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Let's Drop the Parrot Act

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In his insightful article (ET, November 8, 03), Jayaprakash Narayan stressed the need for far-reaching reforms in our educational system. In particular, he drew attention to three issues: lack of quality teachers, a rigid academic environment in which different disciplines work in water tight compartments and an unimaginative examination system. Indeed, if as Narayan points out, a small percentage of our scholars are a match for the best in the world, it is in spite of the educational system, not because of it. Narayan concluded by stating that many of the reforms urgently needed in our education system will cost little money. What is needed is creative thinking and a new mindset that is willing to embrace exchange.

Before we understand how to reform our educational system, we must first be clear on what we want to achieve. Education must make our people wise and equipped to understand and solve the problems of the world. That calls for conceptual clarity and depth of knowledge.

Today, one sees a disturbing trend among students. They answer questions without seeking to understand them. They confidently reply even when they do not know the answer. They rarely seek clarifications or admit ignorance. Indeed, some of the answers provided are so vague and general that they can be given with minor modifications to a range of questions.

Recently, during an interview a fresh MBA who had done a project on corporate governance was asked what is corporate governance? "It is about managing a company well so that shareholders' wealth is maximised," she shot back. When asked to explain c-orporate finance, she meandered a bit and then repeated her first answer. When question on the difference between the two, she finally gave up.

The MBA can't really be blamed for what happened. Our education system lays a premium on rote learning. Greater importance is given to remembering isolated facts than understanding why they happened. The whole emphasis seems to be to help students fall into a set pattern, not improve the learning process.

Consider the following: What is the function of the CEO? What are the duties of managers? What's the role of the board? What is financial management or corporate governance? To all these questions, a student can say "It deals with maximisation of shareholders' wealth." Yet, there is a different answer to each question.

Correcting this state of affairs doesn't need huge investments, it needs a new approach. We must use more imagination while setting examination papers, including questions which provoke students and force them to think. We must move from what to why, when and how. Suppose, we were to ask a question, why do we need a subject called corporate governance? Or another simple question: Why

do firms exist? (This formed the basis for Ronald Coase's Nobel Prize winning effort). Or: When is vertical integration advisable? That again would force students to think and reflect.

In short, the need of the hour is to shift from remembering to understanding, accepting to questioning and reading to reflecting. Students need to understand basic concepts, but they also need to think, reflect and enquire.

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