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EDUCATIONAL TOUR OF INDIAN TEACHERS TO UK : SOME LESSONS TO LEARN

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ABSTRACT:

The Vidya Prasarak Mandal (VPM), Thane has been engaged in organizing educational tours of Indian teachers to UK for the last decade. The visit lasting for about a week comprised classroom observations, interaction with teachers and school inspectors. In addition, a part of the time is utilized in organizing educational tours and cultural programmes for the benefit of the visiting teams. In these tours Indian teachers could witness how British teachers use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for teaching school subjects effectively. The dialogue between the teachers from UK and India brought out clearly the difference between school education systems in Europe and in Asia. It has been realized from both the sides that the problems of school teaching are almost the same and concerted efforts need to be made to overcome them. The personal interaction between visiting and host teachers proved to be quite useful. It has resulted into the establishment of a long term professional relationship among the teachers of both the countries so that they could continue exchanging ideas and experiences on a regular basis. More importantly, these tours have resulted into the close linkages between institutions working for the improvement of school education in both the countries. It has, thus, opened an opportunity for the exchange of material and manpower between two countries.

1. Introduction:

On the request of the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT) London the Vidya Prasarak Mandal, Thane has hosted the visit of British teachers to India in February 2004. During their weeklong stay in India they were taken to selected schools in and around Mumbai (Agarkar and Bedekar 2005). Thus, Indian teachers had an opportunity to interact with British teachers closely. It resulted into the demand from Indian teachers to visit schools in UK. With a view to honour their request and to expose them to the education system in England the Vidya Prasarak Mandal (VPM), Thane initiated organizing educational tours for Indian teachers to UK since November 2004. So far, it has arranged more than a dozen tours benefiting more than hundred school teachers drawn from different parts of India.

Introduction:

LECT, with its spread out network facilitated the visit of Indian teachers to schools in different parts of UK. It would contact a Local Education Authority (LEA) and request to host the visit of Indian teachers. We, thus, had an opportunity to enjoy the hospitality of LEAs of Newham (London), Waltham Forest (London), West Sussex, Birmingham, Kingston Upon Thames, Oxfordshire and Leeds. Although the visit programme planned by each of these LEAs was different there were a few common components; like- 1. Academic Interactions, 2. Visits to Places of Interest and 3. Social interactions. Notable features of each of three aspects are presented below.

2. Academic Interactions:

The academic interaction planned during the visit programme was mainly of three types: Interaction with school inspectors, 2. Interaction with school principals/ teachers, and 3. Interaction with students.

2.1 Interaction with School Inspectors:

School inspectors in UK play an important role in the implementation of a national curriculum in school system. Taking this aspect into account a formal meeting of the visiting teachers was arranged with the school inspectors. During this interaction, the inspectors described the salient features of the national curriculum and described their role in its effective implementation. It was reiterated that their role is that of facilitator than that of a supervisor. If the need arises they often help the teachers in performing their duties by providing material as well as academic help.

2.2 Interaction with principals and teachers:

School visits were arranged to provide opportunities for close interaction with school principals and teachers from UK. For convenience the members of the visiting team was divided into small groups and were dropped at different schools. It was ensured that the schools from different localities were included in the visit programme. For example the LEAs of Oxfordshire and West Sussex took care that visits were arranged to both rural as well as urban parts of the LEA. Interaction sessions were planned firstly with school principals and then with school teachers. During this interaction they could compare two education systems and share their experiences. Visiting teachers also had an opportunity to see school facilities, visit laboratories and understand how teaching aids are used to explain important concepts in the curriculum.

2. Academic Interactions:

2.3 Interaction with Students:

A part of the time of the school visit was devoted to close interaction with students. The visiting members were invited to observe classroom interaction. At the end the teacher would introduce the guest and request the students to ask questions. Majority of the questions, that student would raise, would pertain geographic location of India, its population, weather etc. The visiting teachers in turn would ask questions to explore how students view school education, what they would like to become in their lives and which subject they like most. It would some time for the breaking of the ice. But once the discussion started it would continue for a long time. Often the school principal had to come in to stop the discussion.



Interaction with school children in Leeds

3. Visits to Places of Interest:

The host LEA also arranged visits to places of interest in the vicinity. Britain is known for its good museums. While in London, the team was taken to British Museum, which has a huge collection of artifacts brought from different parts of the world. What is notable is that these artifacts are displayed well with useful information besides them. Within each section there is a guided tour to provide glimpse of collection and its relevance in the development of mankind. One of the visits in London was arranged to the Tower of London. The place of special attraction in the tower of London is the jewel museum. It has a good collection of crowns worn by kings and queens of England. Indian teachers had special inclination to see Kohinoor diamond embedded in one of the crowns. While in Birmingham the visiting members had an opportunity to see Think Tank (a Science Museum). The three storied museum presents past, present and future very well.

Educational tours in Oxford shire consisted of walking tour of oxford, a city with the tradition of education for more that thousand years. Indian teachers could see places like Oxford University Press, Bodleian Library, Trinity College, Balliol College, Museum of History of Science, Ashmolean Museum, Christchurch College, Indian Institute, Centre for Hindu Studies, etc. The city of Oxford has a famous botanical garden with a wide variety of plant specimen.

Visits to Places of Interest:

A visit to the garden was a refreshing experience for most of the participants. Tour programme in the vicinity of Oxford comprised visit to Didcot Power station and Rutherford Appleton Laboratory. The visit to Power Station offered the teachers an opportunity to see how electricity is generated using coal/ natural gas. For many of the teachers this was a first chance to see the process of generating electricity. The tour to Rutherford Laboratory was even more exciting. They learnt that the institution is engaged in spreading science among school students and carried out some of the experiments that school students usually perform when they visit the institution.



The Royal Greenwich Observatory

Apart from the visits arranged by the host LEAs the Vidya Prasarak Mandal made it a point to arrange visits to some of the important places in UK. One such place is Royal Observatory in Greenwich. It was an unforgettable experience for all the teachers as they took Dockland Light Rail to reach the destination. Visit to the museum enabled them to understand how astronomy flourished in UK under the support from the rulers. Most important aspect of the visit to Royal Observatory was to see the Greenwich Mean Line drawn close to the museum. They have been teaching about this line in their schools. It was for the first time that they were standing on the line. Each one of them took picture standing at the prime meridian of the world. They also made it a point to get the certificate signed by the director of the museum from the machine close to the mean Line. Movement of the sphere on the rod of the museum at 12.00 GMT was a memorable event for the teachers.

4. Social and Cultural Programmes:

The visit programmes had ample scope for social and cultural interaction. Through this interaction the visiting teachers could get the idea of social life of British persons. Some of the teachers who had visited India earlier invited the visiting team for dinner to their houses. It was a good opportunity for socialization among the UK and Indian teachers. During the visit to Oxfordshire arrangement was made to see a play written by Shakespeare entitled 'As you like it'. The play was a festive comedy based on the love stories of three couples. Teachers enjoyed the play thoroughly as it was a very different experience for them. Also, the musical evening offered yet another memorable experience for the visiting members. The musical evening was managed by students and their teachers using a variety of western musical instruments.

Social and Cultural Programmes:

During the educational tour to UK a day, preferably Sunday, was reserved to visit the places associated with Indian revolutionaries in London. The teachers were taken to the places associated with great souls of India like Madanlal Dhingra, Udham Singh, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Lokmanya Tilak, Shamji Krishna Verma, Mahatma Gandhi, etc. who fought against the British for freedom. Teachers were shown the Caxton Hall where Indian revolutionaries used to arrange their meetings. They were shown Indian House where Indian students used to live. They were also shown Bentonville Prison from outside where Madanlal Dhingra and Udham Singh went to gallows. At every place the historical facts were narrated which enabled them to understand the contribution of these persons in freedom struggle. This day long tour was a great experience for the teachers as it offered them a rare chance of visiting these places and revises their knowledge of history. What is notable is that there are blue plaques erected on the buildings to show indicate that an important person lived here.



Blue plaques showing the places of stay of important Indian persons

5. Observations of Indian Teachers:

During the period of the educational tour we used to have a group discussion every evening at the place of residence. This discussion was mainly used for sharing individual experiences with group members. It was noticed that every participant had something to share enthusiastically. The observations were related to both the academic visits as well as sightseeing. The academic comments pertained to school curriculum, facilities in the school, teacher pupil interaction, support received from school inspectors, parental involvement, etc. while the comments on places of interest pertained to how well they are maintained and how effectively they are used to educate the masses. A short summary of the observations is presented in the following section.

5.1 School curriculum:

Earlier, different education authorities in England followed different curricula. However, national curriculum movement enabled them to bring uniformity in the curriculum. Most of the schools in east England followed the national curriculum.

There are very few privately managed schools as education is considered to be the responsibility of the government. Each Local Education Authority is given the responsibility to manage schools in its area. They get funds from the central bodies as well as from Local Self Government. Each school specializes in one area and provides guidance to other schools in the vicinity.

The special feature of the British curriculum as noticed by Indian teachers is the focus on Design and Technology. Students are encouraged to design a variety for things like a chair, a show case or a book rack. Special laboratories are developed to teach design and technology in schools. It was also noticed that the British system emphasises a more active approach to learning than Indian system. One of teachers from visiting team commented, "Indian education system is information oriented while British system is skill oriented. It provides ample opportunities to the learner to get actively engaged in the process."

5.2 Teacher pupil interaction:

The teacher pupil interaction in the classroom is courteous. Using the constructivistic approach of teaching school teachers attempt to facilitate learning among the students instead of giving them information. Teacher is, in fact, a learner along with his/her students. The teacher taught relationship is so informal that the whole environment is that of "Let us do it" instead of Let me tell you". Students are free to raise questions in the classrooms that are promptly dealt with. The emphasis is on developing life skills than passing on information from the text books to the heads of children.

The number of children in British classes was limited to 20-25. Even with this small numbers, teachers faced discipline related problems. Indian teachers noticed that their counterparts are not respected by school children as it happens in India. On the other hand, they have to earn respect by being good classroom managers with interesting strategies to deliver the curriculum. Home and social environment in the country is such that students enjoy extra freedom. This freedom has to be respected even in classroom proceedings. Teacher has to provide enough attention to emotional as well as social problems of children in his/her class. In case of necessity the child has to be referred to a counsellor in the school. Corporal punishment is illegal in all schools in the UK as in India.