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THE KINDERGARTENS

Kindergartens have been adjuncts of the urban centres all over the country and often feature in social conversations these days. Opinions are sharply divided about the usefulness of these nursery schools. In one extreme are those who hold them as indispensable components of our education system while on the other are those who view them as an unnecessary factor responsible for the prevailing unhealthy class distinction in the society. A report in Tuesday's issue of this paper puts the number of the kindergartens in the country at 3,200 most of which allegedly operate on business motives. The report details how expensive the kindergartens are in contrast with the government primary schools where tuition and books are free and how on flimsy pretexts the kindergartens charge money from the guardians of the students either enrolled or seeking admission. It also points out the inefficiency of the staff and poor teaching in these institutions.

There is nothing wrong, however, with the kindergarten system by itself. The term, coined just a century and a half ago by Friedrich Froebel to name his school for young children established at Blankenburg, is now popular throughout the world. The German word means 'children's garden' and the institutions are intended for early elementary education. In many countries infant schools, pre-primary schools or nursing schools are run today in the name of kindergartens. In some countries like the United States there are both public and private kindergartens, in others like the Soviet Union they are entirely public and in the subcontinent they are mostly private.

The progressive ideas of the Italian psychiatrist-educator Maria Montessori and American philosopher-educator John Dewey led to significant changes in the kindergarten curriculum earlier this century. This curriculum stresses "creative self-activity" and utilise games and play to meet the needs of the age group. It, however, needs to be adapted to local conditions.

The government has declared primary education compulsory and aims to raise literacy rate to at least 50 per cent within the shortest possible time from below 30 per cent as at present. How difficult, however, the task is may be imagined from the fact that about a third of the 68,000 villages in the country have no primary school today. It is understandable that the bulk of the available resources have to be diverted towards building schools in the villages. As in the urban centres the dependence will continue to be partly on private initiative so kindergartens fit in well in the gap.

Though class consciousness is there in this society with feudal leanings, it may not be right to fault kindergarten for accentuating class distinction. On the contrary by siphoning away a little surplus income of the affluent and spreading education they rather help weaken the class barrier. And education indeed is the most potent weapon against such prejudices.

A look at the social scene would also reveal that the number of the millionaires and billionaires has increased by a number of times since the liberation. If these nouveau riche cannot get within the country the education they want for their children, they would send them to institutions abroad. Again those enrolled in the kindergartens are not all from the wealthy families. A large percentage of the children come from the middle class families for whom the fees charged are a little too heavy.

The situation thus clearly calls for government intervention so that the kindergartens not only maintain financial discipline but also necessary teaching standard so that the clients get their money's worth.