

INDIAN EXPRESS (SUNDAY EDITION)

Express Magazine

OCTOBER 27, 1985

DOES INDIA NEED THE 'OLD SCHOOL TIE'?



Illustration by MARIO MIRANDA

As Doon School completes 50 years of its privileged existence, and the 'pampered' products of its sylvan cloisters rule this country — starting with the Prime Minister — two distinguished educationists, J. T. M. Gibson, who taught for many years at Doon School and was headmaster of Mayo College, and Hari Dang, who was principal of St Paul's, take a close look at our public schools. While the former provides the historical reasons for an elite school system and draws attention to the positive values it generates in the building of a secular, united and forward-looking nation, the latter emphasises the fact that the 'coterie culture' that such schools produce anaesthetises their products to the realities of the world outside. More attention, therefore, needs to be paid, he says, to the non-public schools, for it is in those that the future of this country is being built.

I DO not write about those teaching shops, better called crammers, that have plagiarised the title public school; and I shall need, I think, to give some account of the origin of public schools in India. But first let me comment on three things for which they are criticised: that they produce an élite, their expense, and that most of them teach in English.

For those who suffer from the deadly sin of envy, élite is a dirty word, just as "discipline" has become objectionable to many in today's permissive society where there is too much emphasis on freedom and too little on duty, too little recognition of the fact that the freedom of others depends on control of oneself. As Peter Ustinov has written, "The only real freedom is in order, an acceptance of boundaries." A good school will teach this and a

by J. T. M. Gibson

boarding school has greater opportunities to do so than a day school. It should produce an élite. It is desirable that all should have equal opportunities, but not by reduction to the lowest common denominator.

Though they should have equal rights, people are not the same and some will be better at some things than others. Of course, students in public schools must beware of too great an attachment to what has been called "the old school tie" and to supposing that because they have been members of their sort of an élite, they are necessarily better than those who have not, but I do not know of any society of people, animals or insects that has existed for long without an élite. Russia and India, as well as countries in the west, have their special academies designed to produce excellence, whether as members of the armed forces, engineers, doctors, teachers or whatever, and the schools I write about aim to fit their students not only to join such élite academies, but to live as good members of society.

Then there is the problem of wealth and costs. A good school needs expensive equipment and as Dr Zakir Hussain said, "I cannot understand anyone wishing that if all cannot be provided with good education, no one should." Scientific instruments, computers, typewriters, video sets, a well-stocked library, playing fields, a swimming bath cannot be provided cheaply and



fees at a school which provides these facilities are bound to be more than the ordinary parent can afford. There is something to be said for allowing the rich an education that may enlarge their views and teach them to use their wealth wisely; but no country, in its own interests, can afford or has the right to deny to its citizens the best possible education, if they are fit to take advantage of it. That is why so many schools gladly admit all the government scholars from low income groups that the government sends them; and I would like to see a great extension of merit scholarships, funded perhaps by trusts or business houses, to children of middle income groups such as junior civil servants, officers up to a certain rank and the like. In my day, these were the students who took, with government scholars, the greatest advantage of what was offered them.

Thirdly, there is the language problem. One of the advantages of boarding schools is that they can take pupils from all over the country, many of whom form friendships valuable to the unity of India. A result of this is that teaching is done mostly in English. A language élite can be a bogus élite, but it is to India's advantage that a number of its citizens can communicate with much of the world and among themselves from different parts of their own country through English. How long this will last, or how important it is to teach in the mother tongue I am not sure; but civilisations have often been founded on classical languages, and to learn to think in a foreign tongue is no bad training for the mind.

To appreciate what they aim at it helps to know something of the origin of Indian public schools. The name comes from the British where it is loosely applied to schools whose heads are members of the Headmasters' Conference. In India, this sort of school and a similar conference - the Indian Public Schools Conference (IPSC) - started some 45 years ago, with the participation of the Scindia School, Rajkumar College, Raipur, and Aitchison College, Lahore, shortly to be joined by Daly College and Doon School. Sargent, who was the Educational Commissioner with the Government of India, gave valuable encouragement. There was fear that such schools would only be imitations of British public schools and would be unsuitable for India.

Indeed, in general, their organisation was an imitation. They had the house system with the housemaster largely responsible for the moral, academic and physical development of his boys;

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but this was akin to the way the ancient Indian *gurukals* were conducted. They used senior students as prefects, important in training those suitable for the task to take on authority and how to exercise it; but fagging and beating were not allowed. They paid a good deal of attention to team games hoping that the players would learn to play for the group rather than themselves.

There was also some doubt



whether the old Chiefs' Colleges were socially quite what was needed. Foot, who did not join the Conference at once, though he attended meetings, was one who was doubtful, and another headmaster complained of the "suggestion that the Doon School has the monopoly of all the virtues"; but Foot played a very important part in the development of these schools.

The Doon School had the advantage of starting with a clean sheet, of having been conceived by S. R. Das, and of being supported by other Indian patriots as well as Britishers who believed that India should and would soon become, if not independent, at least a full member of the Empire. These people recognised the vital importance of training successors to the British civil servants, officers of the armed forces and businessmen whose work would gradually come to an end. They also believed in a united India, eradication of caste, and a society of greater social justice. They hoped their students would develop a real sense of public duty and a readiness to accept responsibility.

Early on, the IPSC laid down that schools belonging to it should not exclude pupils on the grounds that they did or did not belong to any particular class or creed, and that once admitted all should be treated alike. Foot, among others, limited pocket money so that the less well off were not at a disadvantage; clothes were plain and silk shirts were not allowed.

Shortly after joining the staff of the Doon School in 1937, I had a letter from a friend in which he wrote, "What tremendous difficulties there must be in combining all the different castes and religions." In fact, there seemed no great problem and 40 years later, the headmaster, Martyn, showed me a letter from an old boy in

Pakistan who wrote, "Although there were no mosques or temples.. my feeling is that there was no trend towards irreligion. We all joined in the morning prayers, recitations of Iqbal and Tagore.. but never once was the feeling conveyed that they were meant to replace our individual form of prayers. I do not remember any occasion of religious ill feelings amongst the boys. This atmosphere of tolerance has helped to

seems to me a tendency of examining bodies, of those who make the syllabus, and those that teach it, not to pay enough attention to the excitement of finding out and understanding rather than just learning.

"Senility and sentimentality are old bedfellows" (Tariq Ali). I hope what I have written is not sentimental, and gives a fair picture of what public schools can offer.

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mould my own individual faith."

I wonder whether, if there had been hundreds of such schools, there would have been Partition. To continue quoting: "The introduction of uplift schemes among the servants and adult education taught us that we had a duty to perform towards those not so fortunate." Another old boy from another school writes: "Fair play, integrity, owning up to one's mistakes, were values imbibed." These and other virtues such as truthfulness, honesty and decency are not the preserve of any particular civilisation and should be the aspiration of us all.

Another early fear was that these schools would westernise their pupils and diminish patriotism, but all have paid considerable attention to Indian culture with their flourishing art, music and dance societies, the practice in many of them of yoga, the observance of Indian festivals and the wearing of Indian dress where suitable.

Because they are independent - a better title perhaps than public - and because most are boarding schools, students are free to use their spare time in worthwhile activities, and the individual abilities of staff members can be put to good use - they can pass on what they happen to be good at. They can offer something much wider than a set syllabus and a rigid timetable. I believe that as many students as possible should leave school with a justified sense of achievement. This can be earned not only in activities already mentioned, but many others such as rock climbing, cross country running or trekking, tree planting and nature conservation, wood and metal work, motor and electrical engineering, debating, service on a school council of pupils and staff, and so on. These activities, to some extent, counter what

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O comparison drawn by our burgeoning anglophone mid-

by Hari Dang

dle-class aspiring to a place in the elitist Indian sun is more invidious than the smug parallels between

the so-called "public" schools and those run by state and Central governments and more humble private managements.

While the Doon School is, admittedly, the quintessential Indian public school, embodying through 50 years of variable levels of excellence and effectiveness, an indigenisation of admirable and nationally useful, if derivative, British value systems, it is not – and never was – a lone archetype. Not only are all the 55 member-schools of the Indian Public Schools Conference (IPSC) equally Indian public schools, but these standard-bearers of educational privilege in this country have spawned a host of imitative replications of varying scales of authenticity and integrity, thus devaluing their own currency. In the process – as often happens in the complex working of Indian social diversity – a new culture of graded educational privilege is growing, side-by-side with the vast mass-based school educational facilities

being increasingly provided to the rising school-going population in this country each year since Independence.

It is possible to argue, as Ivan Illich does, that "the escalation of schools is as destructive as the escalation of weapons", or as the thoughtless detractors of the "public" schools in India tend to do, that it is the envy of the underprivileged democratic masses which stimulates the growth of such institutions. But neither argument need cause anxiety to Indian educational planners and thinkers, or government education departments, for a privileged education does not necessarily or automatically lead to greater opportunities or higher achievement, if – and this is the strong subjunctive – the alternative of reasonable, good and well-organised schooling can be provided for the underprivileged.

And it is here that the state and Central governments, state and

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