

Little progress for Indian education

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EDUCATION is a subject that has nearly always been topical in independent India—probably because, in spite of all the discussion and debate over it, so very little has been done during the past quarter of a century. At present two-thirds of all Indians are illiterate. Yet large numbers of the educated, and the highly educated are unemployed, not to mention the multitudes of the uneducated unemployed and those who are underemployed. Such anomalies abound: there is an acute shortage of doctors in rural India but at the same time not only are thousands of Indian doctors working abroad, there is also widespread unemployment among medical graduates in the country; India badly needs middle-level skilled professionals and other types of trained worker suitable for rural areas—the kind our system is just not turning out. It appears that the Indian nation spends countless crores in educating and training individuals who only seem of value in foreign lands.

These facts speak volumes about education in India, among other things. The system of education—a legacy from the bygone colonial era—has been a constant target for criticism. And understandably so, because the present system differs little in content and character from the one the English rulers had devised with a set of aims and objectives of their own—quite different, one would think, from those which might have most suited a free nation.

In view of the general situation at the time of independence, the leadership thought it fit to maintain the *status quo* in education, as in many other areas, and to let the drastic changes wait till normality had returned. But this turned out to be a blunder, because as time went by those who took charge of education, perhaps incapacitated by their own background and training, did little or nothing to devise a new system or to modify and improve the existing one. As the Prime Minister, Shrimati Indira Gandhi, admitted as late as last year: "One of the biggest mistakes we made when we gained independence was not to have overhauled thoroughly our educational system and structure. We are paying for it now".

All that the government has been able to do in this direction till now is to appoint committees and commissions to go into various aspects of the system and structure of education. These bodies have produced tonnes and tonnes of words in the form of voluminous reports which are gathering

dust on shelves in the offices of bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education and elsewhere. One would like to believe that, armed with all these investigative and in-depth reports from eminent and learned men, the government would by now be quite clear about what needs to be done and how. This, however, is not the case. Confusion and uncertainty mark statements made from time to time by those in authority. The education policy of the government of India seems to be unclear and lacking in definite direction.

The Prime Minister herself has not helped matters by sounding inconsistent in her numerous speeches on the subject, and sometimes at variance with the approach educational planners in her own government would like to adopt. On more than one occasion she has explicitly agreed with the widely held view that the present system of education must be drastically changed, or even discarded altogether, as in her own words 'it has little contact with life in the country . . . It belongs not only to another civilisation, it belongs to another century. And we need a minor or even perhaps a major revolution . . .'. On another occasion, not too long ago, she chose to caution educational planners against policies and drastic measures which would cause major 'dislocations' in the existing educational process. As recently as February 1, while speaking at the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the National Chemical Laboratory in Poona, the Prime Minister said: "With all the known shortcomings of our educational system and of our organisation of science, the fact remains that India pro-

duces exceptionally gifted scientists and an impressive number of highly competent scholars."

To cope with mounting unemployment among the educated youth, planners in the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) would like to adopt a strategy which stresses the vocational aspects of the educational process. This, besides enhancing chances of employment and self-employment through inducements like financial and technical assistance from various governmental and other agencies, will also help ease pressure on enrolment in institutions of higher learning—in line with another CABE proposal which seeks to place drastic restrictions on expansion in higher education. Again, Shrimati Gandhi in her Poona speech last month observed: "Many student groups come to see me and often argue that our educational system should be given a vocational orientation . . . But training a person for a job is not the sole or the highest purpose of education, nor is it adequate for the longer run. That purpose is to train better human beings who can give more to life and be capable of deriving more from life."

In regard to curbs on expansion in college and university enrolments (which have increased by 800% in the past 20 years), the Prime Minister cautions that it must not in any way result in limiting heightened expectations of those in the backward classes, and that such curbs on expansion of higher education must also be accompanied by concrete steps to bring about a change in the composition of the student population in such a way that weaker sections of society can get their fair share of opportunities.

Views expressed by the Prime Minister on a subject are generally looked upon as being indicative of the official line of thinking, if not as statements of official policy. So if Shrimati Gandhi's views are looked at in that light, we can look forward only to more of what has been going on for so long—more debate, more committees, more reports and substantive action, if any, so snail-paced that the passage of time will more than nullify its effects.

The Prime Minister's warning on 'dislocations' in the existing process of education was unfortunate and really unnecessary. For what use was it asking those who hardly move at all to go slow? And again, her linking of the present 'system' to the fact that India produces "exceptionally gifted" individuals was amusing because many Indians are able to achieve what they do in spite of the 'system' and not because of it. It may be more relevant and instructive to investigate the number of talented Indians this system helps send into oblivion or nip in the bud each year. □

SHEIK Zayed Bin Sultan Nahayam, ruler of Abu Dhabi, has a good line in greenhouses. They are soon to cover a 15-acre site in the desert in an attempt to start the first commercial market garden in the Gulf States. The greenhouses will be the plastic-dome type and the irrigation supply will be from water reservoirs that have been discovered under the desert by scientists from the French national oil company, CSP.

The great problem with desert irrigation is, of course, evaporation. This will be overcome by a recently discovered system in which hose pipes, punctured with small holes of calculated size and spacing, are laid out along the rows of plants. Water is thereby delivered at the optimum site and rate to minimise waste.

And who discovered the irrigation system? According to Israeli scientists it was devised at the Weizmann Institute (where it can be seen on the campus flower beds). Will Sheik Zayed give credit where it's due?