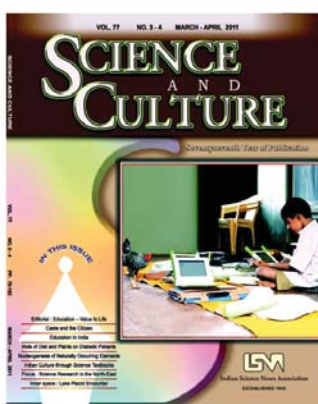


SCIENCE AND CULTURE

VOLUME 77 □ MARCH-APRIL 2011 □ NOS. 3-4

EDITORIAL

EDUCATION—VALUE TO LIFE



As a student of one of the institutions of the Ramakrishna Mission, I used to pass by a full-sized photograph of Swami Vivekananda at the entrance of our hostel adorned with his immortal words, “Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.” Our superintendent of the

hostel, also a *Swami*, emphasised the words ‘already in man’ as a way of instilling a sense of confidence that each of us can reach perfection by perseverance because all of us have the potential to achieve it. And by ‘perfection’ he meant an all-round development in studies, sports, arts and crafts, and most importantly, in character an all-embracing quality that includes honesty, integrity, and sincerity.

What is education? It is very difficult to attempt a straight and single definition. Education provides empowerment, to think and act rationally, and to understand the fundamental values of life. Apart from its philosophical meaning, a practical benefit of education is that it offers a means to maintain our livelihood. From that point of view, education imparts training to acquire skills on subjects useful to society, which in turn helps in earning a living. By referring to a man as ‘educated’, we

understand that not only has he attained a certain level of formal education, but has also attained a developed state of mind as reflected by his actions. Schools, colleges, universities and institutes are instruments or systems expected to impart formal training, as well as help to develop the human mind. Unfortunately, most educational institutions act only to impart formal training in some selected subjects and overall development of a student as a ‘human being’ is overlooked.

The education system in India has recently gone through a significant reform, both in structure and system (no examination upto class VIII, as an example). The biggest policy change was the ‘Right to Education’ (RTE) Act for implementing free and compulsory elementary education to all children between six and fourteen, which was approved by both Houses of Parliament (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha), with effect from April 2010. Education in India has been primarily divided into three grades:

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primary, secondary and higher education. After the recent restructure, primary and secondary education have been clubbed into a single category called elementary education. The nomenclature of higher education remains the same. We present a series of three articles under the title ‘Education in India’ starting from this issue of *Science and Culture* to discuss the history and contents of the

RTE Act, its relevance and lacunae, and suggestions to policy makers to be considered during this formative stage of implementation.

Education policy has been a much discussed and debated subject in India both before and after independence. In spite of the fact that Article 45 of the Directive Principle of State Policy outlined in the Constitution of India called for the State to provide 'free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen' within *ten years*, it took more than 60 years to have this provision accepted by our politicians. Nandan Nilekani points out in his book *'Imagining India'* that during the

legislative assembly debates over the Constitution in 1948, then MP Lakshmi Kanta Maitra had in fact demanded deleting the statement in article 36 which said 'Every citizen is *entitled* to free primary education', since education, he argued, was not a fundamental right. The People's Republic of China, in sharp contrast, adopted education as their central theme to spread literacy immediately after becoming a sovereign state. As a result, the literacy rate in China, which was about 20% in 1949, has risen to an astounding 95% at present, while the literacy rate in India (which was about 12% in 1947) has improved to only 67% today.

Good education demands institutions with dedicated teachers, modern curricula and proper evaluation which inspire one to be a good citizen. Under the new policy that explicitly forbids examination to test students' learning ability till class VIII, the country can legally boast inflated statistics of 'educated' Indians. It is not yet clear what other purpose it will serve to benefit the nation. There is nothing wrong in putting students under competition, especially if it is with oneself, since winning is a natural instinct of human beings and the motive force behind all human endeavour. I am certain that reputable schools will maintain their own system of testing students' capabilities (read examination) as they would be loath to sending unfiltered students for Board examinations in Class IX or X at the risk of maligning their name.

With the change in socio-economic conditions in India in the last couple of decades, there has been a transformation in the mindset of Indians regarding the perceived value of education. If we go back about fifty years, not only were jobs were scarcer than today, but government jobs were most alluring for reasons of job-security and comfortable work pace. Even though

elementary education was sufficient for many jobs at that time, parents would encourage their children to join college as they believed that education added value to life. Today,

by contrast, education has become a requirement (rather than a value-addition in life) for the job opportunities that are available as a result of the country's economic growth. According to Madhav Chavan, who worked in the Literacy Commission during Rajiv Gandhi's prime-ministership, 'for the first time people saw a direct connection between

education and the chance of better employment' with this economic growth.

There is no doubt that good formal education creates skilled engineers and doctors, talented scientists and teachers, all of which are essential for the continued development of a country. But what is needed even more is an education that enriches one's mind with the wisdom to distinguish right from wrong and to apply these principles in their conduct; 'to enlighten and practise the conscience, both the moral conscience and the intellectual' (see paragraph below). Those who are involved in scams and corruption are educated in the conventional sense of the term, but have lost the moral compass to understand societal good versus personal greed. A subject on social education, similar to environmental education, needs to be included in the curriculum to impart the characteristics of a good citizen in a civil society at a very early age. This may also include topics of India's long tradition and achievements in science, technology, history and culture to instil a sense of pride to be an Indian. To impart this education requires a concerted effort of teachers, and more importantly of parents and neighbours, failing which our country will continue to languish under poverty, unrest and scams despite the present economic growth.

I cannot resist the temptation to quote a paragraph from the report of the Calcutta University Commission in 1919, which presented very admirably and succinctly the essential qualities of a good education, the essence of which is valid even a hundred years later:

"Education should be given under conditions favourable to the health of the pupils. Their bodies should be developed and trained by systematic and vigorous exercise. Their eyes should be trained to see, their ears

to hear, with quick and sure discrimination. Their sense of beauty should be awakened, and they should be taught to express it by music and by movement and through line and colour. Their hands should be trained to skilful use. Their will should be kindled by an ideal and hardened by a discipline enjoying self-control. They should learn to express themselves accurately and simply in their mother tongue, and in India, in English also. Through mathematics, they should learn the relation of forms and of numbers. Through history and literature they should learn something of the records of the past; what the human race (and not least their fellow-countrymen) has achieved; and how the great poets and sages have interpreted the experience of life. Their education should further demand from them some study of Nature and should set them in the way of relating both the amount

and the quality of evidence which a varied education requires. Besides this, it should open windows in their mind, so that they may see wide perspectives of history and of human thought. But it should also by the enforcement of accuracy of and steady work, teach them by what toil and patience men have to make their way along the road to truth. Above all, the education should endeavour to give them, by such methods and influence as it is free to use, a sure hold upon the principles of right and wrong and should teach them to apply those principles in their conduct. Thus its chief work is to enlighten and practise the conscience, both the moral conscience and the intellectual. And through the activities of corporate life in school, it should give the pupils experience in bearing responsibility, in organisation, and in working with others for public ends, whether in leadership or in submission to the common will”.

Education is not only a right but an empowerment of mind and intellectuals; it is a value to life. □

S.C. Roy

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We are extremely grieved by the recent natural disaster that took the lives of thousands of people in Japan. It demonstrated yet again that Nature has the power to wipe away decades of development within a few moments, and how helpless we really are in spite of all our scientific and technological inventions. Natural disasters may be uncontrollable but not the devastation that follows such a disaster. On a positive note, this is a lesson to the scientific community that there is no room for complacency, and gives us a chance to introspect, analyse and lead to new innovations. We express our heartfelt condolence to the people of Japan.