

Learning from the ancients

Our educational system must recapture the spirit of the past, writes SHAMSUDDIN

FROM Ashoka to Vikramaditya, and further back, to the period of the Vedas, Indian centres of learning enjoyed an international reputation. Scholars and educationists from China, Persia, Egypt and Greece poured in in large numbers and drank at its fountains of learning.

The ancient Indian teachers rarely disappointed earnest students. For instance, Shukracharya, the perceptor of the Daityas, is said to have taught his bitterest enemy's son, Kacha, the art of reviving the dead. In the Mahabharata, Drona, the reputed seer and archer, could not hide anything he knew of the art of archery from Dhrishtadyumna, though he knew that the latter would kill him one day.

In the *guru-shishya parampara* both the teacher and the disciple lived together, sharing a love and respect akin to that between a father and a son. The method of teaching was predominantly oral and individual. 'Hearing, contemplation and practice' — these were its main features. There were few books and everything was learnt by rote. The conviction was: "If knowledge was in books, it is like money lent to others."

Each teacher housed as many as 15 or 20 students at a time. The matter covered at each sitting was limited to what the pupil could easily absorb in that period. Each lesson had to be learnt thoroughly before the student could move on to the next one. Sometimes older students were required to teach younger ones.

Nalanda was one of the most famous seats of learning in the old world. At a time when Europe was sunk in ignorance this university had at least 10,000 students. The principal school was in the centre, surrounded by nine other mighty structures. There were separate buildings for the residence of Buddhist monks. The Ratna-dadhi was a

vast, nine-storeyed building, accommodating the biggest library in the country at the time.

The attitude towards learning at this university can be gauged from the example of the famous doctor Jeevaka, who had been a student there for seven years, specialising in medicine. His clientele included the nobility and an emperor, and his fee was a figure of not less than eight digits. Yet years after he had left the university he still felt that he was lacking in adequate knowledge of medicine.

The ancient system of education was idealistic by our standards. The pupil lived with his master in his retreat, and was bound by a rigid code of discipline. His conduct was judged by the highest moral standards.

Indian education entered an ebb which continued till the advent of the Moslem rule. The Moslem invaders set about reviving and rejuvenating learning according to their light.

The Moghul rulers were very keen on the education of their children. Akbar had employed different tutors for different subjects, taken by different children. Jahangir and Shahjahan gave their children a good education. So did Aurangzeb. But Nadir Shah dealt a death blow to the good work done by his predecessors and education entered another ebb till the British took the matter into their hands.

Under British rule, the Indian educational system was initially ignored. It was much later that the British decided to suppress the indigenous system and introduce education following the western pattern.

In the beginning of the 19th century, the British government surveyed the indigenous system and reorganised it to suit their needs. Soon after, a bitter controversy raged between the occidentals and orientals. One wanted the ancient system to be

revived and adapted; the other wanted it to be wiped off. In 1854, the Wood's Despatch permitted the establishment of the universities of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. The "new universities" lacked adequate funds, proper equipment and efficient staff and they failed to bring about the spiritual and cultural regeneration of the country. Also, the British ignored the fact that education cannot be made to order; it is a slow process of growth adapting to the needs of the country and culture.

As a result, we have forgotten our glorious traditions, we have foresworn our old ideals and become materialistic under the influence of the West. These days, our pupils have no sense of personal responsibility. Our present educational system is soulless and uninspiring.

It is a fact that our universities have simply imitated western traditions, and have been unsuccessful in integrating western ideals with Indian ones. In the West one principle of university tradition is followed right from Abelard to Einstein. But in India there has been a wide gulf between the ancient universities of Takshashila and Nalanda and their modern counterparts in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. This gulf needs to be bridged if we earnestly desire that our universities should play their proper role in free India.

Our universities must provide true education in order to make our pupils true Indians irrespective of caste, creed, sex, race or religion. They should provide universality of spirit which defies sectarianism and exclusiveness in all spheres of life. In fact, the true Indian spirit is meant for synthesis and not for analysis. It should be complementary and not competitive. Thus, in brief, our university education should follow the real Indian spirit and its traditions.

Of course, we do not, for a moment, suggest that we should revive the ancient system with all its features. The only remedy for today's evil is to revive the spiritual element of the time in our daily lives and base our education, whatever it may be in its outward aspect, on those spiritual foundations.

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