

Education at the Crossroads

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OMITA GOYAL



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EDITORIAL

According to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the essence of human resource development is education, which plays a significant and remedial role in balancing the socio-economic framework of the country... the youth of this great nation awaits a new paradigm of education that fosters knowledge with analytical skills, logical reasoning and the ability to imagine beyond the given.

The current events on university campuses fly in the face of these very pronouncements.

A little over 36 years ago, I was catapulted from the sheltered and homogeneous environs of a convent school to Delhi University's North Campus. It was an eye-opener. I shared space with students from across the country, some of whom were more comfortable speaking Hindi. One of the first questions I was asked by my classmates was, 'what is your caste?' It brought home the reality that is India. Today, it is difficult to comprehend the efforts to stifle rational, questioning voices. My best memories of those five years are the after-class gatherings of students, talking animatedly about the state of the nation at large, voices getting louder as opinions clashed. We were often joined by our professors, who sharpened our thinking and made us question even more. Is that a thing of the past? I sincerely hope not.

But we should remind ourselves that the state of education in India today goes deeper and further back. Some of the concerns are brought out in this collection of papers. Quite deliberately, we decided not to concentrate on the specifics of primary, secondary and tertiary education, nor is there a lot by way of statistics of literacy, dropout, enrolment rates, etc. These are certainly important, and have been touched upon by the contributors, but data for

these is available in other sources. Here, the contributors ask a fundamental question: What is education? While there is no one answer, the papers provide a clear understanding of the current state of education which, we all agree, stands at the crossroads. There is limited space here to give a short summary of all the articles. Instead, I highlight some salient issues that have been dealt with individually and across papers.

So, what is education? First and foremost, it is a fundamental right for the empowerment of every citizen, and the holistic development of the human personality. It is not only about literacy and grades and rankings, nor merely about knowledge creation. A common theme that runs through the collection is the recognition that education has to teach us to think and question. If this is the imperative, education must take cognisance of disparities in incomes and social status, the heterogeneity of culture, religion, language and lived reality.

At the primary level, the Right to Education has in some small measure helped reduce inequality in access to education. But we need to reaffirm our faith in public schooling and invest more funds for basic amenities and good teachers. In higher education, there has been breakneck expansion, particularly with the growing number of private providers. What is not clear, however, is whether this expansion has in any way improved the quality of education. This is not to say that privatisation of education is in itself a bad thing: the concern is the real danger of education becoming a commodity with a market value. What is needed is better regulation and a clear government policy.

There is much, much more that this issue of the *Quarterly* offers, but there are also some areas we could not include for want of space. However, we believe it is a significant contribution to the current debate on education in India.

As usual, we end with a fitting photo essay by Pradeep Chakravarthy on Serfoji II, who is best known for his contribution to the Sarasvati Mahal Library, often described as ‘the most remarkable library in India’.



OMITA GOYAL

FOREWORD

The special issues of the IIC Journal over the decades have covered a broad spectrum of contemporary subjects, addressing almost all the major concerns that we face, as a nation and as citizens. These issues, once the Editorial Board chooses the topic, are put together by the editorial team with great diligence and imagination. As a result, they have become collectors' items, and many of them have been published as books by a variety of publishers. This year we decided that the issue should deal with Education. Quite obviously, this is an area that lends itself to extensive analysis and, often, intense controversy. In our present issue, we have brought together a large number of contributions by many well-known scholars in the areas of their expertise from around the country.

In my Foreword, therefore, instead of attempting a synoptic view of the whole problem, I will confine myself to a single set of issues involving what may be called Value-Based Education. Educational technology is changing rapidly; the traditional classroom is in danger of disappearing, and even the arts of reading and writing that were so crucial in our lifetimes are getting displaced by increasingly sophisticated gadgets. The whole area of educational technology aside, however, it is crucial to pay attention to the content of our education. Education is not merely an exercise in transmitting information. It must also involve the transmission of certain values that we consider essential to the very welfare of human civilisation. In the face of the overwhelming threat of violence and fanaticism, it is, in my view, important to lay stress upon what, for want of a better term, could be called Value-Based Education.

Today, humanity stands at a crucial and potentially decisive crossroad in its long and tortuous history on Planet Earth. On the one hand, the 20th century witnessed an astounding development in almost every sphere of human activity, with science and technology transforming life on this planet in a couple of generations. Breaking

the space barrier, landing on the moon, probing the planets and the stars beyond, are all symbols of the astounding creativity of the human mind. Instant communication has now become routine, and the Internet and other aspects of Information Technology have spread around the globe. For tens of millions of human beings there has been a substantial rise in living standards; some have reached levels of affluence unimaginable in the recent past. The world has literally shrunk before our eyes, and whether we are probing the majestic rhythms of the galaxies or the subatomic dance of the neutrinos, human ingenuity has broken all barriers. We now have enough resources, if used with wisdom and compassion, to ensure for every human being the material, educational and vocational inputs necessary for a decent human existence.

On the other hand, the 20th century has been perhaps the most lethal and destructive in the recorded history of humanity. The First and Second World Wars, and dozens of regional conflicts, some of which are still raging, have killed millions of human beings—men, women and children alike—and dislocated many millions more. The ideological systems of Nazism, Marxism–Leninism, and Maoism resulted in immense human suffering, death and disaster. The advent of nuclear power has introduced a new and deeply disturbing dimension into possible future conflicts. Fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism are on the rise in many parts of the world, and while the number of nations endorsing a democratic system has considerably increased, many authoritarian regimes still prevail, and grave threats to global peace and stability remain. Unilateralism has become a new doctrine, casting a cloud over attempts by the United Nations to build a more democratic global society.

In this ambiguous situation, educating children and youth for intercultural and inter-religious understanding assumes tremendous significance. The UNESCO Commission for Education in the 21st century, of which I had the privilege to be a member, published a report in 1996 entitled *Learning: The Treasure Within*.¹ I warmly commend this Report to educationists around the world as it covers—in a comparatively short compass—a broad gamut of educational problems and challenges. In it, we identified ‘Four Pillars of Learning’—‘Learning to Know’, ‘Learning to Do’, ‘Learning to Live Together’, and ‘Learning to Be’. Here, I will focus on the third of these, ‘Learning to Live Together’.

There is an ancient Sanskrit hymn which exhorts: 'Let us work together, let us enjoy together, let us achieve together, may there be no hatred between us.' Highly consistent with this framework, 'Learning to Live Together' implies that value education should include at least six interrelated dimensions. The first of these relates to *family values*. By these, I do not mean a reversion to conservative or retrogressive social structures, but the necessity for harmony within the family, which, after all, is the first classroom and laboratory for every child. If there is constant conflict within the family, the effect upon children cannot but be negative. Family values, such as respect and regard for elders by children, and children by elders, helpfulness, cooperative functioning and mutual affection help lay the foundation for how we learn to live together over the whole of our lives. Although our educational systems do not integrate the family lives of individual children into the classroom, there can be no doubt that the first elements of education are inculcated within the family, which also requires strong parent–teacher associations within our schools.

The second set of values, which I call *societal values*, include courtesy, consideration to strangers and elders, punctuality, cleanliness and cooperation. After the family, it is in school that these values need to be inculcated. Although competition is important, we must cultivate the art of cooperative functioning within our educational institutions. Among many other avenues, sports and involving students in community service projects can be excellent training for intercultural understanding. For example, in developing nations like India, the concept of Socially Useful Productive Work (SUPW), in which students make periodic visits to slums or villages in the vicinity and assist in projects designed to improve standards of living in areas such as health and education, seems full of promise. This training facilitates social consciousness among students, and is designed to foster a society that is distinguished by cooperation and service to others.²

The third set of values involves *environmental sustainability*. It is now well known that the 20th century witnessed a massive exploitation and degradation of the biosphere. Millions of acres of forests have disappeared, tens of thousands of species have vanished, the ozone layer is steadily attenuating, glaciers are melting, and sea levels rising. If these trends continue, even the medium-range prospects for the very survival of the human race will be in question.

It is therefore necessary that students develop an awareness of the importance of preserving and protecting the natural environment. Importantly, all religions address the value of preservation and protection of nature. The historic conference at Assisi in Italy in 1986 resulted in the Interreligious Declarations on Man and Nature (I happened to write the Hindu Declaration). Although written from the point of view of different religions, these declarations are remarkable in that they all emphasise the spiritual significance of nurturing Mother Earth. A World Wildlife Fund India publication containing these declarations is invaluable as an educational tool.³

The fourth set of values involves *interreligious understanding*. Historically, religion has a decidedly mixed track record. On the one hand, much that is great and noble in human civilisation—art and architecture, painting and sculpture, scriptures and literature, moral codes and social organisations—have their genesis in the great religions of the world. At the same time, countless millions of human beings have over the ages been massacred and burnt, tortured and persecuted, in the name of religion. Even as I write, fierce conflicts are raging around the world between and within religions, causing havoc and massive suffering. The astounding rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has introduced a new dimension of violence and terror.

Complicating matters, in many countries, school textbooks have misleading and biased information about religions that are not in the mainstream, thus imprinting negative archetypes on children from a young age. In order to counteract these distortions, the Interfaith Movement emerged over the last century, seeking to bring together people of different religious persuasions in a harmonious and creative dialogue. Between the First Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893, and the Sixth in Salt Lake City last year, there have been hundreds of interfaith meetings around the globe, along with the development of several major interfaith organisations, including the Temple of Understanding of which I happen to be Chairman.⁴ The key to interreligious understanding lies in the acceptance that there are multiple paths to the divine. In declaring that 'The truth is one, the wise call it by many names', the Rig Veda recognises a growing global sensibility that there can be no monopoly of divine wisdom or spiritual methodology. In other words, if the divine exists, surely it cannot be monopolised by any

one creed or religion. Whereas it may be acceptable for us to claim that our own religion is the most effective way to achieve a spiritual goal, it is manifestly not acceptable to persecute and terrorise people who belong to different religious traditions or on the basis of gender, caste or sexual preference. Who are we, denizens of a tiny speck of dust that we call Planet Earth, to declare that in the infinite billions of galaxies that surround us, the illimitable spirit of the divine can appear only in one form or at one place or at one time?

For these and other reasons, the time has come when the great religions of the world must forgo their mutual antagonism and work together for the abolition of poverty and deprivation, hunger and malnutrition, disease and poverty that still engulf more than half the population of our planet. At a corresponding level, interfaith education must become part of educational curricula and programmes around the world. I am aware that such a call is inherently sensitive, but if a basic introduction to the great religions of the world could be available to students as a matter of course, it would help them broaden their outlook and prevent extremism, while furthering interfaith and intercultural understanding.

The quest for greater interreligious understanding inevitably leads to the question of *spiritual values*, the fifth domain which may facilitate our capacity for learning to live with one another. There is a distinction between religion and spirituality, although these spheres are usually closely intertwined. Religion necessarily involves a great deal of outer conformity, whereas spirituality attempts to access the divine power that resides within the deeper recesses of our consciousness, and cuts across theological and denominational divides. In this regard, the 'Noor-I-Ilahi' of Sufism, the 'Bodhi-chitta' of Buddhism, the 'Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world' of the Bible, and the seers of the Upanishads who exclaim in ecstasy, 'I have seen that great being shining like a thousand suns beyond the darkness', are all manifestations of deep spiritual awareness. All religions emphasise this 'inner light', this 'treasure within' to which so many aspire through an array of methodologies such as prayer, meditation, yoga, Zen, Tao and Zikr. Rather than focusing on differences, therefore, our education would do well to reflect on the fundamental spiritual values that we share across religions, including the most basic contention regarding our essential essence as human beings.

Sixth, and finally, we must embrace the shared values of an emerging *global society*, displaying the courage to think and act globally, and abandon rigid, traditional paradigms. In so doing, we must mobilise our inner and outer resources in order to construct a new world based on mutually assured welfare, rather than destruction. As global citizens committed to human survival, we must use the most recent array of innovative and interactive pedagogic methodologies to structure a worldwide programme of education for children and adults alike. Such an approach should open our eyes to the reality of this global age and our hearts to the cries of the oppressed and the suffering. There is no time to lose. Even as the global society inexorably emerges, regressive forces of fundamentalism and fanaticism, exploitation and intimidation are also growing. As we conceptualise and create a global society grounded in shared values of coexistence, we must not underestimate these destructive forces, while simultaneously seeking to understand and address the fears of such individuals and groups within the broader international community.

In conclusion, I feel that with our rich and multifaceted religious and cultural heritage, India is in a significant position to promote and indeed spearhead the whole concept of Value-Based Education. Our new national education policy is apparently on the anvil, and it is to be hoped that whoever is drafting it will take cognisance of the value-based dimension that I have outlined. I also hope that this essay will stimulate our readers to appreciate the significance of values in our individual, corporate, societal, national and global interactions.

KARAN SINGH



NOTES

1. http://www.see-ducoop.net/education_in/pdf/15_62.pdf
2. <http://education.nic.in/cd50years/q/38/3V/383V0301.htm>
3. <http://www.nvo.unep.org/eaf/eafadec.pdf>
4. <http://www.templeofunderstanding.org>

