

Independence Day isn't just a holiday

To build a New India, what we need is a profound young generation which has strong moorings into culture and history. Independence Day is a celebration of the same

Those who grew up in the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s, would vividly recall the fervour that began much ahead of Independence Day. For weeks, children in schools would practice National Anthem, marches, patriotic songs and skits. And who could forget the big attraction of *lad-dos* that one would get at the end of the flag hoisting ceremony. In those 'no TV, no Twitter' days, life was simple and beautiful and national festivals, including the Independence Day, Republic Day and Gandhi *jayanti*, would acquire enormous significance. Cut to the present and we are confronted with a queer trend — for some strange reason most of our private schools, especially in big cities, have discontinued the practice of celebrating Independence Day.

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The decades of 2000 and 2010 give us reason to worry and ponder over this growing marginalisation and neglect of the idea of celebrating India with special occasions like the Independence Day being converted into mere holidays for children by private schools. On a day when youngsters should be relishing the idea of India, rejoicing the national flag and singing the National Anthem, they are made to sit at home, watch barrage of films on television or throng a mall.

What should have been a precious day in the lives of our children, one which would help them gain an insight into glorious Indian history, is wasted in nothingness. This is akin to a callous neglect by schools, a reckless design that perpetuates cultural and historical deprivation of our children.

On the contrary, students in Government schools are much better off as they do not black out the Independence Day celebrations. Guidelines from the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) come in handy for Government schools. This year, for instance, the MHRD advised schools to follow participatory programmes like 'Sankalp se Siddhi Pledge for New India Movement 2017-2022' or taking pledge to rid society of social evils, including filth or participating in simple quiz and painting competitions.

The Central Board of Secondary Education too issued the same circular and it would be interesting to find out that among the 19,402 affiliated schools how many of these have followed the spirit of the circular, if not its content.

Unfortunately, given the obsession of India's skeptic class, any attempt at triggering a discourse like this — celebration of Independence Day by schools — is fraught with risks of causing a cacophony. The political twist being given by the West Bengal Government to the MHRD circular is a case in point.

As a nation going through a churning, we must appreciate that despite debates around it and clamour for claiming supremacy on whose nationalism is more pure, the idea is critical to the progress of the country. The spirit of love for one's country — call it nationalism, patriotism, national pride — is supreme and non-negotiable. At a time when the society is under severe onslaught of regressive values, including materialism, isn't it wise to try every possible opportunity to hammer in our children, a sense of national pride, a fundamental value, that shapes their progressive years?

The Independence Day is a great occasion to achieve this. One is tempted to borrow from great historian Eric Hobsbawm, who in his book, *The Invention of Tradition*, wrote, "Invented tradition" is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and ritual of symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.

One is reminded also of Singapore's tryst with its national identity. While soon after independence in 1965, Singapore pursued values conducive to promoting economic growth, by 1980s the framework had changed when the Government became concerned with growing materialism. They pushed for what researcher Stephan Ortman termed as 'a stronger national identity'. For building the 'New India' that Prime Minister Narendra Modi so avowedly talks of, we need a profound young generation; one which has strong moorings into India's culture and history. An Independence Day is a great celebration of the same, and any compromise to share the spirit with the children, amounts to severe dereliction of duty by private schools. This must stop.

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