

EDUCATION AND CONCERN FOR THE MARGINALIZED

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1. Introduction

There are a few stunning bits of information on education in India that will put the entire matter under discussion in a proper perspective:

- About half of India's children between ages six and fourteen (82.2 million) are not in school. They stay at home to care for cattle, tend younger children, collect firewood, or work in the fields, tea stalls, or restaurants.¹
- India has approximately half of world's illiterates. Most children who start school drop out.
- Child labour in India number from 13.6 million to 44 million or more.²
- Many countries in Africa, with income levels lower than India, have expanded mass education with impressive increase in literacy.³
- Among the groups who get little and low quality education are dalits and tribals.
- Only 1% of the girls in villages who go to school move up to class XII.⁴

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¹See Myron Weiner, *The Child and the State in India: Child Labour and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 3, 13, 16.

²“Of those who enter the first grade, only four out of ten complete four years of school.” Weiner, *The Child and the State in India*, 3. Madhavrao Scindia said in 1995 that 77% of the tribal students dropped out (*Times of India*, 1.4.95). Further, he suggested that there should be no detention till class VIII (*Times of India*, 5.4.95).

³“Botswana, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Lesotho, Libya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Reunion, Rwanda, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have literacy rates in the 50 per cent to 75 per cent range.” Weiner, *The Child and the State in India*, 4.

⁴Weiner, *The Child and the State in India*, 3-4.

After listing and discussing some of the issues listed above, Myron Weiner comments that despite impressive official rhetoric in favour of universal literacy, there is *no political will* to make this goal come true. He notices shocking apathy and indifference among all sections of people: government officials, social activists, trade unionists, social researchers, religious leaders, party workers, educationists and parents themselves.

In many parts of the world, religious organizations play a vital role in the diffusion of mass education. In India, however, it has not happened through any of the indigenous religious movements. In some countries, secular ideologies stood for a system of national education favouring social equality. In India, on the contrary, *education has been largely an instrument of differentiation by separating children according to social classes*. Weiner attributes it to a *belief* rooted in society that there is a division between people who work with their minds and rule, and people who work with their hands and are ruled, and that education should reinforce rather than break down this division. This belief is held by people who hold the leftist as well as the rightist ideologies, religious believers and agnostics alike. For, “one does not readily escape from the core values of one’s society.”⁵

The clearest evidence for India’s firm (if “unconscious”) adherence to an ethos of elitism is the fact that she has 9% of her students in the university when China has 1%.⁶ Another very clear example that establishes beyond doubt the case in point is the fact that the Navodaya schools that were opened for offering an opportunity to the talented *children of the weaker sections* of our people in rural areas have ended up serving the rural middle class and *urban elite*. The unspoken argument seems to be that quality education is an ‘excess’ and ‘inappropriate’ for the poor.⁷

It is at the level of this unshakable *mindset and civilizational bias* that we have to work. It is here that Christian evangelical alertness has to be exercised.

⁵Weiner, *The Child and the State in India*, 6.

⁶According to the 2001 census, the all-India literacy rate is 65 per cent, 76 per cent for males and 54 per cent for females.

⁷Weiner, *The Child and the State in India*, 5.

2. Church's Teaching on Education⁸

2.1. The Goal of Education: The All-round Formation of the Human Person

Self-reliance and selflessness are important in education; they are achieved through personality development and social education, concern for self and concern for others. According to Vatican Council II, true education aims at the *all-round formation* of the human person in his/her pursuit of his/her ultimate end and of the good of the community to which he/she belongs. It seeks to develop his/her intellectual faculties to enable him/her to judge rightly, to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations, to foster a respect for values and to develop his/her creative and aesthetic faculties. It equips him/her for his/her professional life (GE 1).

Education makes a young person capable of critically evaluating the world in which he/she lives, and making free, intelligent, and responsible decisions for the good of human society (RD 10). It helps him/her towards a conscious choice of living a responsible and coherent way of life (CS 49) and contributes to the formation of a *strong character* (CS 12). The knowledge that students acquire in the context of faith becomes wisdom and life vision (CSTM 14), making them capable of critically evaluating the one-dimension, narrow universe in which everything is looked at only from the point of view of utility (RD10), and resisting relativism in the context of the cultural pluralism of the present day society (CS 12).

2.2. Education to Social Responsibility

Our educational endeavour has for its goal the perfection of the human person who will build up a world that is eminently human (GE 3). It should help young people to acquire a mature sense of responsibility, to take part in social life, to be able to discourse with others and promote common good (GE 1).

Cultivation of the self and self-actualization have been the central concern in modern times. But any form of self-actualization that does

⁸Some important documents from the Catholic Church analysed in this section are the following: GE: "*Gravissimum Educationis*" (1965); CS: "The Catholic School" (1977); LCS: "Lay Catholics in Schools" (1982); RD: "The Religious Dimension in a Catholic School" (1988); CSTM: "The Catholic School at the Threshold of the Third Millennium" (1997); CPMS: "Consecrated Persons and Their Mission in Education" (2002). Each paragraph summarizes the teachings of the Church as found in the above documents.

not take reality as a whole is self-defeating. One does not become a developed personality by seeking some form of self-absorbed personal perfection and specializing in self-oriented forms of refinement, and neglecting one's responsibility for one's brothers and sisters and environment. Concern for others is a wealth inside a person to be revealed.⁹

During the period of education, young people are given the right understanding of the world, life, and the human person enlightened by faith, to order the whole human culture to the good news of salvation (GE 8). Education is not for gaining power, but for the fuller understanding of man, events and things. Knowledge is not merely for material success and prosperity, but to serve and be responsible for others (CS 56). Education must help the young person to *overcome individualism*, live his vocation responsibly in community along with others (CS 45).

Educators should be aware of and conversant with the socio-cultural, economic, and political environment of the school, at the local, regional, national, and even international levels (LCS 35). The students are led to a deeply felt commitment to the *wellbeing of society* and a profound sense of civic and political responsibility (LCS 19).

Great insistence is to be laid on developing the skill of relating well with other people, including those of other cultures, ideologies, and religious persuasions.¹⁰ Young people shall be urged to work for the establishment of peaceful, fraternal, and communitarian social structures more conformed to the principles of the Gospel (LCS 19). Working for justice is part of the Christian mission. However, in struggling for a just cause, they should not forget that peace, and not the elimination of 'the other', ought to be the ultimate goal every human effort. In the context of growing communal and ethnic tensions, education to peace has assumed great importance in our days. It is through dialogue that we open out to new possibilities (CPMS 78).

As young people advance in years, they are to be given a positive and prudent sexual education as well (GE 1). A deeper understanding of

⁹Abraham Vettical, *The Catholic School: A Labour of Love*, New Delhi: The CBCI Commission for Education, 2006.

¹⁰Recognising various differences, education helps to be open to others and to respect their ways of thinking and living (CS 57), avoiding misunderstanding and conflicts (CPMS 67), leading them towards a "civilization of love" (LCS 19).

the meaning of sexuality, the complementary nature of men and women, family life, the strength of mutual relationships that build up individual members of families as sound personalities, the joy of living together in closeness and intimacy, etc., will greatly contribute to the healthy growth of society.

2.3. Education to Culture

Education should “bring together the secular and the sacred, the mundane and the subtle, the routine and the profound... The emphasis must be on the spiritual that gives unity to reality and lends meaning and purpose to life.”¹¹ Every kind of one-sidedness impoverishes. Exaggerations distort. School is a place for an encounter with cultural inheritance (CS 26). But the communication of culture should be organic, critical, and value oriented (LCS 29). Christian education promotes a culture that does not yield to pragmatism (CPMS 60), consumerism, and hedonism (CPMS 63), but offers values which generate the human attitudes of freedom that includes respect for others, conscientious responsibility, sincere and constant search for truth, a calm and peaceful critical spirit, a spirit of solidarity and service, a sensitivity for justice, and a sense of being called to becoming agents of change in society (LCS 30).

In the Indian context, young people should be introduced to the history, cultural wealth, and the most precious elements in our civilization. In all our heritage the most to be treasured are the values that have been handed down to us through centuries: religiosity, respect for the community, deference to elders and to traditions, attachment to family, non-aggressiveness, modesty in dress, dignity in behaviour, a commitment to knowledge and to the truth, etc. While proudly asserting our common Indianness, we should avoid every form of exclusivism, arrogance, and chauvinism, heal ourselves of the negative memories of the historic injuries we have received in the past, recognize the greatness and legitimate pride of other nations and civilizations, and be respectfully attentive to the individuality, uniqueness, and immense worth of diverse cultures of various ethnic groups and minority communities that dwell in this land.

While appreciating the importance of English as the language that gives access to advanced science, technology, higher education, computer,

¹¹Vettical, *The Catholic School*.

internet, and international contacts and competition, it should not become an alienating force, nor should it culturally uproot our young people from the world in which they live. Intellectual advance should not lead them to mental sophistication, softening of character, superiority complex, embarrassment about their original identity, distancing themselves from the community they come from, abhorrence of manual labour, abandonment of their original simplicity and willingness to mingle with people of lowly state.

In the final analysis, education seeks to work out a *synthesis between culture and faith* (i.e., acquiring knowledge and competence under the light of the Gospel), and between faith and life (CS 15). Education today should provide young people with the elements necessary for developing an *intercultural vision* in order to be able to live in multicultural and international situations, where they experience mutual knowledge, respect, esteem, and enrichment in concrete ways (CPMS 65). It should help them to participate in a dialogue of cultures, contribute to the total formation of the human person and to the cause of civilization (CS 15).

2.4. Agents of Education

Educators must reach out to their students with warmth and affection. Emotional intelligence gives them an awareness of their own and others' feelings, and helps them to develop empathy. Spiritual intelligence will help them to break their mental rigidities, confront and tap the resources of suffering that come on their way, notice relationship between different things and happenings, develop a holistic view of reality, work against the inflexibilities of convention, give leadership for community service, acquire a high degree of self-awareness, inspire others not by force or deceit or manipulation but by vision and values, and be unwilling to cause unnecessary harm.¹²

Parents have the primary and undeniable right and duty for educating their children. Consequently, they must enjoy the liberty in the choice of schools (GE 6). In fact, the family is the first school of social virtues: affection, respect, obedience, gratitude, gentleness, helpfulness, service, and good example (RD 4, 87).

¹²A teacher should shift from being a 'note-giving' teacher to an 'idea-giving' teacher, from mark-sheet providing activity to idea providing, and thought provoking activities.

In a special way, the duty of educating belongs to the Church (GE 3). Educators ought to be persons of special qualities of mind and heart (GE 5). They should be equipped with adequate secular and religious knowledge, pedagogical skills and needed qualifications, and endowed with an apostolic spirit (GE 8) and Christian wisdom (CS 41). Their words and even their every gesture are important (CS 43).¹³

Lay people serving in Church schools can make a great contribution in every area and level of educational responsibility. Even in government schools or other institutions, they have an opportunity for apostolate. However, they should keep themselves updated (LCS 69) through personal reading, seminars, conferences, assemblies, congresses, and participation in similar events.

The religious who are engaged in the work of education have a privileged mission to fulfil. Young people must find in religious educators experienced interlocutors in search of God (CPMS 58). They should not get involved exclusively in academic-administrative tasks and not be taken over by activism. What they must do is give attention to the richness of their charism and try to develop it in response to the new social-cultural situations (CPMS 57). In fact, consecrated life ought to be engaged in a constructive dialogue with local culture, sometimes questioning and provoking it, and other times defending and preserving it, stimulating and interrogating in times of cultural disorientation (CPMS 14).

2.5. Forming an Educative Community

No one is an island. We are all part of a whole. We need to inter-relate and form a community with a sense of direction in our educational apostolate. Spirituality alone can keep a community together and build it into an educative community. The spirituality we are speaking about is not mere information about religion. Genuine spirituality, on the contrary, is something that “makes a person serene, open-minded, self-restrained, disciplined and willing to accept plurality of cultures, respect for individual rights, and be compassionate to the disadvantaged.”¹⁴

The educational mission is carried out in a spirit of cooperation among various persons – students, parents, teachers, non-teaching

¹³Children are keen observers of their parents and educators, and as a result values are absorbed unconsciously.

¹⁴Vettical, *The Catholic School*.

personnel, and the school management – who form an educational community (CPMS 4). They create an atmosphere that is conducive to education.¹⁵ Aside from formally teaching ethical and moral values, educators should practise a pedagogy that emphasizes direct and personal contact with the students (LCS 21), making the schools places of encounter, listening, communication, where the students experience values in an essential way (CPMS 46).

Young people today are more depressed than in the past; they suffer from loneliness and lack of affection (RD 11). An educator acts as a companion and guide to the student, prudently combining familiarity with dignity (LCS 33). The school should be an extension of the home where there is a family atmosphere (RD 1, 27). Counselling assistance can be of great help to young people in stress.

Children should be introduced to the etiquette and cultural norms for dignified behaviour prevailing in the society in which they live. They should not forget that there is an honourable way of doing things even in the humblest society. They should also know how to conduct themselves in an inter-cultural situation, ready to adhere to more widely accepted codes of behaviour. Dignified self-presentation is not a sign of arrogance, but respect for others.

With the rapid degradation of the urban scene in India and widespread deforestation threatening to reduce the nation's forests to a few scattered bushes, mobilizing public opinion in favour of protecting the environment and creating an ecological awareness in our students have become most urgent. Indian educators like Tagore sought to keep students close to nature. Our ancestors went into the forests in search of wisdom; and aging God-seekers in our country retired into the Himalayan summits to end their days. A civilization that found God's presence in holy mountains, sacred rivers, refreshing springs, imposing forms of trees and rocks, and varied shapes and figures in nature, cannot remain insensitive to the alarming ecological deterioration that is taking place around us. God's creation calls for respect.

¹⁵There should be personal involvement of students, genuine reciprocity, coherence of attitudes, consistent life-styles, and day to day behaviour (CSTM 18). There should be an atmosphere of sincere respect and cordiality (LCS 77).

2.6. The Spiritual Dimension of Education

Assertion of the Indian identity should include an affirmation of its religiosity. Indeed, education in the faith is part of the finality of a Catholic school (LCS 43). Educators should give abiding spiritual and intellectual assistance to youth (GE 10) and create an awareness of the transcendental (LCS 17). Education helps to draw out the ethical dimension in the human being (CS 30). The educational community creates a climate where a person develops the gift for searching and an eagerness to be guided in the mystery of his being and the reality that surrounds him, with openness to the threshold of faith (CPMS 51).

When there is a religious void in young people, they search for a substitute: the cult of the body, drug escape (RD 16), they look for satisfaction in the possession of material goods (RD 20). Such a tendency can be countered and curtailed only by providing effective spiritual initiation to the young minds by the educators. It shall not be an optional, but, following the spiritual ethos of India, a programme within which every student must participate.

2.7. Mission to the Marginalised

Catholic schools are for all, but give special attention to the weakest, socially and economically disadvantaged, young people left to their own devices, victims of new forms of poverty, those who have lost all sense of meaning of life, slaves of the new idols of society (CSTM 15), children of fragile or broken families (CPMS 69), those exposed to the dangers of violence and drug abuse (LCS 19), of alcohol, sex, and other evils (RD 13), youth in situations of poverty, hunger, conflict, civil war, urban deterioration and crime (CSTM 7). In the context of India, the disadvantaged will include dalits and tribals in particular. Women suffer most in every situation. People speak of “the other India,” where the female foetus is aborted,¹⁶ the girl child is put to hard labour and exploited within and outside the family; where dowry related problems lead to physical torture, mental agony, despair and death; where women have no voice in the household or in society; where most gifted individuals live out a life verging on despair. Amazingly, the women/men ratio is lowest in some of the more developed states like Maharashtra and Punjab. Education

¹⁶Further, it has been found that every third girl child born in India does not survive to see her teenage years.

must rescue women from such a dehumanizing situation. If the adage “as the mother, so the child” is true, it will be the entire Indian population that will benefit when we come to the aid of the girl child.

Schools should overcome individualistic self-promotion, encouraging solidarity instead of competition, assisting the weak instead of marginalisation, promoting responsible participation instead of indifference (CPMS 46). Thus, there should be centres for the training of retarded children and those in need of special assistance (GE 9).

Consecrated persons ought to have a special eagerness to serve the poorer youth, those from the working classes, by developing innovative projects in their behalf, including various types of non-formal education, and helping them to overcome every form of discrimination (CPMS 40). Some Catholic schools have restricted their educational activities to wealthier classes, thus, creating an impression of social and economic discrimination in education (CS 21). They run the risk of giving counter-witness (CS58). Moreover, consecrated persons work in order to assure that women are guaranteed access to education without any discrimination and that they can give their specific contribution to the good of the community and in favour of life and the humanization of cultures (CPMS 64).

3. The Indian Scene

India has produced world class engineers and business executives. However, a recent survey in Delhi revealed that as many as 48% of school and college going students suffer from depression, and about 9% have even attempted suicide. It may be good to have a quick look at the problems and possibilities of the Indian educational scene in order to understand the role of Catholic schools against the background of this complex reality. It must be admitted that things have progressed a great deal with Indian education, on the one hand, and things have gone terribly wrong, on the other.

Indian educational system is the second biggest in the world. India has the world's third largest pool of educational manpower. Indian higher educational system has produced world-class scientists, engineers, lawyers, doctors, managers and executives. India has more than 2 million trained scientists and technologists. We may legitimately boast of these and many more achievements. There has been, however, an increase of illiterates in India: from 333 million in 1961 to 437 million in 1981 (in

2006, around 350 million). Efforts for the universalization of education have met with limited success. Critical observers hold that four-fifths of the Indian population are uneducated for all practical purposes. Further, not only are a good proportion of the persons who are educated are unemployed, indeed, they are unemployable in the usual sense of the term.

3.1. Politicization of Education, Damage to Academic Climate

The public debate on Indian education enumerates a long list of woes.¹⁷ A major complaint refers to excessive political interference in education. Teachers are used for serving the interests of the ruling party, canvassing for its candidates and organizing elections. The consequence has been that academic discipline and standards have fallen: teachers feel no qualms of conscience absenting themselves from class, being engaged in corrupt practices, leaking question papers, offering assistance to copying, and being partisan to students who take tuition from them, having recourse to severe corporal punishments. While we pay our profound respect to those dedicated teachers who are doing the greatest service to the nation serving the rising generation, we must also admit that not all of them are well motivated. It is not necessarily the most talented persons who opt for this profession today. Some have been appointed as teachers on compassionate grounds, under the scheme 'employment to educated unemployed'; some for political reasons too. Many are untrained, or poorly trained, and poorly paid. They take to devious ways in compensation: private tuition, embezzlement of school funds, and involvement in text book racket, etc., are some form of them.

The students go one step further. They engage brazen-facedly in mass copying and inhuman types of ragging; they introduce trade union type activities into the campus, indulge in vandalism, and go to the extreme extent of lending a hand to booth-capturing in elections, drug sale, and gun-running. They thrive on a *bandh*-culture, that too, in spite of the fact that, in some states, there are too many holidays already. Given the present system of education, many weak students drop out for lack of

¹⁷We have the following information from Advocacy Internet (Humanity Today): "Number of street children in India today: 18 million; those who die within a year of their birth: 2 million; those with HIV/AIDS: 1,70,000; those out of school 59 million; child labourers: 22-111 million; children living as bonded labourers 25%. India spends 3.5% on education (Kenya 6.7, Tanzania 4.3, Malaysia 7.8)

interest, and some intelligent children drop out for boredom with the curriculum and the environment.

3.2. Commercialization of Education

There is a complaint that education is being commercialized. We notice a mushrooming of private schools – money-minting centres or teaching shops – charging capitation fees, frequently raising the dues under various heads, and imposing many other burdens on the students. Industrial houses and NRIs are going in a big way into the field of education seeking higher profits. There are reports of fake universities coming up and distributing fake certificates. There are allegations that some autonomous colleges are churning out degrees that have no reference to any standard.

India's record of corruption is truly alarming. Businessmen keep a generous percentage of their annual budget for bribing politicians, officers, policemen and vigilance personnel. The disease affects every area of public life and every level of the administration. Large sums of the poverty relief schemes and rehabilitation programmes are embezzled. Education department does not escape the plague.

Payment of capitation fees has developed, in fact, into an impressive system. Many are willing to pay too, especially the rural elite who had missed earlier opportunities for quality education – the upwardly mobile class – the *nouveau riche*. Consequently, there is an over-crowding of students into classrooms. In some places, a system with several shifts has been introduced, with the schools operating like factories and production centres. While Christian schools have kept clear of these excesses, they have not always succeeded in resisting the fatal virus. Our centres, of course, start with the best of intentions; but ultimately pragmatic motives prevail over evangelical and humanitarian considerations.

3.3. A Competition that Puts out Hope

With excessive commercialization comes a spirit of fierce competition. We all agree that a competition that stimulates personal effort is good; but we also know that a competition that puts out hope is disastrous. Admission into prestigious schools and specialised courses has turned into a veritable nightmare. To get the children ready for the competitive world, they are admitted into schools too early in life, overloaded with textbooks, overburdened with an excess of homework. Psychologists insist that such premature mental strain can damage their tender minds. They are not even

allowed to enjoy their childhood and benefit from the normal pace of physical and psychological growth.

As the students move to higher classes, competition becomes more intense. Expectations of both parents and children begin to soar to unrealistic heights. Children are not helped to understand that success cannot be defined by marks alone, that success in exams does not necessarily mean success in life, that a third division does not necessarily mean disaster. Fear of the job market makes students tense. Young people should be taught that there are other ways of looking at success and failure. A strategy for success should always include a strategy to cope with failure. After all, true success consists in finding solutions to difficult problems in life, not stealing the limelight or winning public recognition.

3.4. A Defective System

There has been much debate on what is described as the *creativity-killing education* system that prevails in India: about the curriculum, teaching style, the way of conducting the examinations, and evaluation criteria. It is said that the present system which was introduced during the colonial period only produces an army of clerks, peons, and errand boys, as the private education system produces ‘*sahibs* and *memsahibs*’!

No doubt, some manner of updating the system is required with changing times. It is absolutely necessary, on the one hand, that our young people be introduced to our civilizational heritage and, thus, grow proud of it. It is equally necessary, on the other hand, that they are acquainted with new thinking in every area of life. We, however, do a disservice to the nation when distorted facts are planted into young minds. The BJP proposed to re-write history books, glorifying the Hindu past and denigrating the minority contribution to Indian civilization. They thought it good to introduce astronomy, religious rituals, and Vedic mathematics into the university syllabus. The Marxists have re-written several textbooks supporting the Marxist ideology. Regional scholars are re-writing textbooks highlighting regional greatness. Not much of such re-writing has been forward-looking, nor has it made the textbooks more relevant or educative. Rather, they have often made persons and communities more contentious. They keep *planting new prejudices* into young minds, and the next generation will not know where their anger and aggressiveness come from.

Efforts for the vocationalisation of education and plans for providing work experience during school hours have not been an unqualified success in a society that abhors manual labour. A similar effort for moving away from a mere examination-oriented system, a system that favours rote-memory, has also met with limited success. Debates have continued whether education should be results-oriented, certificate-oriented, job-oriented, skills-oriented, work-oriented, knowledge-oriented, or life-oriented. It is not everyone that sees the necessity of adopting a holistic view of things, as the Church has been exhorting educators to do. After all, we are not producing human machines to serve the market – just workers and consumers – but human persons who have their own identity, dignity, role in history, and an ultimate destiny.

3.5. Signs of Hope

While generally Catholic schools have succeeded in keeping away from most of the weaknesses described above, we cannot deny that these schools too are part of an imperfect system. True, they have made a contribution to discipline, efficiency, high standard, moral quality, and excellence within Indian education system. At the same time, they must squarely face the questions regarding transparency, accountability, and not in being a burden to the poor. Moreover, they must also see whether they have broken new ground in improving the system and in placing it at the service of the deprived communities, whether they attend to the welfare of the employees, and whether there are child-labourers in the campus or at the service of activities that they have initiated.

While mobilizing resources is necessary for education, commercialization of education is degrading. While there is a place for competition and search for success in everyone's life, there is also room for cooperation and sharing. Eagerness for excellence should not lead us to alienation from the masses. Quality education should not mean producing snobs, parasites, and exploiters of their own fellow-beings, but leaders committed to the welfare of society. Intellectual ascendancy should not make one look down on manual labour or those engaged in it.

The more gifted and better educated children should be motivated to help their weaker companions in the school itself or in the neighbourhood. They can, for example, reach out to slums and rural areas. In the same way our institutions can cater to the needs of the larger society by launching literacy classes for adults and evening classes for poor children. Life

becomes interesting for young people when they are busy helping each other. The staff and other volunteers can get involved in beneficial activities, like non-formal education programme, income-yielding skills, formative hobbies, encouraging traditional arts and crafts among illiterate boys and girls, assisting physically or mentally challenged persons, offering remedial courses for drop-outs, follow-up programmes for neo-literates, teaching song, dance, etiquette, and social behaviour to slum-dwellers, educating people about social evils like alcoholism, drug abuse, giving tips on health, hygiene, family responsibilities, information on HIV/AIDS to young adults, etc.

When we are tempted to be pessimistic about the present system of education, we ought to remember that for all its weaknesses, it produced men of the calibre of a J. C. Bose, a C. V. Raman, and in our own days a K. R. Narayanan, and many such outstanding personalities.

4. Church's Concern for the Marginalised

4.1. Clarity of Vision

Christian education is the continuation of Jesus' mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It is our bounden duty to impart religious education to Christian children and to bring them up in the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church. We ought to create an evangelical atmosphere in our schools so that everyone may derive some inspiration from the Gospel message. It is precisely for this that we have been given special protection and guarantees in the Indian Constitution. Our educational institutions should, therefore, promote the Christian formation of Catholic youth and ensure the moral formation of young people of other religious traditions.

4.2. Commitment to the Marginalized

Christian sense of mission impels those involved in conducting educational institutions to give a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, and for the education of their children. In our Indian context the marginalized would include the poor, dalits, tribals, women in general, rural women in particular, slum dwellers, child labourers, unorganized workers, physically or mentally challenged people, drug addicts, victims of violence, etc.

Many dioceses and religious congregations have launched several programmes in aid of the poor, like remedial classes, offering scholarships, interest free loans, free supply of books, teaching aids, free tuitions, etc. Many religious societies have opted to locate more of their educational

institutions in the rural area. Some have decided to work for the defence of the girl child, and empowerment of women.

If a recent survey is indicative, it is encouraging to note that 55% of Catholic educational institutions are in rural areas, that 42% of students of these institutions come from families below poverty line, that another 33% are of the lower income group, and 25% from dalits and tribals. While these institutions educate over 10 million students every year, 23% of them are Catholic and 5% of them are of other Christian churches. It is also reassuring to be told that 54% of the students educated are girls.

It should be the pride and joy of every Catholic educational institution to increase the number of Catholic students, and those from dalit, tribal, and less privileged communities. In order that this venture be a success, we should create in the school an atmosphere where the poor can feel at home. If not, they would drop out. It should be our concern not to lay excessive financial burden on the poorer students, e.g., with high fees, expensive uniforms, financial impositions under various heads, including school celebrations, visits of VIPs, costly school magazines, etc.

4.3. Educating the Marginalized beyond the Margins

In spite of launching any number of programmes for bringing literacy to the Indian masses, we have ended up in having half the illiterates of the world. Even at the beginning of the 21st century, 350 million Indians are unable to read and write. It is high time that all groups join hands together to wipe out illiteracy from our society. In Russia, China, and Cuba highly motivated political activists contributed a great deal to the promotion of literacy among the masses in an inexpensive manner. Religious personnel can do better in this regard.

Missionaries worked miracles in the area of mass education in Mizoram and Nagaland. Church workers have done so in the Philippines. The rapid rise of educational standards in Northeast India and in Jharkhand has been the fruit of Church effort. Sister Cyril of Kolkata has shown how students can be involved in similar service in our own days.¹⁸ If literacy rates have shot up from 18% to over 50% in Arunachal Pradesh during the last few decades, it has again been a Christian missionary contribution.

¹⁸“A Myth-Challenging School in India,” <http://www.psg.us/resources/ccmythchallenge.html> [30 May 2006].

“Once a person learns to read, he reads avidly,” stated a volunteer who worked for literacy.

Christian missionaries gave a script to most tribal languages in Northeast India, gave them grammars, dictionaries, and basic literature, including the Bible. The publication in 1842 of Orunodoi, a monthly periodical devoted to science, religion, and general information gave the Assamese language a boost. Between 1846 and 1851 the (Baptist) mission had five million pages of reading material. This constituted ninety per cent of the total Assamese literature published in those years.

As we have seen earlier, what we have to work on is to change the mindset of the middle class and convince them that young people of the humbler society deserve a ‘preferential attention’ in today’s India. That a ‘hidden Einstein’ may be awakened in a dalit child with education, that a ‘mute Milton’ may be given utterance in a tribal youth, that a ‘dormant Ambedkar’ may come to life under our loving educative care. We should not forget that Valmiki and Vyasa, the authors of the two greatest epics of Indian civilization, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*, were not of the dominant castes. Talent can lie beyond the mainstream, and it does, indeed! If we go by the interpretation of certain historians that it was precisely indigenous tribal communities that were subdued, subjugated and reduced to the dalit status, then we truly begin to understand that much of the ancient greatness of India was due to communities that today we consider ‘marginalized’. They are not only capable of basic literacy, but also of quality education!

4.4. Quality Education

There is often a wrong understanding of quality education. We are not referring to a system that is glued to competition, grading, standardizing, and herding of children, making machines out of men so that they become mere ‘producers and consumers’, lopsided creatures, power-hungry leaders who learn from each other how to excel in corruption. Quality education in the true sense produces persons with thought and feeling, with eagerness to share, persons who are capable of looking to nobler things in life.

We are all too much involved in education not to know the meaning of ‘quality education’. A search for excellence is much in Christian tradition. Aside from ensuring the development of intellectual and psychological dimension of the young student, education to excellence aims at the all-round development of the human person, mental acuteness,

social awareness, healthy relationships, refined manners, dignified self-presentation, intelligent and clear self-expression, perfect diction, and thoroughness about everything he/she does. Most of all, quality education perfects one's learning skills and attends to the ongoing education. As we have seen earlier in this paper and in many church documents, a Christian understanding of excellence in education is more holistic.

'Quality education' has to be understood also contextually. Children of illiterate parents, students who missed good primary education in neglected village or slum schools, may not rise to great heights in the academic field immediately. The skill of the educator consists in drawing each person according to his/her ability and competence to the levels he/she is capable of. We must not forget that Abraham Lincoln rose to greatness from an illiterate family, and that Shastri and Kamaraj rose from a poor background.

Education today will not be considered complete if young people are not introduced to issues like human rights, minority rights, children's rights, consumer rights, women's liberation, environmental issues, need for peace, trans-cultural relationships, etc. However, struggle for rights should neither end up in mere rhetoric, on the one hand, nor aggressiveness, on the other. Education to justice should point to the path of peace. We have men like Mahatma Gandhi and Dalai Lama to show us the way how one can fight for one's rights with dignity and without having recourse to violence.

Education to peace does not mean merely propagating some pacifist slogans, holding some peace seminars or courses. It means earnestly working on various forms of prejudice reduction: prejudices against persons of other castes (both higher and lower), tribes, languages, political affiliations, ideologies, theological point of view, regions and religions. Theologies and ideologies that add an aggressive dimension to justice struggles, and histories that keep injuries of the past alive, make a negative contribution to the cause of peace. Education to peace includes teaching youth to deal respectfully with people of other convictions, cultures, and civilizations, even with those who are totally against Christians. It means learning to dialogue with people with whom we have conflicting interests. This has become absolutely necessary in this era of globalization. Missionaries who work across cultures contribute a great deal to peace by learning and teaching trans-cultural skills, getting involved in actual peace negotiations in contexts of communal or inter-ethnic tension.

5. Alternative Educational Models

5.1. Vocationalisation of Education

It is a great mission to inculcate esteem for manual labour and promote a work-culture in a society in which such values are almost absent. Mahatma Gandhi believed that education should lead to the acquisition of a skill that offered employment. He set an example of work with his spinning wheel.

The technical schools for boys and girls have been rendering an invaluable service in this field. They have been offering both formal and non-formal courses in practical skills that could help a person to make a living. *Grihini* schools (on domestic sciences) help a young woman to prepare herself for the responsibilities of a family. We can also be proud of the special training centres for physically and mentally challenged people, slum children, drop outs, drug addicts, women in difficulty, etc., that have come into existence in our days. They are addressing the challenges of new forms of poverty. In a world thrown out of gear by globalization, every form of remedial courses, programmes in preparation for formal studies, training for entertaining skills, puppet shows, initiation to folk art and story telling, dramas and public events with a message, spoken English course, training in traditional art skills like carving, carpentry, weaving, bee-keeping, care of poultry, piggery, and every kind of marketable skill, etc., have something relevant to offer for the uplift of one or another group of people.

5.2. Communitization of Education

Communitization of education means making the community responsible for the education of its members as well as the beneficiary of the education of its members. Unfortunately, it is often noticed that while the individual is developed, the community fails to receive any substantial benefit from the education imparted to the individuals. Because of this, the community does not feel motivated to support education.

The institution needs to reach out to the community in the neighbourhood with beneficial activities, like literacy programme, non-formal education, *balwadis*, street plays, etc. Students are to be made aware of the needs of the community. Youngsters should not become uprooted individuals through educational institutions, but should remain part of the local community to which they would eventually return, and contribute to its growth and development. Students should be trained

through exposure programmes and situation analysis to commit themselves to the neediest. Many institutions have already adopted poor villages offering special assistance.

Educators themselves should be inserted into the culture of the society they serve. It necessarily leads to the effective work of education. Such educators will develop and enhance the social consciousness of students and their concern for the community to which they belong, so that they, in turn, may promote its sustainable development.

5.3. Networking

Networking is necessary among various church related agencies, other private institutions in the field of education, with the government, with legislators and policy-makers at every level, and the alumni of Catholic educational institutions who have become influential in society, people of other persuasions and loyalties, and even with groups that seem to oppose us.

It is only with the assistance of all people of good will that we become effective in the aid of the poor and their education. The work we have in hand is so important and so great that its success can be assured only with the cooperation of all people in the field of education. There should be greater interaction between the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) and the Conference of Religious of India (CRI) at the regional and national levels.

5.4. Public Advocacy

Advocacy does not mean a protest campaign or a denunciation drama, but a drive to change public opinion about an issue: it may be aimed at changing a policy or a mindset. Education of the marginalized is the responsibility of the government. However, we are well aware that what the government lacks is not well defined policies, but the political will to implement them. For example, a report said: "The government opened the school but did not send any teacher."¹⁹ Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister of India, even as a Rajya Sabha MP from Assam, had noticed in 1998, an absence of this political will for universalizing primary education. A strong public pressure was essential, he said. Realistically he had affirmed that the lobby for steel, power, and industrial sectors was more

¹⁹*Times of India*, 4.6.94.

powerful.²⁰ It is essential to mobilize public opinion to exert pressure on the government to bridge the gap between official rhetoric and hard reality. Only then will the slogan “education for all” will have any meaning in the Indian situation.

In order that Christian institutions may become the leaven in the Indian society, they must remain knowledgeable about the problems of the poor in a constantly changing situation, win credibility as spokespersons for the poor, keep in touch with persons who can contribute to their cause, and organize volunteers who can successfully carry out programmes. One may write letters to policy-makers, address audiences, use the media, or organize groups, mobilize persons who matter, to exert an influence on public opinion. But the goal in every case is the changing of a mindset.

6. Conclusion

In working for the education of the marginalized in India, we are working against a *long-established belief-system that people are not meant to be equal*. It means more than struggling against a mindset. It means contending against deep-rooted convictions. It is against this unshakable belief-system that the Christian evangelical sturdiness will need to test its staying power.

The Catholic identity of a school will include diligent teaching of religion to Catholic children, education in moral values to students of all communities, creating an evangelical climate in all educational contexts, and radical commitment to the poor. We propose that an action plan be drawn up which should include an inbuilt system for monitoring and evaluation, at the national, regional, and local levels.

Radical statements in favour of the poor alone are not enough. People are tired of empty rhetoric. Often we find that the more radical the statement in favour of the poor, lesser the commitment. People can see through the documents made by script-writers, and those that have sprung from mature experience: There is difference between those who merely seek to be politically correct, and those that come from profound convictions, and those who appear merely populist and those who are action-oriented. There is a difference between statements made by people who have been dealing only with ideas, and those who have been dealing with people. The latter will present concrete strategies and result-oriented

²⁰*Times of India*, 25.4.98.

planning. Our goal is not merely a glamorous proposal, but effective implementation, practical steps to the ultimate goal.

Wherever efforts for the promotion of literacy or universalisation of education failed in concrete situations, the organizers felt the need of *Preraks* (i.e., inspirers or motivators) who would provide a working philosophy favouring the initiative, urge generosity in voluntary workers, and elicit commitment among them. The challenge of Christian educators today is to become *Preraks*, to inspire and motivate others.