

[Education Under Fire](#)

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Part Two: Can India Improve Her Education System? One Family's Saga

In Part One [Sept. '95], we discussed the problems of education in India today, not only in a general sense of producing competently educated citizens, but in particular the failure to inculcate moral values in students. Many in India (and elsewhere as this is a worldwide trend) see a need for a fundamental restructuring of our education systems. In Part II of our series we hear the views of a prominent South Indian spiritual leader and the illuminating personal experience of our reporter.

By Anandhi, Madras

Fifty years back, when I was a young girl, Navarathri was celebrated in Tamil Nadu by everyone and, though my father was not overly religious, Saraswati puja was a must in our home. My mother helped me arrange our colorful collection of dolls and idols of Gods and Goddesses on steps specially made for the occasion. The house was decorated by hanging mango leaves and white palm shoots and small banana trees tied on both sides of the kolu. The first eight days were celebrated by my mother's drawing kolam and making sundal. Many brass lamps were lit in the evenings.

My brother and I looked forward to Saraswati puja. We respected our father so much that doing anything with him was a privilege. All the sacred books were brought and arranged in two piles. Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita, Vishnu Sahasrana, Periyapuranam and Thevaram were placed with reverence on a wooden plank. Mother brought books written by my father. The latest issue of the magazine which he edited was kept alongside. My brother and I brought our school texts and notebooks. All these were Saraswati Devi. Even our pencil box and father's pen were placed in the puja. Finally, mother put a new white silk cloth and a red coral chain on top of the pile of books. The lamps were lit and my father did the puja. After reciting Sanskrit slokas, we prayed and prostrated to the books to give us proficiency in all arts. We prostrated before our parents, and they blessed us by showering rice from the puja. After this, we went to our father's office. All the printing machines were decorated with sandalwood paste, kumkuma and flower garlands. We worshiped the machines, even the block-making machine, by offering flowers, puffed rice and sugar, coconuts and bananas and finally arati.

My own schooling had its ups and downs. I studied in secondary school, 6th to 8th standard, in the 1940s during British rule. Our family came to Madras from my father's village, and my father enrolled me in a convent school. I don't remember why. Perhaps because it was close, or because he thought his daughter should learn English.

There were always uncles, aunts and their children visiting our home. My cousins studied in village schools. One of my cousins who was studying in a small town school was especially bright. He was younger than both my brother and myself.

One day when father was sitting on the black rosewood swing and talking to my uncle, he called all of us. We were told to each recite a poem. My brother recited a Sanskrit sloka that father had taught him. My cousin started reciting lines from Ulaka Neethi, a book on right conduct, each line ending in "Don't do this." Father and uncle were all smiles. After every line that he chanted in a singsong tune, father said "Hum." After my cousin recited about twenty verses in his high-pitched voice, we broke into applause. My mother had come from the kitchen to listen to the little boy.

Then it was my turn. As I was studying in a convent, I didn't know any of these Tamil verses. But I wanted to show off to my cousin and uncle, so I started to recite the first lines that came to my mind--"I saw a ship a-sailing, a-sailing on the sea." Uncle and father listened with interest but their faces had a puzzled expression when I finished. I tried again--"The four-and-twenty sailors that stood up on the deck were four-and-twenty white mice with chains around their neck."

There was stony silence. I was asked to recite something else. "Jack fell down and broke his crown." My father looked dismayed. These lines must have appeared silly after what the little boy had rattled off. "Siva, Siva!" my father exclaimed. "Don't you know poetry?" I tried again, desperate, "Three blind mice, see how they run."

"Enough!" said father. What did he expect from me? Perhaps a verse from Wordsworth or from Paradise Lost--because he had sent me to convent school? That event marked the end of my convent education. I was quickly switched to a vernacular

school. My father now saw me struggling with Tamil, and lovingly read verses from Thevaram and Divya Prabandham to me for a few months. I started enjoying the beauty of the language in bhakti poems.

Father had progressive ideas about education. He expressed his views in the Tamil magazine he edited. He wrote under the pen name Pettron, meaning "parent," and one of these articles on school education was titled, "What sin have they committed?" In it, he thrashed the educational system in India.

Rasikamani T.K.C., who was a close friend of my father, had a very poor opinion about schools where children were herded in closed classrooms and learned little from the blackboard. He said children should be brought up close to nature and taught to use their hands. He admired Madam Montessori, the great educator who brought a complete change not only in education but to the way very young children were treated. One of my older cousins had finished his college degree course. He was the first person in our large family to have achieved this. T.K.C. once met him and asked for his name. With great pride, my cousin said, "My name is Ramani B.A." T.K.C. chuckled and asked, "Oh, you are Mr. Bachelor of Arts. Can you climb a coconut tree?" Ramani was bewildered. He couldn't even understand the sarcasm. T.K.C. felt that university education had made him obviously superior. He, like other college-educated-elite, shunned any manual labor. Particularly young men would not--and still resist it--carry their own suitcases in public. For the educated man, manual work was demeaning. Once a boy is educated, even if he fails in the public examination, he wants a job in a bank or big company. I have heard older people say, "Don't send your daughter to

university. If she gets a degree, she will sit around and read books and won't do any household work."

C. Rajagopalachariar, the last Governor General of India, (imprisoned for his free-India activity) wrote in his Jail Diary, "Hope lies only in a 'universal' education by which right conduct, fear of God, and love will be developed among the citizens from childhood. Otherwise, swaraj ("self-rule") will only mean grinding injustices and tyranny of wealth. There are so many books I have not read. Yet, if I kept busy reading them, nobody would accuse me of mispending my time. However, eventually you come to know that additional learning will only make you die more learned and not enable you to do anything more useful to mankind, or help correct your character in any manner. Reading more books is mere self-indulgence, like over-eating. Mental exercises ought to be intended for the development of one's soul, and to perfect which we should always exert ourselves, or for adding to the world's stock of knowledge."

It is not at all surprising that when he eventually became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, he immediately tried to implement a radical new educational scheme: a) reduce the hours of elementary schooling from 5 to 3 hours a day--teachers and buildings would serve in two shifts doubling the number of children--and b) in the two saved hours, children would attend classes learning arts, culture and crafts from men and women of the community. "In India, the whole village is the school," he said. "It is a mistake to imagine it exists inside four walls." Supporters said his idea would usher in a new age of enlightened education for India. They liked it because: a) it was financially sane; b) it would help fulfill the

Constitutional law that all children attend primary school; c) it brought art, aesthetics, ethics, culture and craft back into children's learning; and it engaged parents and the community in the education of the youth. His critics mercilessly, and ironically, condemned it as casteish, alleging his sinister motive was to keep the low-caste trade children tied to their caste occupations. He resigned, disillusioned.

After this, many plans surfaced, but the population was increasing exponentially. No plan was truly effective. Officials were corrupt, teachers disinterested and parents largely apathetic. And Tamil Nadu remains caste-ridden to this day.

Part III will highlight a school that integrates modern learning techniques, Hindu wisdom and a high academic standard.

Anandhi Ramachandran is a senior instructor of dance at Kalakshetra Academy in Madras and a freelance

journalist.

Sidebar: Dharmic Insights

Sri la Sri Shanmukha Desika Gnanasambhanda Desika Paramacharya Swamikal, 26th Guru Mahasannidhanam of Dharmapuram Aadheenam in Tamil Nadu, holds a deep interest in improving the education of India's children. His matha itself runs many schools including a major college.

Hinduism Today:What is your personal definition of "education?"

Guru Mahasannidhanam of Dharmapuram

Aadheenam:Everything that one learns, every skill, is education. One of Saint Thiruvalluvar's verses gives the most expansive look. It says learning is like a well which gives clear water the deeper you dig. The more you study, the more the spring of knowledge will bubble forth. There is wisdom in all life, like there is light in all gems. The more facets we cut, the more light the diamond reflects. Wisdom is light. We say Pranava,the Omkara[Aum], is the ultimate source and essence of knowledge, but before that, there are many steps to climb and many branches of knowledge--mathematics, language, astronomy, etc. Each person takes to the subject that is closest to his personal temperament. Yet foremost, we must have an educational scheme that is based on morals, on Indian culture. The four aspects of life, dharma(right conduct), artha (wealth-getting), kama(pleasure-fulfilling) and moksha (self-realization) should be taught from the beginning. Then whatever one learns and does will be beneficial to society--builders will build well; laborers will not shirk work; and merchants will not cheat. However, teaching moral codes of conduct is completely ignored now in schools. In our older system, when the Tamil language [and other regional languages] were used, children learned religious hymns and sayings filled with good values. Unlike in the past, today's textbooks do not contain examples of virtue from the lives of inspiring personalities.

HT:But we can't really teach Hindu morals to Muslims or Christians.

MD: The laws by which a man must conduct himself have been told by all religions. Deeper theological differences come later. Secularism should insure all children instruction in common ethics, not exclude it.

HT: So our "secular" educational policy is a de-spiritualizing force?

MDA: "Secular" means what? It should mean simply showing equal respect for all religions. It does not mean disbelief in God. But that is what it has come to mean. In Tamil Nadu, after independence, 1947 to 1951, no minister said the word "God" in public. Rajaji became chief minister in 1952 and started using words like "God-fearing" and "Kadavul." Only after that did other ministers pick up courage to. What a secular country should do, independent India failed to do. But countries where there are religious governments do what a secular government should! For example, in Sri Lanka, Christian students learn from books written by Christians; Buddhists learn Buddhism; Muslims learn Islamic truths; Hindus Hinduism. If ten youngsters are wanting to study Saiva Siddhanta or Vaishnavism, a teacher must be appointed to teach them before the enthusiasm diminishes.

HT: You say that all children should attend school at least through the 5th standard. Are you saying then that children should not stay home where they can learn hereditary occupations from their fathers?

MDA: Now, actually, they learn nothing! They are sent to roll

beedis and other such things. To enforce compulsory education at least up to the 5th standard will insure poorer children a better quality of life. They will gain a better understanding of personal hygiene, environmental responsibility and disease prevention. There should not be one person in India without a 5th standard certificate! If a child does not study up to the 5th standard, it should be a criminal offense! Then the parents would be scared.

HT: Kerala has 100% literacy. How did this Communist government achieve this? From 35%, Tamil Nadu has now only come to 45%.

MDA: Over-population is the problem. When we got independence, the population was 280 million. Now it is 880 million! Did anyone with foresight set up the training of more teachers and build more schools?

HT: What is the real key to quality education?

The key always is good teachers, who are not just good at teaching, but good people! Also, parents must take a greater interest and responsibility in the educational development of their children.

HT: How did children used to first start their schooling experience?

MDA: They used to spread fine "sand" on the floor, [first-harvest rice] and, holding the finger of the child, the teacher or father wrote in the rice sand Hari Namastu Siddham . The child then learns that even the letters of the alphabet are sacred, given by God.

The learned find their home and town everywhere. Why not learn and learn till death?--Saint Tiruvalluvar