



Education for the Masses

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INTRODUCTION

For those of our countrymen, who were young and hopeful of a bright future, the year 1947 was indeed a harbinger of optimism and promise. These hopes and promises have not been totally belied in the last fifty years. A country which depended heavily on imports of even pencils and erasers is now a proud participant in international trade and commerce. From a situation in which deaths due to starvation were accepted stoically as the will of God, we have progressed to self-sufficiency in food. All this has been possible because of the rapid strides in the fields of Science, Technology, Industry, Medicine, etc. Any country can be proud of such spectacular achievements as ours in Space Technology and Atomic Energy.

In spite of all these advances, the western world looks upon us as a contradiction: the most sophisticated technology and mass illiteracy coupled with an ever-expanding population. This is an index of our lop-sided development. It is indeed incomprehensible to the world how a nation can exhibit such diversity in the standard and quality of life. On the one hand, we have an educated, sophisticated class which can feel at home anywhere in the western world. On the other hand, we have a vast mass of poor, illiterate people, whom this spectacular progress appears to have by-

passed. The country has now to address itself to these questions of dichotomy.

We can trace the origin of all these problems to two fundamental causes—overpopulation and mass illiteracy. They cannot be wished away, nor are they amenable to cosmetic touches. This article addresses itself to the second of the causes mentioned above, viz., mass illiteracy coupled with economic poverty.

WHAT IS EDUCATION?

There are several definitions of education. Swami Vivekananda himself has framed several of them. His most famous definition is: 'Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.'¹ He made another statement which is almost prophetic in character. 'If education were identical with information, the libraries would be the greatest sages in the world and encyclopaedias, the Rishis.'²

Perhaps the best definition given by Swamiji, which is relevant to the present context is: 'We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet.'³

These are commodities in short supply today—character, strength of mind and enterprise. The reasons are not far to seek. One has only to look back at the history of the country for the last two centuries to see

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how we have landed ourselves in this situation.

EDUCATION IN PRE-INDEPENDENT INDIA

Until the end of the eighteenth century, the system of education followed in India was based, more or less, on the ancient *gurukula* model. These *gurukulas* imparted religious and secular education, through Sanskrit and vernacular languages. The Muslim invasion did not disturb this system except that institutions like *madrastas* got added to it for an education through the medium of Persian. Unlike the Muslim invaders, the British however, neither identified nor integrated themselves with anything Indian. Having established their hegemony on Indian soil, they started systematically dismantling indigenous institutions. They also felt the need to recruit local people for running their administration. This meant that these recruits had to be taught English and anglicised in their outlook.

In the year 1835, the East India Company commissioned Lord Macaulay to prepare and submit a report on the establishment of an alternative system of education. The ostensible object was training and educating clerks and lawyers. But there was something more sinister at work. In a letter written to his father after the adoption of his report, Macaulay wrote 'It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolator (Hindu) among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence.'²⁴

The implementation of Macaulay's system of education had, however, its positive fall-out too. The study of the English language exposed Indians to the social, political and economic thoughts of the West, based upon the rapid growth of science, technology and industry. Indians could absorb some of the positive qualities of the

western society like patriotism, social concern, the sense of fair play etc. India earned many friends and admirers abroad. A new generation of western-educated intellectuals appeared and there was a resurgence of India's national and political aspirations leading to the freedom of the country.

EDUCATION IN POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA

After independence, a constitution was drafted in which basic education at the primary level was made compulsory. Hence, the government was obliged to provide it at any cost. But two developments made the implementation of this constitutional provision problematic. The first was another constitutional requirement that education should be a joint responsibility of the Union and the State Governments. Basic education thus became the responsibility of the states, with the Union Government concentrating more on higher education.

The second development was of a far more serious consequence. The first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, was a visionary. He wanted to take India rapidly to the forefront of technological development. He had been much impressed by the Soviet model of the Five Year Plans, which had helped that country turn around from a predominantly agrarian economy to an industrialised society. The success of such plans depended upon accelerated industrialization. Nehru wanted scientists, engineers and technologists to be produced in large numbers, which obviously meant that higher education had to be encouraged.

A third factor also entered into the scene—the spurt of population. At the time of independence, India's population was 330 million. The educational infrastructure then was not adequate. Had the population growth been under check, the infrastructural growth would have caught up with the needs. The latter is a slow process and has

never been able to overtake the former, which is a much faster process.

Whenever there is a financial crunch, priorities need to be fixed. The reasons for encouraging and heavily subsidising higher education were obvious. The Chinese attack of 1962 compounded the problem and India had to gear up to meet external challenges. The defence budget went up. Rapid industrialization demanded more power and Atomic Energy offered an attractive option. The benefits of space satellites in the fields of agriculture and exploration of natural resources attracted the attention of planners and India's progress in this sector has indeed been spectacular. But somebody had to pay for all these priorities. The cut fell on education.

The budgetary allocation for education in India is one of the lowest among the developing countries. Even in this allocation, priorities had to be fixed. In the process of dividing the cake, the lion's share went to higher education and the vast majority of the poor and illiterate had to rest content with mere crumbs.

The priority given all along to higher education was necessitated by these demands. This is indisputable. But is there anymore need to continue subsidised higher education? Is it not high time for us to declare that, as a national policy, higher education be self-supporting? In that case, it will be possible for the planners to divert the funds to the more deserving sector of basic education. This process has already started. During the last two decades, there has been a greater emphasis on the privatization of higher education.

BASIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

Basic education in our country is offered by three kinds of institutions—private schools, corporation schools and village schools. The first two are in cities and the last spread over the countryside. The private schools cater basically to the rich and the upper middle classes. These schools churn out, year after year, students whose eyes are on the IIT's and other engineering and medical colleges. They form the Indian urban elite and rise to positions of prominence in their professions. Many of them even occupy positions of authority for implementing educational policies.

Corporation schools are run by city corporations and municipalities. Most of them have inadequate infrastructure, for teaching and otherwise. Education imparted in them is of a poor quality. When the students from these schools try to join the higher education stream, they face the handicap of competing with students from private schools, who are much smarter.

The last set of schools, the village schools, are the worst-off. Most of them cater to a cluster of villages and are held in ill-maintained buildings with very few teachers. In a few cases, where villages have a progressive Gram Panchayat, such schools have prospered. These schools are expected to cater to the majority of the poor population and deserve special attention.

It is obvious that the intellectually and economically handicapped need greater care and better teachers. The Government can do something in this matter. When officers are posted to remote regions like the

'Race Against Poverty' Award 1998

The United Nations 'Race against Poverty' Award-1998 for the Asia-Pacific region goes to Ms. Fatima Bi, Serpench of the Kalva village of Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh, for her extraordinary effort in spearheading social mobilization and community empowerment for poverty alleviation. Although an uneducated lady, Ms. Fatima Bi had been a pioneer in mobilising the women of her village to launch self-initiated programmes. Due to such social mobilization, the village of Kalva has acquired, in a span of three years, a concrete road, total electrification, dams and better drinking water facilities.

North Eastern States or the sub-Himalayan regions or even Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep, they are provided with special allowance, because most of the times they have to leave their families behind. Cannot the same principle be applied to school teachers in remote villages?

WHAT DOES SWAMI VIVEKANANDA SAY?

A few years ago, a book, written by Eleanor Stark of the United States called *The Gift Unopened* was released. The author says that Swamiji's message has been unfortunately a gift-wrapped and lies unopened. It is high time the Americans opened the package and benefited by the gift. This applies equally to us. This gift package is available to us now in the form of Swamiji's *Complete Works*.

Writing to Alasinga Perumal from Chicago in 1894, Swamiji says, 'So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them.'⁶ How true it is today! As discussed above there is a large population in our country, enjoying the benefits of highly subsidised education, and occupying important positions in public or private life. Every such individual has been educated at the cost of hundreds of his fellow countrymen. This realization must first of all dawn upon us.

It is our responsibility to help bring education to the poor and the illiterate. This can be done by helping physically, financially or administratively. Private schools need to be started in rural communities with financial help from richer communities, affluent citizens and industrial houses. Such schools have already been started in pockets here and there, but they need to increase in number. The help or subsidy can be in the form of books, uniforms, tuition fees, midday meals etc.

At the Governmental level, the policy makers and administrators should make higher education self-supporting. Swami Vivekananda in his famous address *My Plan of Campaign*, said, 'I believe in patriotism and I also have my own ideal of patriotism. Three things are necessary for great achievements. First, feel from the heart'⁶ So according to him, the very first step in patriotism is to feel for the poor, the uneducated and illiterate millions of the country. This is the motivating force, which should impel us to action.

ROLE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

In the developed countries, two streams of education are available to students, the academic and the vocational. In the urban sector of our population, a school or college dropout is treated almost as an outcaste, whereas in the poorer and rural sectors, this is considered almost routine. The usual reason given is that the boy or the girl has to start earning to support the family. There is neither the motivation nor the means to go in for higher education. Should such students be satisfied merely with school education?

Every major industry in any country survives on the support of ancillary industries and these in turn depend upon the service sector. This last is the weakest point in India's industrial scenario, and it is here that the gap can be filled and the chain strengthened by training people for manning the service sector. It is indeed amazing how much private initiative can accomplish in this sector. Take, for example, Coimbatore and its environs in Tamil Nadu. Entrepreneurship appears to be in the blood of its inhabitants. Ancillary industries and service sector have proliferated there. Sri Ramakrishna Mission at Coimbatore itself is running a Polytechnic, catering to this need. This is one of the more easily

implementable solutions for helping the poor. Just as, in the field of general education, the emphasis has to shift from higher to basic education, so also in the area of technical education, there must be a shift towards Polytechnics and Industrial Training Institutes. Every city dweller knows how difficult it is to get a good quality plumber!

The only way today to motivate the people is to encourage private enterprise and initiative, by removing unnecessary hurdles and obstacles. If Japan, USA and other countries are still being held up to us as models for growth and prosperity, it is because of the free atmosphere prevailing there. We need to generate the same kind of environment here. The average Indian, even if poor, is still smart and enterprising. Given the proper basic education and training, he will no doubt prove as useful as any university graduate.

EDUCATION OF WOMEN

Any discussion on basic education is incomplete without the study of women's education. This subject occupied the thoughts of Swami Vivekananda for a very long time and he gave expression to them on several occasions. Even though his dreams have been realised in the urban society, the situation remains unchanged in rural societies.

Some years ago, a study was conducted by volunteers of the National Service Scheme at IIT, Chennai, about the educational pattern among parents of children of school-going age, belonging to rural and poor communities. The study revealed that where both parents had attended school, their children would automatically be admitted to schools. Where only the father was educated and the mother had not been to school, the data was rather mixed. Some children went to school, and some did not. But there was no instance

where the mother was educated and the children did not attend school, irrespective of whether the father was educated or not. The moral is that when you educate a boy, you educate an individual; when you educate a girl, you educate a family. It is a pity that even today, a girl's education is not taken seriously enough in poor families. This mind-set has to be changed.

ADULT EDUCATION

At the dawn of independence, India had a substantial unlettered adult population. A massive campaign of Adult Education was launched which brought some results. But even after 50 years, why are we still talking of adult education? Many of the adults of today were of school-going age or even younger at that time. Had our constitutional obligation been sincerely carried out, there would have been no need of adult education at all today. If we even now do not pay heed to this problem, we may be running this programme even fifty years hence. The fact that adult education is still on our agenda should be taken as a reflection of our inefficiency.

POLITICAL WILL

Political will can work wonders in our country. Take the case of Kerala. Even though basic education had been started by Christian missions before independence, the sudden spurt in literacy rate during the last few years, reaching almost cent per cent, has been due to the will displayed by the political parties. They have been vying with one another in promoting literacy so that the people can understand and appreciate their political ideologies. This is certainly far better than treating poor, illiterate people as vote banks.

Summing up, the following steps need to be taken urgently:

- 1) We have to set our policies and priorities right, with the help of planners and educators
- 2) Excessive emphasis on higher education should be played down. Higher education must be privatised.
- 3) Governmental funding should be directed towards basic education. Private initiative for establishing schools in rural areas should be encouraged and even supported.
- 4) Emphasis in technical education should shift from Engineering Colleges to Polytechnics and ITI's. This will help the poorer sector towards self-employment.
- 5) Similarly, greater emphasis must be laid on nursing schools and training institutes for para-medical staff like lab-technicians, radiographers etc., rather than on medical colleges.
- 6) Education of girls should be made mandatory. In the United States, it is the practice of local urban or rural authorities to remind parents about school admission when their children reach the age of 6 years. Non-compliance is punishable by law.
- 7) Last but not the least, there must be a strong political will. The field of Education should be de-politicised.

CONCLUSION

The problem of poverty, mass illiteracy and over-population needs to be handled on a war footing. Every educated person must share the guilt of neglecting the masses. Indian society is already facing the consequences through increased crime-rate, criminalization of politics, lawlessness, corruption, etc. We, as free citizens of this land, should strike at the very roots of this problem so that the future generations may live in peace and prosperity. Whether India will continue to have the dubious distinction of being one of the poorest, most illiterate and most over-populated nations of the world or whether it will rise up to claim for itself its rightful place in the comity of nations, depends on us and our will alone. Let us remember Swami Vivekananda's exhortation—'Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached!'

References

1. CW, Vol 4, p 358
2. CW, Vol 3, p 302
3. CW, Vol 5, p 342
4. Swami Jyotirmayananda, (ed), *Vivekananda*, p 425, 1988
5. CW, Vol 5, p 58
6. CW, Vol 3, p 225

TANTINE'S GENEROSITY

Miss Josephine Macleod was generous in the extreme when confronted with suffering. I saw her on the Hoogly Bridge, walking quickly to reach the place of appointment. Suddenly she halted with an expression of acute pain and turned back to the emaciated heap of bones, huddled with her body against the railing so as not to be trodden upon by the heedless hurry of passengers. Tantine did not open her handbag to give a few coins—she bent over the woman and drew from her chamois bag a handful of rupee bills, she gently thrust the money in the tattered sari folds. Her face was bitter when she walked on. She knew money is insufficient, charity is insufficient; pity won't do! Her compassion was on a different scale and each and every such encounter strengthened her resolution to serve Bengal.