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'Hum approved suppliers hain'

By Suchita Malik

IT was an unflinching shot of "sifarish" that I had used for the admission of my tiny-tot in a lower class of a reputed school. My girlie had also successfully stepped to the next class with "excellent" performance. Preparations were to be made for the next class and the purchase of books and stationary was the first on the agenda.

"May I get the list of books prescribed for my child?" I enquired from her teacher.

"The list has been supplied to the ...book store" in Sector of Chandigarh. You may go there and you will get everything", was the stock reply.

"Yes, Sister! Fine," I mumbled feebly for lack of words or perhaps an alternative. However, I immediately recollected that it was the same book-shop as the one recommended by her previous school. It was the "prescribed" shop and a familiar one.

My thoughtful yet rather short journey to that shop made me wonder as to how the education, its mode and standards had changed drastically since the time it was imparted only to the willing students in search of high educational standards with the zeal that would make their parents feel proud and put even the most hard-working men to shame.

The train of thoughts was rather short-lived as I soon completed my journey to the "approved" destination. Well-dressed parents with their progeny could be seen standing in the queue and struggling for the identical purpose. The crowd could be compared with one outside the ticket-window of a Gurdas Mann show. As usual, we had to wait for our turn.

The waiting period made me traverse through my times when the father wouldn't even know about the results of his children, let alone bother himself about buying a loadful of books and then putting the brown-paper covers followed by another round of providing water-proof transparent covers atop. The result would only mean pass or fail to him and our entry to the next class would be as smooth as the exit of cash out of his clumsy pocket for purchase of books and note-books. And that would be the end of our routine annual meeting with him and all would rest in peace for the rest of the year.

We have come a long way and a lot of water has flown under the bridges since then. Education has become stylish with an emphasis on the maintenance of that 'style' at any cost. Lots of 'teaching shops' have mushroomed all around to keep pace with the growth of Independent India.

These teaching shops are a law unto themselves and dictate their own terms and conditions. And as long as they yet 'educated' parents like us, they can hope for a steady progress.

As I was engrossed in these thoughts, my husband almost shook me out of sleep saying: "Madam Wolfe, will you please come out of your stream of consciousness and be at the counter instead?" I felt embarrassed yet peevisish. "Yes! Yes! please give us one set for class II of a ...school", I said to the man behind the counter. He nodded and went behind to pick the one out of a stock of already assembled sets. The shopwallah had done his homework well this time, I said to myself.

As the 'shop-wallah' was trying to fumble his way ahead amidst a hoard of books reaching for the table to place them, the enormous quantity of the bound knowledge shocked me beyond words. "My God!" reacted I instantaneously, "my girlie is going to read all this! When will she have the time to play and make merry with her friends? After all, she has to marry her Barbie off to a decent guy! "Then, as if in a bid to act sane, I exclaimed, "A sound mind resides in a sound body. All play and no work would also make Jack a dull boy." But the man at the counter was hardly interested in my sermonising; he would rather make an immediate bill and attend to the other casualties waiting nearby. And lo! he made the bill and handed it over to me in a jiffy.

Once again, I was shocked out of my wits. "No, it can't be true," I reasoned as the prices indicated for the exercise-books alone were higher by about 20 per cent. I, somehow, dropped the idea of confirming the prices of other essentials viz. pack of pencils, erasers and a pack of crayons were a must and could not be left out. The accompanying 'brown paper' stared me hard like a VIP and the roll of transparent cover, meant to add a tinge of respectability to the 'forced' knowledge, sat like a king crowned.

In between my husband insisted on checking each and every book and note-book to see that the paging sequence was correct and stapling was done properly. Bad enough for us, the exercise resulted in rejection of 75 per cent of the stuff. The fellow would change the same but... The exercise continued for about 15 minutes, attracting the scornful looks of standersby.

My faint entreaty to the shop-wallah to accept the bundle of knowledge back for I could probably arrange the same at a lesser price from the open market met with a smug denial and a look of disdain - "Nahin madam, hum to us school ke approved suppliers hain. (We are the approved suppliers of that school) You have to buy the books from us only."

I was allowed to come out of the shop, like a prisoner of war, after paying the exorbitant price for the fabulous education I was buying for my child.

Chandigarh

Heartbeats