



Educating The Child

Nation-building, if that phrase has not lost much of its sense by overuse, must begin at the grass-roots. Emerging from a revolution or, by way of evolution, nearly every nation worth its salt has done so to reap, in some cases, spectacular results. Japan, among other countries, is a brilliant case in point. In the far east China comes next to Japan in the planning of education to purpose. The architecture is one based on building from the bottom upwards. And the key-stone with which to start it, is the education of children—or education at the primary through the secondary stage. The relative emphasis as in Japan is on the pre-entrance examination which corresponds to our primary plus pre-secondary stage. This involves children of the two age-groups 5-9 years, and 10-14 years—representing about 71% and 22% respectively of the total number of primary students.

And these children, to repeat cliché, form the foundation on which to build a nation. And education—or of the right type of it could alone help us do so. We are, in this leader, avoiding on purpose platitudes habitually repeated by everybody—from educators to politicians to members of the government. Being among the lowest (22%) literacy in education in the world our problem is two-fold. One, basic, namely, nearly 80% of the people are illiterate; two, the 20% (or thereabout) are receiving an education that is such a slapdash affair which few, if any, seen to have taken seriously. The rot spreads right from the primary to the university level. By now it also has become one of those national negatives which we seem to have accepted with little or no demur. This remains illustrated by the lack of response from higher authorities in the education to legitimate criticisms carried by the national press on education.

Yet we feel morally bound not to give up. Quality of education at the primary, pre-secondary stage must be attended to in a way some other countries are doing in their parts of the world. Not that we have no idea ourselves about the quality needs or the way they can be effectively met. Our education theorists must be well conversant with them. The problem is, as always in the undeveloped part of the world, practice. Some developing (now far ahead of others) countries have talked less, theorised still less, but kept busy working on the simple rules and pragmatic principles on which they based their educational or other policies.

Most quotable in this context as we have said, is the Japanese system of education for teen-agers at the pre-entrance stage. The first thing to be noted about it is that they have one policy centrally decided for all students irrespective of the gifted or the slow; as distinct, say, from the American system. They begin with teaching of language skills with a rigorous enforcement of the rules of class and school discipline in a way that students come to regard school as a national institution. Respect for teachers and devotion to studies are embedded in this basic tradition. Second, parents take special care at home of the child's work at school, from supervision of homework to maintaining contact with the teacher. Third, private aid at the cost of parents is organised on fool-proof basis. Fourth, full use of the time for study, about one-third more than in a western system.

All this care at home and school is to enable the child to get through the entrance examination to qualify for admission to a prestigious high school. More on the success at this examination and admission obtained to the proper type of school depends the rest of the career of the child. The cream so skimmed of trained nationals go to man the professions and services, the industries and so on. It will be seen that these were the school trained youths that accounted for Japan's progress in the industrial 50s, 60s and 70s.

Compared with this a standard of parental and state solicitude for the child at school our ways and systems in this regard are practically a shambles.

Now that the control of primary education is being taken over by the government a drive for quality may be launched under a policy aimed at grooming the children through education, for the task of building the nation.

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