

ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

Essay Competition 1979/80

Name: Maninder Singh Bhandar

Date of Birth: [REDACTED]

School: Springdales Public School, Pusa Road -1, New Delhi-110005
India.

Class A Question No.3

Is the educational system in your home country well designed to meet the future needs of the country? Give your views on this question, with your reasons. Does the educational system of any other country provide in any respects a model which your country could follow?

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THE INDIAN EDUCATION VENDING MACHINE (AND WHAT HAS GONE WRONG WITH IT)

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" said Alice.

"That depends a great deal on where you want to go," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where," said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

".... so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you are sure to do that," said the Cat, "if only you walk long enough".

Alice In Wonderland: Lewis Carroll

I sometimes wonder if like Alice, the Indian education system is so preoccupied with getting somewhere that in its anxiety it has lost track of where it wants to get. An education system developed without reference to national goals will definitely lead us somewhere, although the chances are small that it will lead us to success.

However, before we attempt to ask what exactly is the manner in which the education system fails to work, because of its irrelevance to national goals, we must determine what they are.

To me, the purposes of Indian development and progress are threefold: firstly, for India to develop into a peaceful, prosperous nation, among those in the forefront of world's nations; secondly, we need to ensure that the fruits of this prosperity do not remain confined to a single stratum of society, but disseminate widely to the masses; finally, and perhaps even more important

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than the preceding two, for India to maintain and strengthen its institutions of democracy, granting freedom of speech, thought and action to every Indian.

In achieving each of these goals, the education system must play an important, almost crucial goal. For it's the people who make a nation. And education makes the people.

The Indian education system, as it stands today, seems singularly ill suited to meet national aspirations. It is ill equipped, and wrongly designed to meet the needs that will, and are, arising as we try to attain our goals.

Let's try to look around and see what has gone wrong, and try to determine why it went wrong. Finally, to see if we can seek assistance in the form of ideas, tried and tested elsewhere.

The immediate post Independence era brought forth a massive education programme. 'Literacy' was the magic word, with a sort of hypnotic attraction for the young nation's leaders. It was the beacon to lead the nation onto the 'royal road' to economic development.

To an extent, India's fond hope of yester years was fulfilled. We rapidly expanded our economy. In the long run, however, the hasty effort was to prove counter-productive. Built-in faults, initially not apparent, have now begun to assume menacing proportions.

Ironically, the case is too many colleges, it being a case of over-kill. Doctors, engineers, scientists, lawyers are being annually turned out by the hundreds - to join the ranks of the unemployed. The economic system is proving incapable of absorbing the influx - and the unemployment graph for the educated unemployed has begun to soar.

This cannot by any stretch of the imagination be supposed to mean that we have too many technical personnel. However, it does mean that we have the wrong technical personnel.

India chose ultraspecialisation in the manner of the West. What we have now is a crisis of over qualification. Our educational institutions turn out men and women with a slick precision reminding one of the Ford car assembly lines. Doctorates of Medicine and Doctorates of Philosophy have begun to crowd the rightfully rarified heights of academic distinction.

The nation faces the sobering prospect of having unemployed doctors roaming city-streets, while the countryside suffers, starved of medical aid. What India needs, is not more university dons, and white coated ivory tower professionals, but more paramedical personnel, and sub professional workers. We need to bring technology and medicine down to the villages. And it is common knowledge, that a health worker dispensing anti malaria pills and B.C.G. vaccines in a village is saving far more lives than a doctor with the highest degree in one of the urban hospitals, with the latest equipment. Yet, having been trained to work in a modern hospital which by necessity, can't cater to a large demand, a doctor will not be willing to work in the countryside. Understandably, since a vast portion of his training will be underutilised.

So, the first problem we have is one of over-qualification. Its solution is more of less qualified people. We need to develop a pyramidal man power distribution instead of a top heavy one. It would be something that would

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go a long way to rectify the paradoxical situation where India, with the world's third largest trained manpower force remains relegated to tenth position with regard to size of economy, and a vertical medical infrastructure with the latest technology at the top, coupled with one of the globe's worst health systems.

Yet another tragedy of post-independence India is that thirty years after independence, education remains the almost exclusive privilege of the urban middle class, especially higher education. In the modern world, the key to prosperity is education. As long as education remains concentrated in the hands of a few, India can scarcely hope for equality of opportunity or economic equality.

If our development is to be authentic, not cosmetic, future India must have a better distribution of education.

Equally dangerous is the fact that the educated perpetuate themselves. The chances of a white collared worker's child getting an education remain far higher than those of an illiterate, unskilled labourer's child getting an education. This trend reflects itself in the composition of the nation's administrative machinery, diplomatic corps, and the upper echelons of its armed forces.

This has also caused an alienation of the upper classes. "The danger of (education-induced) social cleavage is a far more tangible threat to the new polity than the slowing down of economic growth," wrote President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. How true the statement is, in the Indian context.

This alienation, parallel to the Westernisation of the elite manifests itself in pop-music, jeans and guitars. The education system is partly responsible for it. A phenomenon of this sort bodes no good for the future. Education can go a long way to blunt its sharp edges, which are beginning to cut the nation neatly and dangerously into two.

Finally, perhaps most importantly, India needs to strengthen the foundations of its democracy. Ultimately, it is not the legal trappings and politicians who make a democracy tick, but the people.

What is needed, is that these people not just be 'masses' as we are wont to consider sheep or cattle, but thinking people - individuals capable of distinguishing for themselves what is right, what is wrong, and not be led by the nose by others.

The Indian education system, by relying on retention rather than comprehension, and reproduction rather than original thought, is singularly ill-suited for the purpose. It is producing literate human beings, not educated people. Literacy is just the superficial gloss - education is values, judgement, ideals, maturity - the stuff democracies are made of.

If India is to remain a free country, this thing is all important. The alternative is a farce of the system - or a collapse of the system altogether. Democracy is a fragile thing, to be carefully nurtured by the people. Once it disappears, history teaches us, it is a difficult thing to replace.

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The question that now arises, is what can be done about these problems. How have other nations solved them? Could we not follow their example? Before we begin, a word of caution. Every nation has its own goals and limitations, which often vary widely. Attempts to transplant systems, hence, must fail. India's own experience in this regard has been an excellent demonstration of the fact. Right from the colonial era, Oxford and Cambridge were Utopias to be followed. Yet, what worked in the UK could not work in India. The seed did not flower in a foreign land. Many of India's modern educational problems can be traced to the tragedy of a mismatched model. We gave birth to a legion of institutions of higher learning, leaving our primary school infrastructure grossly inadequate. The system's orientation to foreign values caused further alienation of the people.

Yet, there are certain ideas which may be found useful, whose importance transcend individual national leads, and apply to all systems.

One such idea is the American policy of integrating flexibility into syllabi. It is a vitally needed factor in a nation as vast and diverse as India. In proper doses, it may be extremely useful.

Another potentially useful concept is the Tanzanian idea of delinking primary education from secondary education. The idea, apparently, is to produce an education system which will lay stress on producing competent citizens, directly, with only a small proportion of that total number - the very best - going in for higher education. This could be linked up with the Soviet policy of special institutions for students showing promise. Yet, such steps must be taken with care, lest an even worse form of elitism develops.

Finally, Brazil's massive literacy programme, launched on a war footing, is possibly an idea worth emulating if it could be integrated with a corresponding programme of political awareness, and a knowledge of the workings of democratic institutions.

However, it is vitally necessary we do not succumb to the temptation of using education as a means of political indoctrination, as has occurred in numerous countries.

However, steps in this direction are being taken. The National Adult Literacy Programme, still feeling its birth pangs, shows promise. The now three year old 10 + 2 + 3 system of education, although yet to pay dividends, might be the best thing that has happened to Indian education.

On the whole, although the situation may seem bleak, there is hope, even if only a glimmer of hope, that we shall be developing a system more relevant to our needs, present and future.