

Bringing up Eklavyas

INDIA IS FAR FROM PUTTING ALL ITS CHILDREN IN SCHOOL. THEN WHY ARE MORE AND MORE PARENTS AND EDUCATORS SAYING IT IS BETTER TO KEEP KIDS OUT OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM THAN IN IT?

Text by Amitava Sanyal
Photograph by Dheeraj Paul

LET ME throw a proposition at you," says Vinish Gupta, tiptoeing among the students sitting on cushions on the floor. "Have you seen the nuclear sign — electrons buzzing around a proton? What if I told you that the representation is only a conjecture? That nobody has yet seen it exactly like that?" The 20-odd 20-somethings look puzzled. They have not come to the campus of the Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas (SIDH), a half-hour drive from Mussoorie, for science classes. They are here to find out how to approach education and how to unlearn some of the things they learnt in school. And that's exactly what they are getting.

Not surprisingly many of them have passed through some of the best-regarded educational institutes around the world themselves.

THEY DON'T NEED NO THOUGHT CONTROL. Pawan Gupta, an IITian who started SIDH two decades ago, says, "A study we conducted in Tehri Garhwal some years back showed that though parents were happy sending their kids to school, they weren't happy with the outcome. Their educated kids would neither get jobs, nor would they want to go back to agriculture. The schooling inculcated in them the feeling that agriculture was infra dig." That's why one of SIDH's focus areas is redefining 'success' and 'prosperity' in an inclusive, organic manner.

Sandeep Pandey, an engineering doctorate from University of California, Berkeley who runs the Lucknow-based educational NGO, Asha Ashram, says, "Mainstream education is meant to select a few. It cannot fulfil the aspirations of all. So there is a real need for a more holistic system." Alongside its regular 3-hours-a-day schools, one of the 'social experiments' Asha is running is a camp for kids of brick kiln workers in Kanpur. The guiding philosophy there is similar to that at SIDH.

Manish Jain, a Harvard graduate who set up Shikshantar, a home schooling initiative in Udaipur, says, "There is more to be learnt from apprenticeship than through pedagogy in a class. That's what 90 per cent of Indians do. I myself learnt more outside." Not wanting schools to interfere with his daughter Raksha's education, Manish has joined the small but growing tribe of parents who have taken their kids out.

DIVIDING LINES IN EKLAVYA COUNTRY

But to R Govinda, head of the department of school and non-formal education at the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, a far bigger problem lies in India's class and caste divides. "We have perfected the system of dividing the society by education. The classification of schools for the rich and the poor is more important a debate than that between school and its alternatives."

It cannot be ignored that some of the better schools that have shunned rote-learning approaches to education — such as Rishi Valley in Bangalore or Mirambika in Delhi — have merged into being anglicised for rich kids. Arvind Gupta, who, as a Unesco evangelist for science teaching, has visited more than 120 schools, says, "The schooling at home schooling,

which is a large movement in the US today, has remained within the houses of the rich in India.

"This is, after all, a country where 40 years of independence have lent only two policy documents on education — a 190 Cabinet resolution and a 1986 legislation. Education was also the only Directive Principle that came with a time frame. But it took till 2002 — decades beyond the timeframe — to amend the Constitution and make it a Fundamental Right. Even then, it was left without any agency. On one hand, the amendment has not been notified by the Union. On the other hand, the Right to Education Bill 2005 was introduced more than three times into a Lok Sabha that was largely ignored by the status and brand contra-Constitution by Supreme Court."

FOR THE HEAD, HEART AND HANDS

Amir Kashef, currently with Unesco's Indian Exchange and one who, as director of elementary education in the early 2000s, was one of the authors of the BEE's first draft, says, "Our system is input-driven, focusing more on school self-insurance and teachers, rather than being output-oriented, focusing on quality. It is possible for both efforts to coexist." Govinda, who also teaches at the University

of Laxkar's Institute of Education, would rather have a well-defined 'public space' in education, where all the stakeholders have a voice.

"Indeed, what exists in India now are the government and the private systems," he says. Ashok Ganguly, as chairman of CIEE, a benchmark that institutes more than 1000 affiliated schools, is often at the receiving end of such talk. He says he has tried to introduce innovations such as 'improving 100 skills training'. An encouraging benchmark till Class II, and teaching mathematics late — but has faced stiff resistance from teachers and parents. "There are no cognitive, resource-linked and motivational barriers," he says. "But if such steps are not taken, schooling will remain only for the best, and not for the hands and heart."

One day, when Shikshantar's Manish was watching a film on the Israeli-Lebanese war made to a brand, five-year-old Raksha came up to him. When the film appeared on screen, the father said, "That's my friend." When the next girl came up on screen, Raksha pointed and said, "That's my friend." She looks so sad. I will take her into my arms and tell her not to be sad. That's the sort of heart Manish was hoping to nurture when he took Raksha out of school.



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SIDH is just one of organisations in India that are questioning the usual, industrial model of education — one that brooks no curiosity, one that focuses on exams rather than education, one that declares only a tenth of those who pass through it as success, one that hardly makes an effort to create a humane culture. That's why, in a developing country like India where access to education is still the biggest headache of policymakers, several educationists and parents

would rather focus on nurturing alternatives.

Not surprisingly, many of them have passed through some of the best-regarded educational institutes around the world themselves.

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Pawan Gupta, an IITian who started SIDH two decades ago, says, "A study we conducted in Tehri Garhwal some years back showed that though parents were happy sending their kids to school, they weren't happy with the outcome. Their educated kids would neither get jobs, nor would they want to go back to agriculture. The schooling inculcated in them the feeling that agriculture was infra dig." That's why one of SIDH's focus areas is redefining 'success' and 'prosperity' in an inclusive, organic manner.

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It cannot be ignored that some of the better schools that have stressed alternative approaches to education — such as Rishi Valley in Bangalore or Mirambika in Delhi — have morphed into being sandpits for rich kids.

Arvind Gupta, who, as a Unesco evangelist for science teaching, has visited more than 1,500 schools, says, "De-schooling or home schooling,

which is a large movement in the US today, has remained within the houses of the rich in India. The poor simply cannot afford it here."

This is, after all, a country where 60 years of independence have bred only two policy documents on education — a 1968 Cabinet resolution and a 1986 legislation. Education was also the only Directive Principle that came with a timeframe. But it took till 2002 — decades beyond the timeframe — to amend the Constitution and make it a Fundamental Right. Even then, it was left without any agency. On one hand, the amendment has not been notified by the Gazette. On the other hand, the Right to Education Bill 2005 was mutated more than three times into a Model Bill that was largely ignored by the states and found contra-Constitution by Supreme Court.

FOR THE HEAD, HEART AND HANDS

Amit Kaushik, currently with Unesco's Solution Exchange and one who, as director of elementary education in the early 2000s, was one of the authors of the Bill's first draft, says, "Our system is input-driven, focusing more on school infrastructure and teachers, rather than being output-oriented, focusing on quality. It is possible for both efforts to coexist."

Govinda, who also teaches at the University

of London's Institute of Education, would rather have a well-defined 'public space' in education, where all the stakeholders have a voice. "Instead, what exists in India now are the government and the private systems," he says.

Ashok Ganguly, as chairman of CBSE, a behemoth that administers more than 9,000 affiliated schools, is often at the receiving end of such flak. He says he has tried to introduce innovations such as imparting 'life skills training', discouraging homework till Class II, and instituting mathematics labs — but has faced stiff resistance from teachers and parents. "There are cognitive, resource-linked and motivational barriers," he says. "But if such steps are not taken, schooling will remain only for the head, and not for the hands and heart."

One day, when Shikshantar's Manish was watching a film on the Israel-Lebanon war made by a friend, five-year-old Kanku came up to him. When the friend appeared on screen, the father said, "That's my friend." When the next girl came up on screen, Kanku pointed and said, "That's my friend... She looks so sad. I will take her into my arms and tell her not to be sad." That's the sort of heart Manish was hoping to nurture when he took Kanku out of school.

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