

THE JOURNEY TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIA

PRESENTED AT SEISA UNIVERSITY.

ASHIBETSU SHI, HOKKAIDO, JAPAN 9TH JULY 2005

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EDUCATION IN ANCIENT INDIA

In tracing the evolution of education in India one needs must begin with the system of general education and its beginnings of what today we loosely term “education” as it was understood and practiced in ancient India. The earliest recorded system of education per se is found in the Rig Veda, which broadly deals with the philosophy of life and the practices in learning (generally speaking, the word Veda means “to know.”) It is called the Vedic Era in the history of education in India and is thought to be almost 5000 years old.

During this period education revolved around the system of Gurukuls. These Gurukuls or Rishikulas were the seats of learning and students were required to live with their “guru” or teacher and learn by precept as much as by actual study and debates. In this ancient system of education (the guru-shishya parampara) all children were taught together, be it under a shady tree or in the Gurukul (school), whether normal, gifted or physically or intellectually disabled and were seen as worthy of the benefits of education, each according to her or his abilities. It was inclusive education in the truest sense. There were no special schools catering exclusively to specific disabilities or learning difficulties. Students found incapable of academic learning were given options to learn other occupations, which they could do easily, such as tending cattle, gardening or housework. This was rightly seen as an opportunity to be usefully employed and was not thought derogatory but prevented the hierarchy of the educated and the uneducated.

It is argued that providing for persons with disability was based on the theory of Karma and a way towards a better life in the next birth. Whatever the motivation the fact remains that even as far back as 187 BC mention has been made of mental retardation (Garba Upanishad), Patanjali included disabled persons for yoga therapy, and in the 4th and 5th C BC, during the Maurya Dynasty, Kautilya passed an edict banning both verbal and behavioral abuse of persons with disabilities recognizing their right to property and employment. Later King Ashoka established hospitals and asylums. But a significant milestone was around the 1st C B.C according to a legend which tells us the story of a king who was told that his three sons were “dull witted”. The crucial question now was “Who would look after his kingdom after the king was no more?” So, he began a nation wide hunt for someone who would be able to tutor his dull witted sons. The search ended, we are told, with Visnusarman a courtier who assured the king that he would devise special ways of teaching the royal pupils. The legend goes on to tell us of how Visnusarman developed his strategy for education using a collection of animal fables, which taught the princes matters related to diplomacy and values honored universally. This resulted in “The Panchatantra”, the ancient Indian collection of animal fables from around 1000 BC, and is perhaps the first book on special education.

So, in India, we have a rich cultural legacy for inclusive education and India has always been and is

still today an inclusive society in the sense that a very wide variety of cultural and religious beliefs exist side by side. Even today, small rural schools provide education for all children under one roof, little realizing that they are following a system of education newly rediscovered in the West termed "Inclusive Education". The tragic fact seems to be that somewhere on our way towards modernization we have lost this unique system of education.

The Vedic Period was followed by a period when Brahmanic influences took gradual control and the unfortunate caste system took root, which undermined the earlier inclusive approach to inclusive into one of discrimination. The spread of the caste system introduced unhealthy attitudes and practices and was at least in part the cause for the reforms preached by the Buddha. Buddhist philosophy and Buddha's teachings influenced the education system giving rise to Viharas or Maths and became the centers of learning replacing the Gurukuls. In 712 A.D. when Mohamed Bin Kasim (an Arab) invaded India, he brought with him the Muslim influence and this can be seen as the beginning of the Muslim Period. Many Madrasas (schools) and Maktabas (attached to Mosques) were established, primarily to teach the religion of Islam but gradually replaced the ancient Indian institutions of learning, which at that time was considered so highly by the outside world that many illustrious visitors flocked to these schools of learning. The main digression from the established system of education, both during the Vedic as well as the Buddhist period was the shift from a completely independent system to one dependant on the largesse of individual rulers and philanthropists. During the period of the Mughal dynasty, which followed the Muslim period, education made great progress since most of the rajas (kings) and in particular Akbar the great saw education as secular and were dedicated to the cause of education..

IMPACT OF BRITISH COLONIZATION ON EDUCATION

When the Mughal Empire began to crumble, weak political administration gave way to anarchy. During this period of instability, Europeans began to visit India for trade and among the many, who visited, it was the British who made the most impact and the rest is history. The British who first came to India for trade established The East India Company but soon exploited the prevailing political situation to establish themselves firmly as rulers. In the field of education the essay by Charles Grant called "Observations" became famous for creating a controversy between the old Indian system of education and the occidental view, which dismissed the Indian system, its literature and its languages and called for reforms in the Indian system. Though he was opposed by more understanding British, such as Warren Hastings and Lord Minto, Grant and his supporters (Lord Macaulay) introduced the East India Company Charter, which was passed in 1813 and paved the way for the British system of education.

The British were not primarily interested in the education of the hoi poli and introduced what was called "downward filtration" in education. This was a scheme to provide education to the Indian elite only and through them they expected the benefits of education to filter down to the common citizens. In the traditional pre British system of education, which existed, while there was diversity there was hardly any disparity in standards. The disparity of the educational system, which was non-existent till then, appeared only after **1835** because schools were started based on the English pattern of education. Schools offering English medium education were given state recognition and this automatically de-recognized the indigenous system. A gradual process of educational reforms established elite residential schools for the children of the British. Usually located in the cooler climate of the hill stations, it suited the British children unused to the heat and dust of the land their fathers had colonized. But such schools effectively started a system of education where the faculty and the facilities offered were of a higher standard, more expensive and available only to a few. Indian children who were educated in schools started by the British were offered the British curriculum, which was often

geared to serve British interests, to create a work force well versed in the English language and who could then contribute their skills to the many initiatives the British established. Researchers reconstructing the history of education in the 18th and 19th centuries in India have documented that India did have a sustainable system of education even as late as the early years of the 19th century and that it was systematically demolished over the next fifty years by the British colonizers who put in place their own system of education. In 1931 Mahatma Gandhi made a statement at Chatham House in London, which made headlines in the British press. He said “today, India is more illiterate than it was a fifty or a hundred years ago because the British Administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out. They scratched the soil and left the root exposed and the beautiful tree perished.” The beautiful tree Gandhiji referred to was the tree of education.

With the system of education practiced by the Buddhists, the Muslim and Mughal rulers giving way to the British system of education the need for a fresh look at the existing system of education in the country became apparent. Credit for introducing for the first time a well structured and graded system of education must go to Charles Wood, the Chairman of the Board of Control of the East India Company, who in 1854 made several recommendations (known as Woods Dispatch) resulting in the first ever educational policy in the interests of India, which became an integral part of the general policy of the Indian government. With the transfer of power from the East India Company in 1857 to the British, a Commission of Education was set up under William Hunter in 1882. (The Hunter Commission) and was the first ever commission to look into education in the country as national policy.

Whatever the motivation the fact remains that during the first three decades of the 19th century many changes were taking place and several initiatives are documented showing that the importance of educating the intellectually disabled as well as other disabled was well understood and efforts were being made constantly to provide for them. The first school for special education was begun in North India in 1826 by Raja Kali Shankar Ghosal who started a facility for the visually handicapped in Varanasi. Some of them are Special School for the visually handicapped in Ambala, Punjab, the first institute for the deaf and blind in Mumbai made possible with the introduction of Braille in India in 1886, a special school in Kurseong in Bengal for the intellectually disabled (1918 and in Travancore in Kerala (1931), a separate school for “idiots” in Chennai making a clear distinction between the intellectually disabled and the mentally ill in 1936, in Ranchi in 1939 and in 1941, a school for the intellectually disabled as a direct outcome of The Children’s Act and in 1944 another special school for intellectually disabled children started by Mrs Jai Vakil from her own residence in Mumbai. A major contribution was made about this time by Srinivasan in 1954, who began the very first special class in a mainstream school and was the precursor of the concept of integration in education. (*The first residential institution for the mentally handicapped began in Switzerland by Hohann Guggenbuhl in 1816-1863*) and the concept of special education and a systematic provision of services was begun by Jan –Marc Gaspard Itard in France (1774-1838). Disability Act in USA came into force in 1990 and in India 1995)

SECOND WORLD WAR AND AFTER

At the end of the second world war, Sir John Sargent who was Educational Advisor to the Government of India prepared what is called the Sargent Report in 1944. He recommended that provision for people with handicaps form an essential part of the national system of education (Sargent Report 1944). After India’s independence, education continued to be with the Ministry of Education and during this time the visionary Kothari Commission did recommend the inclusion of all children with disabilities in mainstream schools in their plan of Action (Gupta 1984: Jangira 1995). Yet, in spite of

this sound advice the education system remained stagnant and in fact lost support earlier committed by the government for education of children with disabilities. But many initiatives has already come into being .Maria Montessori traveled throughout India strengthening early childhood education .Pioneers like Gijubhai Badheka and Tarabai Mondekar introduced nursery schools for young children and set up as support services like teacher training institutions .At this time also, missionaries almost undoubtedly contributed greatly to the education of the masses and it is documented that Scottish missionaries started the first known kindergarten. But none of these initiatives saw education from an inclusive or even an integrated point of view.

POST INDEPENDENCE

When India became free of the British colonizers in 1947 a partitioned and badly scarred nation needed to begin social reconstruction. The government began to become formally involved in policy decisions at a national level and in 1953 the Central Social Welfare Board was formed between 1960 and 1975 several committees were appointed to recommend a national policy which specifically focused on the needs of children from low socio economic areas. This resulted in the formulation in 1974 of the National Policy for Children as also the National Children's Board. The major achievement was however the launch of the ICDS program also in 1974, The Integrated Child Development Program, (ICDS) as a part of India's Fifth five year plan. This is an excellent concept but the prime initial objectives were the decrease in infant mortality and training women in health care and nutrition .It broadened its scope only in 1975 to include a psychosocial component on non formal early childhood education but as just one of the total of 6 components it was designed to support. The DPEP the District Primary Education Program, which followed focused on integration in the areas of teacher training, removing architectural barriers and in providing appropriate aids and did fare better but was unable to include a vast majority of children with disabilities in mainstream education. (Pandey and Advani.1995).

It was recognized by the government that people with disabilities have the same right to education as other citizens but the needs of a nation grappling with a myriad problems, poverty and sheer survival needs of its people made it difficult to sustain focus on the development of services for disabilities.

In 1974, a major shift in education for the child with disability was achieved with the launch of the comprehensive Integrated Education for the Disabled Child (IEDC) The aim was to provide children with moderate disabilities with both facilities and financial support. This was implemented in 15,000 schools in 26 states and union territories and reportedly covered 65,000 children with disabilities in mainstream schools. In a bid towards the implementation of this project, the Government launched Project Integrated Education Development (PIED), which provided teacher training, methodology for identification of children and school facilities as support services. . However a major criticism against this was that it covered only the mild and moderately disabled who were admitted in schools undetected as disabled and that it did not cover preschool children .It was also not specifically geared to children with intellectual disabilities. It was therefore withdrawn but it did provide learning experience in that it nudged policy makers closer to the concept of integration as a first step which led later to rethinking education services and to the formulation of inclusive practices.

It was only in 1986 when the Parliament of India adopted the National Policy on Education (NPE) that for the first time equality of opportunity was formally stated as a goal of education and the phrase "education for the handicapped" was used .(The first National Policy on Education (NPE) of independent India was passed in 1968 but had to be reformulated in 1985 since it lacked financial and organizational support) .But at this time the policy advocated **only** the integration of children with loco motor disabilities and others with mild disabilities in mainstream schools. It also enabled the

setting up of a team of experts under the Chairmanship of Behrul Islam in 1987 to study the problems of disabled children and became the core of the comprehensive legislation provided later in the Disabilities Act of 1995.

Children in general became the special focus of the government only when The Ministry of Education set up by the British was later divided into the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Human Resource Development .Children with disability were recognized as needing specialized care and disability was specifically put under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. But the central body for formulating and implementing educational policies is the Department of Education in the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD) even though policy is formulated by the Center .Thus two Ministries dealing with the same group of people with separate policies has given rise to some dualism creating ambiguity. The negative fallout is that education for children with intellectual disability is clubbed together with other disability issues and viewed as a welfare measure and not an educational issue .It forms just one among the host of other responsibilities taken up by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, such as issues pertaining to scheduled caste, tribes, women, and people with disabilities in general. Children with disability form just one of the categories of people who are clubbed together under what is termed "Disadvantaged Groups." This group comprises of a variety of people with diverse needs and those with disability are seen primarily as requiring rehabilitation with education forming a small part of the overall rehabilitation scheme.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment provides assistance through grant in aid schemes to voluntary organizations and these could cover education if applied for .Assistance up to 90% in urban areas and up to 95 % in rural areas is provided for setting up special schools and other service delivery programs for education. A recent survey of organizations working for the disabled shows about 2,456 NGO's and 1,200 special schools (GOI.1994). It is also documented that only 10% of people with disabilities are covered under the Governments Grant in Aid Schemes leaving a major chunk of services to be provided by Voluntary agencies. Inadvertently this has delayed putting the issue of disability on the national agenda. So, while there have been contradictions in the government ideologies and conceptualization as far as education of the disabled child goes, some major issues have been dealt with imagination and a quite a few initiatives for school going children with disability have been tried with some being successful and some which failed.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

India is a signatory to the 1990 United Nations **World Declaration on Education for All**, (EFA) which reaffirmed the rights of all children including children with disabilities to access education in regular school settings and to the **Biwako Millenium Framework for Action** towards an inclusive ,barrier free and rights based society for persons with disability ,the **Declaration on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asia Pacific Region**. India also subscribes to the philosophy of the 1993 , UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities and the Salamanca Statement and Frame work For Action (1994). This perhaps set out in concise terms for the first time the concept of inclusive education and as one needing global consensus and urged all "governments to adopt as a matter of law and policy the principle of inclusive education and emphasized that " children with special needs must have access to regular schools ". The Normalization Principle of Wolfensberger had much earlier placed focus on the person with disability and the slogan "change the environment to suit the child not the child to suit the environment" became a well known quote.

The logical follow on was therefore the recognition and conceptualization of a major shift from

integrated schools to one which was more inclusive and in December 1995 the government of India passed a bill in Parliament called **“The Equal Opportunities , Protection of Rights and Full Participation Bill for Persons with Disability ”** or The Disability Act in short .This Bill very specifically mandates (Chapter V on Education) that every child with disability should have access to free and adequate education government has recognized the need for certain amendments in this Act and has begun the process .The principle areas for rectification have been identified and the major focus is on lack of a specific mention of services to those doubly handicapped by poverty and disability . (*Other areas are Rehabilitation, both social and medial, Human Resource dev through training*) .

A Draft National Policy for Persons with Disability has been circulated on 15th of June this year (2005) requesting comments from stake holders. With specific reference to Education and in recognition of the fact that one model may not be suitable to a country with such a diverse population and the wide diversity of needs for persons with disability in different environmental and social conditions , the policy covers a variety of educational options such as special education, distance education ,itinerant teacher models, remedial teaching, home based ,CBR model, .home based education, education through an open learning system ,alternative schooling. Many specialized and national as well as state level institutions have already been established to advise and assist the Ministry and the one pertinent to intellectual disability is the National Institute for Mental Handicap. (1984)

THE LEGAL CONTEXT

The Constitution of India does not explicitly include children with disabilities in the provisions made for education , but Article 41 does mention people with disabilities and says in part “the State shall within the limits of its economic development make effective provisions for securing the right to work , to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment ,old age, sickness ,disablement and in other cases of undesired want”. It does not mandate the free and compulsory education as a fundamental right and is merely a directive principle to guide state policy but Article 45 does rectify this by stating that free and compulsory education should be provided for ALL children until they complete the age of 14” The ALL is never specifically explained.

But the most recent 93rd amendment to the Indian Constitution passed in December 2001, affirms the Government’s commitment to (EFA) or Education for All. In Sanskrit it is Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) .The preamble explicitly states that this includes children with disabilities. This policy aims at all children in the 6 to 14 age group being able to complete eight years of schooling by the year 2010. The SSA gives importance to early childhood care and education and appropriate intervention for children with special needs and also makes special reference to the education of the girl child. The positive factor is the change incorporated in the Education Act by adding a pertinent clause which clarifies that “ALL ” includes children with disabilities.

On the 21st of March 2005, the Hon. Minister of Human Resource Development in the Rajya Sabha presented a comprehensive statement on the subject of inclusive education of children with disabilities .

U.N.CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITY

It is heartening that the most recent, the UN Convention on rights of persons with disability in January 2005, has allowed non state parties unprecedented participation rights in the discussion of the Convention at the level of the UN. However it is important to understand that the Convention on

Disability Rights was required despite other Human Rights instruments already existing because these earlier conventions had not addressed the concerns of persons with disabilities themselves. It is also recognized now that the earlier Disability Rights conventions such as the Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, had confined themselves to what is called "soft laws", which have only a persuasive value. The fact is that the Disability movement internationally has far outgrown the paternalistic and protective ideology which finds expression in the conventions of the '60's such as the Declaration of Rights of people with Disabilities and the Declaration of the Rights of Persons with Mental Retardation. The Convention also presents a unique opportunity to examine the dichotomy brought into existence by earlier conventions on civil-political and socio-economic rights and to move on to foster indivisibility of human rights (Amita Danda, UN Convention Consultative meeting)

BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The education system in India has compromised on many levels. We no longer see the child as priority. We have become very conscious of the need to educate our children but it is hardly academic motivation, which generates this interest but rather an economic motivation. Education is largely seen as the route to white collar jobs and this is due to our present education system, which has molded generations to the thinking that all worth is measured in terms of money. Very often the knowledge of the English language becomes the measure of this worth. So, Inclusive education in India, needs must contend with the present system of education, which is provided under the Integrated Education Program for children with mild disabilities in a regular school and the special school for the more severely disabled child under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment implemented through state governments and NGO's.

Some questions will inevitably have to be confronted. Perhaps the most important is not whether inclusive education is relevant for us in India but the problems associated with its implementation. ? A major deterrent has been the lack of statistics on the prevalence of intellectual disability. Surveys conducted by the NSSO (National Sample Survey) in 2002 and the Census in 2001 show varying figures with the NSSO quoting 1.8% (1.85 crore of the country's population) and the census quoting 2.19% of the population. (2.19 crore). The large number of children in most schools is another reason since most of our schools except the elitist ones have classes where student teacher ratio is anywhere between 40 to 60. What passes for education in most free educational institutions offering services to the poor and even in some middle class communities catering to a major chunk of educable children can hardly earn the title of quality. The disparity between elite educational institutions and their poorer counterparts are too glaring even to be mentioned. However, the journey towards Inclusive education has begun and is a reality since the mind set of government and the general public by and large has changed.