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EDUCATION AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN SRI LANKA*

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"Education has always played an important part in preparing men for life in society and moulding them accordingly, whether directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly. No socio-political system can forgo securing its foundations on winning over minds and hearts to the principles, ideas, common references and, beyond these the myths which bind a nation together". (Edger Faure *et.al. Learning to be*, p.150).

In the last few months words and concepts as "national identity," "national consciousness," "common culture," "national culture," "territorial integrity," "national unity" have become familiar in the mass media. Besides their intrusion into the media, many seminars, workshops, conferences and discussions have been held on this theme by many types of institutions - religious, developmental, educational, research, government and non-governmental. This healthy and vibrant dialogue was a response to the gravest peril the nation faced after independence - the possible disintegration, division and dismemberment of the nation and the moral, social and political crisis facing the whole society that affects the life of each and every citizen of the land. The ethnic crisis and the gun culture in the country made Sri Lanka the most violent nation on earth in recent times.

This is common knowledge. But in this dialogue a belief that is emerging is that education did very little to develop a cohesive/integrated society. R. Wijedasa, an educationist, retired from the Ministry of Education, stated in a recent unpublished paper this opinion unambiguously:

To a very great extent the educational policies and educational systems built on them have to take the principal share for the mess in which we live in our land. Our education system is not geared to develop a national consciousness or for cultural pluralism or national solidarity. In spite of our educational policies geared to democratization, relevance and quality improvement we have failed to foster a national consciousness which enable us to live in harmony.

Several comments by others give the same impression. A Sarvodaya activist stated in a paper in Sinhala read at a recent seminar, "We did not succeed in creating a national consciousness. The support of formal and informal education for the creation of friendly feelings among citizens of our country was very minimal." (Valebode, 1989). A statement made by a Secretary of a Ministry quoted in a newspaper leader refers to this national failure. "But regardless of the crisis we are facing today and in spite of all statements issued by men of prominence, we have tragically failed to achieve a sense of one nationhood". (Ceylon Daily News, 5 Sept., 1986). The leader writer referred to this as our failure in education.

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Before an analysis of the causes of the failure of education to foster the growth of one nation it may be useful to define some relevant terms in current use.

National or Sri Lankan Identity

At a recent seminar held in December, 1989 Sri Lankan identity was defined as "a collective inter-ethnic identity transcending, while not negating, ethnic identity, a sense of belonging to a commonality which goes beyond the fact of being subject to a common polity, a sense of togetherness in belonging to a poly-ethnic nation." (Hussain, 1989).

Another participant at the same seminar has explained Sri Lankan identity in more precise terms. "People who have the country for a home must enjoy a common Sri Lankan identity." (Amarasingam, 1989). To achieve such an identity he explained, "There must be total acceptance in thought and deed of the equality of all communities, of all languages, of all religions, of all cultures, and more than anything else of all castes."

Victor Ivan, editor of "Ravaya" at another Marga Seminar in Sinhala generally described the conditions essential for developing a national identity, as a common territorially demarcated country, common economic system, a common national state and above all, a common national ideology. (1989).

Some of the quotes are definitions as well as social and political processes to reach that ideal of a Sri Lankan national identity.

Leo Dubbeldam (1984) defined cultural identity of a particular society as "the aggregate of specific behavioral elements which are recognised as representing the characteristics of the fundamental behavioural pattern of the members of that society, thus confirming the rightful and appropriate existence of that society and its members." This concept expressed in behavioural terms may apply either to an ethnic or a national culture. If any idea of inferior/superior status with respect to other cultures emerges it can be a potential danger in a society as in Sri Lanka. But cultures change. Cultural identity too can change.

National Identity

The French and the Germans have their own national identity within the larger European culture. Sri Lankans, to take an example from those living in Australia, do not seem to have a national but only ethnic identities. Though cultural identity is equated some times with the national it is normally applicable to nations whose national identity is something to be established or where many important cultural differences exist within a nation. Intellectual efforts are occasionally made in Sri Lanka for the promotion of a common Sri Lankan culture. Yet one has to be aware that one can not completely opt out of ethno-centrism (Kater, 1984). Normally a cultural identity is formulated according to political criteria. Sri Lankans may be suspicious of such criteria and may have to look to other social and cultural indicators in this exercise.

In this paper 'Sri Lankan identity' is used in order to be unambiguous about the concept of national integration and its application in the political, cultural and social areas.

Education's Lost Opportunity

In the opinion of many educators and others as indicated earlier it is believed that the education system has failed to promote a Sri Lankan identity. Why the system failed in this aspect needs to be studied not to apportion blame but to examine and analyse, at least, the educational sphere so that we may improve our national performance in the future in creating a Sri Lankan identity.

(a) Unity under British rule

The English educated class who came from the urban elite prestigious schools believed that the whole country was unified because they formed a class with common interests. Hence their assumption that national solidarity was achieved through the English language and British rule. Eminent persons in this class believed this as a self-evident truth (Joachim, 1962).

Constituted as they were with pupils drawn from all communities, social classes and creeds, working, playing and thinking together, these schools (i.e. 'public schools') were the greatest welding force in the cause of national unity and freedom, a force out of proportion to their number.

But a more discerning observer noted.

The unification of Ceylon under the British regime is often stressed; but it was a political unification for facility of administration, not for national solidarity, the wedge driven by the Portuguese and the Dutch were mainly geographical; the division effected by the British regime divided Ceylon's social structure. Ceylon was in the process of conversion into a divided nation; a small but powerful section that accepted Western standards and Western Christian Civilization; the majority of the population weak and effective, but steadfast to their ancient culture and civilisation. (Weerasooriya, 1971).

This great schism in the culture, according to Ralph Pieris, was created by English. Further this divisiveness was emphasised again by Singer (1964).

This (i.e. graduate of Royal or St. Thomas) value system is such that he could more easily work to transform Ceylon into a replica of England than to transform himself into a replica of a Ceylonese.

The duality of the education system, the division of the secondary schools, the media of instruction, unequal educational opportunity (even under a unified school system) all helped to promote unintentionally divisive tendencies in society.

(b) Education as preparation for war

In 1968 Sir Edmund Leach in the BBC Reith lectures referred to education as a battle ground where each student would add more weapons in his/her armoury for obtaining positions in the occupational ladder. Following Sir Edmund or independently, the Premaratne Committee expressed a similar view. "All the knowledge that comes his way he shapes into weapons that may be needed in fulfillment of his or her parents' ambitions." In a static economy in the race for white collar jobs our education has been used again for individual struggle, which sometimes assumes a community or ethnic dimension. The use of the term "Kaduwa" illustrates more graphically the preparation for war in two areas, discrimination in employment and in social mobility. (*Report on the Presidential Commission on Youth 1990*, p. 184).

(c) Marginalisation and alienation of youth through education

Our education system is a disaster as far as the creation of a common Sri Lankan identity. The educational system is examination oriented, individualistic, competitive and largely theoretical; our academic curriculum neglects value promotion, personality development, social concern and service (Balasuriya, 1989). Similar views were expressed by the late Prof. Hewage. The schools did not develop the basic value of respect and concern for the human person, in spite of the stress on religious education. Our school model, too, could not accommodate our various cultures, ethnic groups and languages in a meaningful way and as a result the system alienated and marginalised rural youth and youth especially from minority groups.

Opportunity for Rebuilding a National Identity

The present malaise in our society may be turned into a problem and a national challenge. If we are ready to learn from our past mistakes, misunderstandings and wrong concepts of education, the opportunity should be grasped now. We have to redefine aims and goals of education for the whole nation. The system was a living copy (including the rivalries of various denominational groups) of the British model; the need for a political education to develop a cohesive society was not felt. The coercive power was in the state and in the manipulation of its authority and power. Besides the British educational system unlike the American one did not feel the need for developing a national consciousness through the schools as Britain was a stable society for nearly a millenium when it became a sea-borne imperial power. Hence our borrowed system neglected the creation of a Sri Lankan identity.

The very structure of the system of education was divisive. The two major national education commissions, Kannangara (1943) and Jayasuriya (1962), are remarkable documents in that the dissensions and riders constitute approximately one third the space in the number of pages as the major recommendations. All their members were eminent men and women who represented religious, ethnic, regional or other educational interests. Each group ultimately tried to retain group advantages or to improve their educational opportunities. These riders and dissents (pp. 116 in three reports of pp. 305 of main recommendations) are reminiscent of internecine religious wars of another era. The national interest, hence, went by default. The most remarkable statement was that the English language unified the nation, when that language was used only by 6% of the population at the time. These values and beliefs did not permeate the then 'vernacular' (language of the slave) schools or education which was the schooling for the servant, peasant and working classes.

This duality in language is but one of the well-known dualities in our education system. The state and denominational schools, education for the ruling class and education for the working class, education in the North Atlantic culture and education in Eastern culture, fee-free and fee levying schools were some obvious dualities. The education system, laid the foundations among other factors, for a divisive society and a nation at war.

University education in the forties will illustrate this divisive facet. The late Sir Ivor Jennings writing in the *University of Ceylon Review* (1944) made this comment : " A University must reflect the social conditions in which it exists. So long as the deep social stratification of Ceylon persists it is inevitable that the top stratum, mainly Class C of the census return should be most strongly represented." The statistics given in this paper indicate that there were hardly any Ceylon Moors, Malays, Indian Tamils and only a few Kandyan Sinhalese in the University at the time.

Regional Disparities in Educational Opportunity

The persisting regional disparities in education indicated by Gunaratne Navaratnarajah and Nystrom vitiate again the development of a national consciousness and a culture when many social groups are aware that they are disadvantaged or discriminated. Nystrom asserts that the western littoral districts from Jaffna to Matara have dominated education for over 400 years. The rural peasantry, (Sinhala and Tamil) plantation sector Sinhala and Tamils and slum dwellers are the victims of this differential education. This is the base of the 'littoral literati' which has held all power before and after independence. The other areas which enjoy some educational advantages are the Kandy and Kegalle district urban areas according to Nystrom. So many electorates on a very sophisticated analytical study appear to be disadvantaged. No remedial measures seem to have been undertaken to reduce these regional disparities.

In a plurinational state, all cultures need to be represented in the education system. But our sectarian religious and language policies in education tend to keep our children in separate entities. The local learning environments were always considered inferior to the western educational institutions. The *pirivenas*, *maktabs* and *madrasaas* do not enjoy status or recognition.

The New Role of Education

That education is in constant crisis has nearly become an axiom in modern times. Education in developing societies has to achieve multiple aims, goals and objectives depending on the structure, texture, culture and beliefs and issues of a particular society. Sri Lanka's time has come to re-think deeply and conscientiously on the basic goals of the education system as we have passed through the biggest blood bath in our history for over a century. It is time to rethink and mend our ways. The pursuance of an educational policy elitist in design, content and purpose, while the masses are given only a caricature of this education has got to end. The clever ploy and personal satisfaction gained by evading issues and problems must also cease if we are to develop a vibrant culture of democracy, creativity and harmony. We need not despair. Profound educational changes occur when an awareness of national identity is heightened (Singh, 1988).

Many countries have developed national identities in different ways. Nehru claimed that Mahathma Gandhi gave India an identity. 'The economic miracle' of West Germany was helpful in establishing a new identity (Greffenhages, 1989). Our state has not developed any societal or cultural unity. Nor has it developed economic stability, nor practised democracy in action except in words. Our main thrust in developing an identity has to be through the education system, strongly supported by the mass media and the basic social units as the family and the community. In our society the 'culture of the state' is more powerful than the Anglo-Saxon 'culture of society'. As in Germany educational policies are more governmental than people inspired.

If we are to develop an education system promoting a specific Sri Lankan identity, there are some fundamentals we have to re-think in education. One important aspect of the new thinking is the development of the human person in dignity. A model has been quite aptly described by Nudler (1986):

An acceptable human development model in the context of modern society should leave room for simultaneous unfolding and mutual re-inforcement of different facets of the human being, that is *inner growth, external achievements, individual uniqueness and social integration, primary community and social relations*. (emphasis added)

Our human resource development approach, so fashionable in development literature, neglected the 'inner' and the social man. Our religious model on which our education system is based neglects the social and economic man as well.

This human has to live in a society and education has, at least, to invent that society which in any case is a social invention (Gardiner, 1986). In this society of the new human person education has to deal with new aspects seriously and conscientiously to develop:

1. Social equity (caste, class, region, ethnicity, religious differences have to be devalued)
2. Inter regional and international equity
3. Living presence of the future
 - preservation of our national environment
 - actualising people's cultural identity
4. Sensitivity to the present and an appreciation of the past
5. Participation and meaning for every person in society.

Education alone cannot develop these social indicators. But an education system needs to have an image of the future human person, the society that he/she lives in and a transcendental meaning to life.

Hence a dialogue is needed to deal with the following aspects in our education system:

1. School model based on democratic ideals
2. School curriculum especially a poly-cultural one
3. School culture and administration
4. Role of mass media in education
5. Role of the parents and communities in education
6. Peace and political education and conflict resolution through educational institutions
7. Reexamine religious education and the development of an appropriate national value system eg. respect for the human person and values of tolerance, toil and team-work (as advocated by Ali A. Mazrui, 1976).

We have to give up our time-worn ideas of education that glorified colonial education or a traditional education. It is futile to think that there was ever a golden period of education, even in Greece. We have to think of educating the human person before we think of educating the civil servants, the medical doctors and now the business executives.

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