

Education in Pre-British India

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Dharampal, the well known Gandhian and historian of Indian Science, has given a detailed accounts of the extensive indigenous system of education that was thriving in India before the British came in his famous book, *The Beautiful Tree*. We give below a brief summary of his report. Dharampal's account is based on the British Collector's reports when they came to India and were asked to report on state of the indigenous education.

Indian historical knowledge has been derived from the writings and some other valuable accounts left by the foreigners. For example, the universities of Nalanda and Taxila have been better known as some Greek or Chinese travellers had written about them centuries ago, which had survived in the form of some journals. Thus these journals provide us very useful information about indigenous education.

The information about indigenous education, which is available today, whether published, or still in manuscript form in the government records, largely belongs to the 1820's and 1830's period. It is significant to emphasize that indigenous education was carried out through *pathshalas*, *madrassahs* and *gurukulas*. These three institutions were the source of traditional knowledge systems in India and played a very significant role in the Indian education. These institutions were in fact the watering holes of the culture of traditional communities. Therefore the term school is a weak translation of the roles these institutions really played in Indian society.

The most well-known and decisive point, which emerged from the educational surveys, lies in an examination made by William Adam. He, in his observations

found that there existed about 1,00,000 village schools in Bengal and Bihar around the 1830s. Men like Thomas Munro, had observed that 'every village had a school'. Observations made by Dr. G.W. Leitner in 1882 show that the spread of education in the Punjab around 1850 was of a similar extent. At about the same time, England had very few schools for the children of ordinary people till about 1800, and many of the older grammar schools were in poor shape. According to A.E. Dobbs, the University of Oxford might be described as the chief Charity School of the poor as well as the chief Grammar School in England. It was also one of the greatest places of the education for students of theology, law and medicine.

The men who wrote about India belonged to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century of Great Britain. These surveys, based on hard data reveal a great deal about the nature of Indian education and detailed information on the background of those benefiting from these institutions.

According to this hard data, in terms of the content, the proportion of those attending institutional school education in India in 1800 is certainly not inferior to what obtained in England then; and in many respects Indian schooling seems to have been much more extensive. The content of studies was better in India than in England. The method of school teaching was superior in India at that time. The school attendance, especially in the district of Madras Presidency, even in the decayed state of the period 1822-25, was proportionately far higher than the numbers in all variety of schools in England in 1800. The only aspect in which India was behind was the education of girls. Girl schooling may have been proportionately more extensive in England in 1800.

However, the Madras Presidency and Bengal-Bihar data presents a kind of revelation. According to this data, the education of any sort in India, till very recent

decades, was mostly limited to the twice born amongst the Hindus, and amongst the Muslims to those from the ruling elite.

Two of the collectors sent detailed information pertaining to those who were being educated at home, or in some other private manner. The collector of Malabar sent details of 1,594 scholars who were receiving education in Theology, Law, Astronomy, Metaphysics, Ethics and Medical Science in his district from private tutors. The collector of Madras, on the other hand, reported in his letter of February 1826 that 26,963 school-level scholars were then receiving tuition at their homes in the area under his jurisdiction.

The government of Madras presidency completed a survey of Indian educational institutions in 1823-24. After that it came to be known that despite the poverty and disturbance, there were about 13,000 schools and 740 colleges under the presidency. According to this survey the original number of students in school and colleges were 1,88,650 out of which 42,502 were Brahmans and 85,400 were from the castes known as Shudras. The remaining were Vaishya, Mohammedan and from other Hindu castes. The numbers of girls were only 4540, but according to the report this lesser number of girls as alleged was mainly due to the prevalence of home education of girls. But the number of Mohammedan girl students in Malabar district was very large. The number of girl students there was 1,122 and for boy students 3196. How these institutions of education were destroyed is known to some extent by what Gandhiji said.

The Government of the Presidency of Madras on 10 March 1826 ultimately reviewed the reports of the collectors. The Governor, Sir Thomas Munro, was of the view that while the institutional education of females seemed negligible, that of the boys between the ages of 5 to 10 years appeared to be a 'little more than one-fourth'

of the boys of that age in the Presidency as a whole. Taking into consideration those who were estimated as being taught at home, he was inclined 'to estimate the portion of the male population who receive school education to be nearer to one-third than one-fourth of the whole.

The caste-wise division of students provides the more interesting and historically more relevant information. This is true not only as regards boys, but also with respect to the rather small number of girls who, according to the survey, were receiving education in schools. Furthermore, the information becomes all the more curious and pertinent when the data is grouped into the five main language areas -- Oriya, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil. These constituted the Presidency of Madras at this period, and throughout the nineteenth century.

In the Tamil speaking areas where the twice-born ranged between 13% in the south Arcot to some 23% in Madras, the Muslims were less than 3% in South Arcot and Chingleput to 10% in Salem, while the Soodras and the other castes ranged from about 70% in Salem and Tinnevely, to over 84% in South Arcot.

In Malayalam-speaking Malabar, the proportion of the twice born was still below 20% of the total. Because of a larger Muslim population, however, the number of Muslim school students went up to nearly 27%, while the Soodras and the other castes accounted for some 54% of the school going students.

In the largely Kannada-speaking Bellary, the proportion of the twice-born (the Brahmins and the Vysees) went up to 33%, while the Soodras, and the other castes still accounted for some 63%.

The position in the Oriya-speaking Ganjam was similar: the twice-born accounting for some 35.6%, and the Soodras and other castes being around 63.5%.

It is only in the Telugu-speaking districts that the twice born formed the major proportion of the school going students. Here, the proportion of Brahmin boys varied from 24% in Cuddapah to 46% in Vizagapatam; of the Vysees from 10.5% in Vizagapatam to 29% in Cuddapah; of the Muslims from 1 % in Vizagapatam to 8% in Nellore; and of the Soodras and other castes from 35% in Guntoor to over 41% in Cuddapah and Vizagapatam.

The main subjects, which were reported to be taught in the schools of Bellary and also in Rajahmundry, were reading, writing and arithmetic. Ramayanum, Maha Bharata, Bhagvata, were some other books which were reported to be taught in these schools.

While several of the collectors observed that no institutions of higher learning were then known to exist in their districts, the rest reported a total of 1,094 such places. These were enumerated under the term 'colleges' (as mentioned in the prescribed form). The largest number of these, 279, were in the district of Rajahmundry with a total of 1,454 scholars; Coimbatore came next with 173 such places (724 scholars); Guntoor had 171 (with 939 scholars); Tanjore 109 (with 769 scholars); Nellore 107; North Arcot 69 (with 418 scholars); Salem 53 (with 324 scholars); Chingleput 51 (with 398 scholars); Masulipatarn 49 (with 199 scholars); Bellary 23; Trichnopoly (with 131 scholars) and Malabar with one old institution with 75 scholars.

The books used in these institutions probably were the *Vedas*, the various *Sastras*, the *Purans*, the more well known books on *Ganeeta*, and *Jyotish-sastras* and epic literature.

Several collectors, especially the collector of Canara, who did not send any statistical returns at all, mentioned the fact that many of the boys and especially the girls received education at home from their parents, or relatives, or from privately engaged tutors. The data from Madras regarding the number of boys and girls receiving tuition at their home is equally pertinent. In comparison to those being educated in schools in Madras, this number is 4.7 times.

The number of girls attending the school was very small. Leaving aside the districts of Malabar and the Jeypoor division of Vizagapatam district, the girls from Brahmin, Chettri, and Vysee castes were practically non-existent in schools. However, there were some Muslim girls receiving school educations: 56 in Trichnopoly, and 27 in Salem.

Thirteen years later, a more limited semi-official survey of indigenous education was taken up in the Presidency of Bengal, which is known as the *Adam's Reports*. In spite of the controversies, *Adam's Reports* have mentioned that there were perhaps 1,00,000 village schools in Bengal and Bihar in some form till the 1830.

Adam divided the period spent in elementary schools into 4 stages, which were: The first stage was a period of about ten days, during which the young scholar was taught to form the letters of the alphabet; the second stage, extending two and a half to 4 years, was distinguished by the use of palm leaf as the material on which writing was performed and the scholar was taught to read and write and also learn the *Cowrie* table, the Numeration table, the *katha* table and the *Ser* table; the third stage extended from 2 to 3 years, which were employed in writing on the plantain leaf and addition, subtraction and other arithmetical operations were taught during this period; and finally in the fourth stage, which extended up to 2 years, the writing was done on the paper and the scholar was expected to read the *Ramayana*, *Manas mangal* etc.

About 45 years after Adam, Dr. G. W. Leitner prepared an even more voluminous survey of indigenous education. This survey was more direct and much less complementary to British rule. Leitner's researches showed that at the time of the annexation of the Punjab, the lowest computation gave 3,30,000 pupils in the schools of the various denominations who were acquainted with reading, writing and some methods of computation.

There is a sense of widespread neglect and decay in the field of indigenous education within a few decades after the onset of British rule. This is the major common impression, which emerges from the (1822-25) Madras Presidency data, the report of W. Adam on Bengal and Bihar (1835-38), and the Punjab survey by G.W. Leitner.

Gandhiji was very disappointed at the condition of Indian education during the British period. Gandhiji observed two main points in Indian education: (1) Today India is more illiterate than it was fifty or hundred years ago; and (2) the British administrators instead of looking after education and other matters which had existed, began to root them out.

Source:

Dharampal, 2000. Introduction in *The Beautiful Tree*, Volume III. Pp. 07-86. Mapusa: Other India Press.

Note: The archaic spellings have not been changed.