and did not interpret its downgrading as a serious political issue. In fact, I enjoyed reading English literature as well and opted for the English Honours course when I joined Miranda House as a B.A student. It was then that I was first jolted into recognising the many harmful effects of the dominance of the English language in our society. Our school had a somewhat homogenous population. Virtually every child came from middle or upper middle class families, and somewhat similar cultural backgrounds. Therefore, intermixing was easy and smooth.

In Miranda House, I experienced for the first time the bringing together of a relatively heterogeneous group of people with enormous differences in their family’s income and educational levels, cultural background and social status. We had

students from extremely affluent, westernised, high status families brought to study under the same roof with daughters of bus conductors, small shopkeepers, clerks, scooter drivers, low level government employees, and even wealthy merchants. The divide was not merely economic but also cultural. The symbol of that divide was the English language. It was not enough that you be able to speak and write in English — the accent in which you spoke, the slang you used, the kind of school you learnt your English in mattered much more than being a diligent student just as the neighbourhood you lived in and the social status of your family mattered much more than how you performed in class. The contempt of the English speaking elite for the Hindi speaking “*behenjis*” of Miranda House and their near total refusal to have any interaction with the latter was far more deadly than the inequities of the traditional caste system. These new Brahmins were more arrogant and far less useful for our society. They behaved as though India was a little island off the coast of England. Too many of them were outraged when as President of the Miranda House Union I began to address all general body meetings in Hindi and conduct most of the Union business in Hindi.

The manner in which English literature was taught and the attitudes sought to be inculcated through it left me thoroughly disgruntled. But since our university system is not flexible enough to allow switching courses mid-way I had to stay stuck. After my B.A, I tried changing to history but my application was not entertained because I had not studied History up to then. It was only after getting my Master’s degree in English that I could secure admission in MA History. But in well functioning universities, even Indian History is taught only in English. Our ancient

India expert, an internationally famous historian, was proficient in neither Sanskrit nor any other Indian languages - modern or ancient.

My job as a teacher of English literature in a Delhi University college has only deepened my conviction that the domination of English is causing enormous damage to the people of our country. It is systematically undermining their self confidence. For example, most of my students have very poor skills in the English language; most of them cannot function efficiently in it leave alone use it as a vehicle of creative thinking. At the same time they have almost stopped reading anything even vaguely worthwhile in their respective mother tongues because acquiring skills in those languages brings no reward. None of my English honours students this year was even aware of the Tulsi, Balmiki or any other literary versions of the *Ramayana* though they had seen Ramanand Sagar’s T.V *Ramayan*. Their knowledge of English literature is confined to reading and mugging up guide books. Not one of them has seen or used a standard literary text. They could not follow those texts without help, even if they tried. If six poems of Donne or Shelley are prescribed in their course, they will never read a seventh even from the guide book.

Thus the system has effectively destroyed their intellectual curiosity and undermined their own linguistic and cultural identity. They know only *khichri* Hinglish. Lack of deep roots in any language has impaired their ability to handle ideas, nuanced thoughts or even emotional, cultural complexities. Consequently, thing is put in neat watertight categories of moral vs immoral, good vs bad. They have forgotten how to ask serious intellectual questions and, therefore, are not likely to find answers. □

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Environment pollution, Sport and cultural activities, Social developments, Women development, Youth activities and tribal development etc.

For the wide spread functioning of the above said activities. The organisation seeks your consolidation and collaboration in the above said activities. If your organisation is going hand with hand.

Intimation maybe requested to

Yours sincerely, XYZ

Many of our court judgements similarly sound like total gibberish. The following sample is an extract from a judgement by a session's judge in a case of child sexual abuse:

Besides all these, how it seems to be unnatural that the thing for concealing to which the accused was hiding himself here and there and was frightened in coming home, on call only he came to the house, on coming not before anybody else, except before those persons who were bent upon to punish him immediately and further were furious on him and tried to assault him, and who should have sent him in jail for the statement given by him against himself, has confessed before them his offence willingly. In the back ground of this, the accused who is not only literate but is doctor and is living in the present atmosphere, and confession of such offence by him in this manner seems to be unnatural in itself...More unnatural to these all is the confession of the offence before his father which he made before his father ...in presence of five persons stated above. The

family of the accused is also the family of the learned persons. On account of the last night's incident they would have not become perturbed rather they had so much time they would have come under the influence of the shock as of the family of Madan Gopal Kakkar and would have thought of the saving themselves, and out of them atleast one would have been who would have not admitted the offence again. In this way the story of confession of the offence by the prosecution by the family of Kakkar and Bhasin family is wholly unnatural, fabricated, and product of legal advice. This could not at all be trusted.

One can well imagine what brilliant grasp of law such a linguistic genius would have acquired. This particular judgement, infact reads as if the honourable judge neither knows nor respects the ABC of law. It is not surprising that he went out of his way to exonerate a medical doctor accused of child rape.

Very few of our policemen know how to register an F.I.R. in legible hand leave alone one that is factually accurate and grammatically correct. Their ignorance of the law is frightening though expected. Their low educational skills make it virtually impossible for them to read and understand even Bare Acts leave alone legal treatises in antiquated victorian English. But they take no time to pick up those provisions of law which help them fleece money. A linguistic analysis of the petitions filed by our lawyers even at higher levels, leave alone district courts, reads like products of a deranged brain. Here is an extract from an F.I.R. drafted by a Chennai lawyer in a murder case:

...two members going to received the money...at the Time of medicine of mind effect and drinking methyl Alcohol for compulsory husband over drinking..This person Elumalai over drinking and tired staying my house. Again Drinking of Methyl Alcohol for my husband. After my husband wanted meals please take it by Anunchalam. But overtake of again and again attacked the Neg. Suddenly my husband Rolled to Land and earth. Retenched husband again and again attacked. Over attack for snag for my husband place...Husband sounded stoned some place. Ramaraja...warming Drinking of person attack for Arunchalam unattack of call to go and Sang removed...Five members joined attacked for my husband Head, mouth nose, attacked things of goods for stones. Some place suddenly number of husband...

My husband's sister Lands of agiculture lands buying try to Arunchalam. But my husband overtake same Land buying my husband another sister's husband for 9 months. The problem dated warning for my husbands dated 27th April 1993 murder to my husband. The 5 members of speeches of my husband murder to doing ease for you. Also warning for me. My husband murders above 5 members promised. Related persons but deployed for me. Department of police something rupees alloted for received anybody. No action and Responses.

Respected Sir, this problem solved for me. The murder of my husband and brother Annamalai warning. Enquired for the

problems solved please, Sir,
Thanking you...[XYZ]

Linguistic Cripples

I hear similar gibberish even in elite business chambers and ministerial pronouncements. Most of us Indians sound mentally retarded when we propound our ideas in English. We are today becoming a nation of linguistic cripples which is an important reason why the work calibre of our professionals is so shoddy. A person who cannot handle any language competently is unlikely to be able to handle concepts or ideas required to think things through. Most of even our MBBS doctors are so poorly equipped in English that they can not possibly follow the latest medical information already available in international journals even if they are inclined to access it. Therefore, too many of them practise quackery after having procured medical degrees of doubtful worth.

While we are churning out millions of unemployable matriculates, B.A.s and M.A.s, the country is facing a real shortage of skilled electricians, plumbers and a host of such technicians because we are simply not investing any money or energy into this area. Under our traditional occupation based caste system, every child picked some or the other valuable skill from his parents, a skill which had been developed and perfected through generations. Today, everybody wants to be a white collar pen pusher because that alone brings status and money. Only those who cannot make it, take to blue collar occupations but without the required skills for them. The electrical wirings in our public buildings are a virtual death trap; our water treatment plants are a scandal; our power stations are forever breaking down, our municipal

sewage pipes frequently leak into water pipes. Most of those actually operating these services could not spell the word “hygiene” leave alone know how to provide a clean water supply. The fault is not theirs. The children of our impoverished farmers and artisans learn what they can by simply watching other ill trained people. Their own educational skills are not such that they can acquire this knowledge through self study.

Our colonial rulers could at least run their exclusive enclaves efficiently and provide functional civic amenities for Civil Lines areas. Our post-Independence elite cannot even ensure clean water supply or regular electricity in the opulent and exclusive New Delhi areas. Frequent tragedies like mid air collisions of planes, collapse of newly built bridges, breakouts of fire in public buildings, power breakdowns, dysfunctional telephones and general civic chaos are as much the products of sheer incompetence and inefficiency as they are the offshoots of corruption.

Destroying Minds

Thus while our policy makers have destroyed the traditional skills of our people, they have denied them good quality modern education and opportunities for acquiring new skills necessary for running today’s economies. The *sarkari* school system meant for the poor is a mockery in the name of education. These schools function mainly to provide *naukris* for the teachers and a host of *babus* of various grades who man our education departments and ministries. Consequently, there is very little teaching going on in them today. The little that happens is of such poor quality that anyone who has gone through 11-12 years of that exercise has for all practical purposes become

a dysfunctional human being, and is unlikely to be able to think coherently on any subject except those areas of life not touched by school education. To top it all, they acquire contempt for any manual work. A son of a farmer or *lohar* who has studied up to matriculation or B.A. is likely to despise his father’s occupation even while he himself is skilled for no other and therefore, likely to end up adding to the large army of unemployable youth.

Among the many very saddening exposures to how our schools are destroying brains, I would like to cite one. While I was on a visit to Vitner village of Maharashtra some years ago, the people there proudly introduced me to a teenage boy as the brightest and most diligent student of that village. I asked him to write an essay on himself and the boy sat down dutifully to do the exercise. After about 45 minutes he brought a two page neatly written essay on Mahatma Gandhi. I was puzzled and asked him why he didn’t write about himself. Somewhat embarrassed he told me that they had not “taught” him to write on “that topic” in school. If this is what our school system is doing to our brightest and most hard-working, we can well imagine the fate of our not so bright and less than average students.

I have been experiencing the products of this devastation year after year in the Delhi University college where I teach. As with that village student, my first assignment to even my B.A. students is an essay on themselves. Most of them (except the few from really well functioning schools) look as bewildered as that village boy and many simply cannot write more than 6-7 lines that do not go beyond giving the student’s name, father’s occupation, the area he/she

lives in and a couple of other identification points. Their excuse is the same: this topic was never a part of their curriculum. Over the years only a handful have given me something resembling an essay. This was the case even though many of them came from non-*sarkari* schools.

Even our private sector in education functions abysmally because of the very low standards set by government schools. Most of the private schools, especially those that have mushroomed in small towns and villages are worse than teaching shops because, for all the money they charge, they give students very little in return.

Brain Drain

Nehruvian socialism has wrecked our economy with its policy of nurturing the supposed commanding heights of our economy by exploiting and depressing the farm sector and other segments of the vast unorganised sector. Its counterpart in education was the belief that a handful of institutions like Mayo College and St. Stephen's will provide us the talent to run our entire society and economy for one billion people. The result is there for all to see. The few talented people this country produces are desperate to find a foothold in foreign countries largely because they feel threatened and choked by the inefficiency and corruption all around.

If we do not begin to put our act together in the field of education, think beyond a few elite schools and colleges, and aspire to *high quality* secondary level education for every child in this country and opportunities for acquiring real skills, in a few years we will need to start thinking of importing skilled manpower and well trained professionals to run even our basic services and civil amenities, as well as our universities and colleges, perhaps even our primary schools.

Our leaders have given us a sickly legacy of substituting ideology for ideas, using radical rhetoric as a substitute for sensible politics. We the educated elite not only swallowed phoney rhetoric avidly and were deeply mesmerised by it as long as it was being mouthed in the correct Oxonian English. Today, when Laloo Yadav or Rabri Devi use similar rhetoric of "social justice" we feel outraged because they are speaking in *dehati* tones we so despise. No democracy can be made to function meaningfully by a tiny informed elite who shut out all information and knowledge from others by speaking, reading and writing in a language no one outside their charmed circle understands.

Those who feel convinced that the country can't manage without

English should at least have the good sense to ensure that it becomes the language of mass literacy and education and that there are enough schools and teachers available to provide quality English education to our people. Today's ruling elite may not know how to manage our economy and society but at least can appear as respectable suited-booted beggars before IMF and the World Bank and do a bit of crisis management. Tomorrow's ministers and bureaucrats will not even know how to write a coherent letter to various aid agencies asking to be bailed out. Fifty years from now we might have to hire foreigners to beg on our behalf just as today we hire western professionals to lobby with foreign governments because our diplomats know little diplomacy. □



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