

**LEARNING FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES
A CASE OF UK INDIA TEACHERS' EXCHANGE PROGRAMME**

Sudhkar C. Agarkar

Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education, TIFR
Mankhurd, Mumbai 400 088 India
(sca@hbcse.tifr.res.in)

and

Vijay V. Bedekar

Institute for Oriental Study
Naupada, Thane 400 602, India
(vbedekar@vsnl.com)

Introduction

Education is a social process. It is organised differently in different cultures. In the present days when the world has become a global village, it is necessary to know how the task of imparting education to young lads is undertaken in different cultures. It is with the view of exposing British and Indian teachers to each other's culture, an exchange programme is planned between these two countries. These visits are arranged collaboratively by the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT), UK, the Institute for Oriental Study (IOS), Thane (Maharashtra State, India) and Asian branch of the Commonwealth Association of Science, Technology and Mathematics Educators (CASTME-Asia). The paper presents the salient features of this exchange programme.

Visit of British Teachers to India

The visit of British teachers to India has begun from February 2003. So far seven teams from Newham (London), Oxfordshire, West Sussex, Birmingham, Leeds, North Wales, Manchester Local Educational authorities (LEA) have visited India. Each group comes with a specific aim to study. Usually a team spends a week in Mumbai. This period is used to acquaint them with Indian cultures and traditions and to provide a glimpse of Indian school education. In general, the programme five components: Visits to schools, Visits to research/training institutions, Interaction with members of voluntary organizations, Seminars to share experiences and Sight seeing/cultural programmes.

School Visits

In India one finds a tremendous variation in school system. An attempt is made to expose the visiting team to a variety of schools. A visit is arranged to an Ashram School, modeled on the lines of ancient Indian gurukul¹ system of education. It caters to the hitherto neglected tribal population in India. Since all the students are first generation learners, they encounter a variety of difficulties in their educational endeavor. Teachers have to struggle hard to teach formal school subjects to these students. The visiting teachers interact both with teachers as well as students in these schools. Despite the fact that the medium of instruction in the school is Marathi (the language of the state of Maharashtra) the visiting teachers find no difficulty in establishing a good dialogue with the teachers and students.

Visiting team stays in the town of Thane which is a suburb of Mumbai. There are a large number of schools in the town catering to students coming from different strata. Visits are arranged to some of these schools to familiarise them with the education system in semi urban as well as in urban localities. Visiting teachers are given ample opportunities to talk to teachers, students and observe their interaction in the classrooms. Schools usually wish to acquaint the visitors with co-curricular activities that they undertake in the schools. This is done through craft exhibition, science exhibition, quiz competitions or debate competition. A variety of articles prepared by children are displayed systematically in the craft exhibition. Visiting teachers have been showing interests in such exhibitions. What attracted them most was the *Rangoli*² pattern prepared using coloured powders. Some of the visiting teachers even wanted to buy the rangoli powder of different colours and learn the skill of preparing rangoli designs.

In recent years there has been a growth of private international schools in India. A visit is also arranged to such schools to provide a glimpse of modern India. These schools provide education using English as a medium of instruction. They have all the modern facilities like a laboratory, a computer room with dedicated Internet connection and good lecture rooms. Boys and girls from different states of India and also from other countries attend these schools. Visiting teachers get an opportunity to understand the relationship between teachers and students and also between students and students in a multicultural set up as they stay together in the school campus.

Visits to Research and Training Institutions

Education system in India receives support from research and training institutions. Visits are arranged to selected research and training institutions in the vicinity of Thane. One such institution is the Institute for Oriental Study (IOS), Thane. It is a unique institution devoted to conducting studies in oriental science. Teachers are told about the treasure of knowledge that existed in ancient and medieval period in India and are exposed to a rare collection of old books and manuscripts. Specifically the issues related to the education system in India before

¹ Gurukul is a unique educational system followed in ancient India, where pupils after the age of 8 used to reside in the hermitage of the teacher for a period of at least 12 years. Apart from educational curriculum importance was given to personality development and inter-human relationship.

² Rangoli is an ancient Indian art in which geometrical figures are drawn using white or coloured powder. The powder is prepared by crushing soft stones and colours used are organic. Usually these diagrams are displayed in the temples and outside every house, especially on the auspicious occasions.

colonial period, science and technology in ancient India, administration and architecture in olden days impressed them most.

Visit is arranged to Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education (HBCSE) to expose the visiting teachers with R & D activities undertaken in school education. HBCSE is the national centre of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) for science and mathematics education. It conducts research in the areas of curriculum development, teacher training, alternative conception, talent nurture and science communication. HBCSE has an exhibition on History of Science within its campus which highlights contribution of eastern countries like China, India, etc. in shaping modern science and technology. The teachers also get an opportunity to visit the integrated laboratory that is used to design low-cost concept based experiments in science.

A visit is also arranged to one of the education college in the city to familiarize the teachers with pre-service training methods. In this college an interactions arranged with college faculty and also with student teachers. They are also shown a variety of teaching aids used in the college. These interactions have proved useful in making the visiting teachers aware of the course content of the training programme. They can see how the prospective teachers are trained to face the challenges of school education in twenty first century.

Seminar on School Education

A day-long seminar is arranged on the topic of mutual interest at Thane. Apart from the entire visiting team it is attended by school-teachers, representatives of school management committees, school headmasters, members of voluntary organizations and teachers' associations. Visiting teachers describe various activities undertaken by them to engage students in educational activities. On the other hand, Indian teachers make presentation on their efforts to make education relevant to the needs of student. This seminar provides ample opportunities for teachers from both sides to share their first hand experiences. Usually a presentation is arranged on *Vedic*³ Mathematics to familiarize the visiting teachers with unique system of mathematics devised in India. The speaker explains the short Sanskrit formulae in the form of shlokas and demonstrates their use in mathematical calculations. Using these formulae, one can make calculations involving big numbers within a short time.

Discussion with Members of Voluntary Organizations

The special feature of Indian education is that there is a band of voluntary workers striving to support school education. Interaction is arranged with the members of selected voluntary organizations in the district of Thane. It includes organizations like Gram Mangal, an agency working for the education of disadvantaged children, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), a voluntary agency working for the overall development of tribal people, Jana Kalyan Samitee (JKS), an agency managing a mobile laboratory for rural schools. Interactions with the members of these voluntary organizations prove to be quite beneficial as it provides insights into the efforts made to support school education.

Sight-seeing and Cultural Programmes

There are ample places of tourists interests in and around Mumbai. Teachers are taken to

³ This system is conceived by a Hindu monk in the last quarter of the 19th century. The author was inspired by the *hymns* in the ancillary text of the *Atharvaveda*, one of the ancient most Indian sacred literatures.

some of these places as the time at disposal is very limited. One of the important places chosen for sight seeing is *Gharapuri* Island, a site of magnificent Elephanta caves consisting of beautiful carvings, sculpture and a temple of Hindu God *Shiva*⁴. It is one of the world's heritage sites designated by UNESCO. The sculpture carved out of a solid basalt rock creates a representation of heavenly mountain residence of lord Shiva.

India boasts of a rich cultural heritage. The schools that the teachers visit attempt to provide a glimpse of this heritage. In addition, a special cultural programme by professional artists is arranged to provide them insights into these traditions. On some occasions it includes recital of Indian musical instrument. On other occasions it includes performance of classical dances like *Bharatnatyam*⁵, *kuchipudi*⁶ and folk dances of various regions of India. The commentary in English is given to explain the genesis of each dance, the clothes worn by the artists and the special features of different dances.

Visit of Indian Teachers to UK

The programme of Indian teachers visiting schools in UK started from October 2004. So far, five visits are organised to different Local Education Authorities (LEA): Newham (London), Oxfordshire, West Sussex, Birmingham and Leeds LEAs. The visit programme is planned in such away that it provides opportunities for academic as well social interactions. The programme usually comprises visits to schools, a seminar, educational tours and social get - together.

Visits to Schools

The school visit programme is planned to provide a glimpse of British education system to Indian teachers. To achieve this goal schools from urban as well as fro rural areas are chosen. The team is divided into small groups and are dropped at different schools. It is ensured that visiting teachers can see school facilities, observe classroom interactions and interact with teachers as well as with students. In addition to primary and secondary schools some LEAs have arranged the visits to institutions that support school education in UK. These visits have proved beneficial for Indian teachers to observe British education system closely and to compare it with Indian education system.

Seminar on ICT in Education

The main focus of Indian visit is to learn the use of Information and communication technology (ICT) since it is making headway in school education in UK in a big way. As one enters the classroom, one notices the presence of smart boards and LCD projectors. British teachers are quite familiar with these instruments and can use them proficiently. The Indian team often has a curiosity about the use of smart boards and internet. The seminar focuses on this aspect and clarifies the doubts related to use of ICT in school education. The potential of the smart board is explained and the efforts made by LEA in trying to spread its use in schools are enumerated.

Educational Tours

Visits are arranged to various institutions and places to provide additional information to Indian teachers. Depending on the LEA, of the places visited would differ. For example,

⁴ A member of Hindu trinity. Other two are *Brahma* and *Vishnu*.

⁵ One of the traditional Hindu dance styles practiced since ancient times.

⁶ One of the traditional Hindu dance styles practiced since ancient times.

Oxfordshire LEA arranged visits to Botanical garden, Didcot Power station and Rutherford Appleton Laboratory. Birmingham LEA, on the other hand, arranged visits to Think Tank (a science museum), Equinao Museum and City Municipal Office. Visits to these places gave a lot of interesting information to the teachers. They could appreciate how these institutions are supporting school education.

Social and Cultural Programmes

The visit programme, as mentioned earlier, had ample opportunities for socialization. There were occasions when teachers were taken to picnic or invited to the houses of local people. Through this interaction the visiting teachers could get the idea of social life of British persons. During the visit to Oxfordshire arrangements were made to see Shakespeare's play 'As You Like It' in an open theatre. Teachers enjoyed the play thoroughly as it was a very different experience for the visiting team. Socialization opportunities, it was observed, broke all the barriers of the geographical distance. They could interact freely with each other.

Outcome

The exchange visits described in this paper proved to be beneficial to both the groups. Firstly, they could understand difference in social fabric in India and UK, appreciate cultural differences and experience the difference in education systems. The family system in Britain is weak in UK while it is quite strong in India. As a result, one notices the difference in the involvement of parents in school matters. British parents show a little concern while Indian parents are over-concerned. Inculcation of moral values among the students is a direct outcome of family system. The cases of misbehaviour are many in UK while they are few in India.

Teachers in India receive great respect from students while a British teacher has to earn respect. This difference leads to different ways of classroom management in these countries. Indian schools give much more importance to performance in the examinations than British schools. As a result, there is a focus on preparing for examination which gave rise to mushrooming of coaching classes. Apart from helping students in their scholastic achievements a large number of voluntary organizations in India are struggling to elevate the knowledge base of the school children. These out-of-school activities play a crucial role in shaping the motivation and attitude of school children towards education.

Although there are differences in two education systems there are many commonalities also. India is a country of diverse cultures. There is diversity in language, food and clothing. Due to its metropolitan nature, the city of Mumbai and its suburbs are quite multicultural. Students use different languages at home for communication. The medium of instruction in many schools, however, is English. Most of the students coming to these schools do not speak English at home. Not only they come from homes speaking different languages but also bring with them diverse cultural experiences (Khubchandani, 1997). Indian teachers face a challenge to deal with such students. In England too where the school has students with different cultural backgrounds the problems are similar. Along with the variation in the financial status of their parents, there is also a variation in their cultures as many of them are immigrants from different parts of the world. Since language spoken at home is different from English, using English as a medium of instruction to such diverse groups creates problems in communication. It turned out that providing education in the mother tongue of a child is the best solution. If this is not possible then efforts must be made to make a child proficient in

English.

An important outcome of the exchange programme has been the establishment of international linkages between teachers. British teachers now have friends in India while Indian teachers have friends in Britain. They are in touch with each other. They have been sharing their experiences with each continuously. This cooperation has led to mutual support. An example might illustrate this point better. The teachers who visited India contributed fund to buy a vehicle for handicapped children. In return Indian teachers have sent handicraft material to their friends in Britain. This cooperation is not limited to teachers but has also extended to students. Students from north Wales have collected money to donate computers to their friends in Ashram schools. In return Ashram school student have sent thanking letters along with their paintings. There is now an established link between British and Indian students. This link would certainly lead to peace and harmony.

Conclusions

The exchange programme described in this paper brought together teachers from developing and developed countries together. It offered an opportunity for the teachers to see each others system and share ideas and experiences. There was an opportunity to visit a wide range of institutions to see how they all work and inter-relate. There was also an opportunity to experience social and cultural flavour. Enough time was given for reflection and discussions among the teachers. British teachers and their Indian counterparts have realized that there are more similarities in the education systems of Britain and India than there are differences. The problems faced by the teaching community in both these countries are very much the same. There is, therefore, a tremendous scope for the exchange of ideas and teaching practices. The programme has brought out beyond doubt that there is lot that can be learnt by interacting with teachers and students in a different set up. The leader of one of the British teams commented, "Distance between India and England is more than 5000 miles but problems of education are similar." Teachers from both the sides appreciated that concerned authorities in both the countries are trying hard to work out the solutions to these problems. They were optimistic that achieving equity in school education would soon become a reality.

The interaction between teachers of India and UK proved to be beneficial for both the groups. British party took many ideas back to their country and were able to reflect on their own ideas and practices. They were impressed by the importance given to spiritual education in Indian schools. For Indian teachers it was a rare opportunity to talk freely to their counterparts in England in such an informal environment. They were immensely benefited from the experiences they had in using ICT in classroom interaction. It is hoped that international exchange programmes are arranged on a large scale for the benefit of teaching communities in different countries.

References

- Agarkar, S.C. (2002), Educating the Disadvantaged, *CASTME Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3.
- Khubchandani, L.M. (1997). Bilingual education for indigenous people in India, In J. Cummins and D. Corson (Eds.) *Encyclopaedia of Language and Education*, Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Kulkarni, V.G. and Agarkar, S.C. (1985). *Talent Search and Nurture among the Underprivileged*, Mumbai: HBCSE, TIFR.
- Norton, D.L. (1994). Education for moral integrity, In D.M. Bethel (Ed.) *Compulsory*

Schooling and Human Learning, California: Caddo Gap Press.

Acknowledgements

The Exchange visits are arranged jointly by the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT), UK, The Institute for Oriental Study (IOS), Thane and Asian Branch of the Commonwealth Association of Science, Technology and Mathematics Educators (CASTME-Asia). It is a pleasure to thank the office bearers of all the three organizations for their help. Cooperation received from teachers and headmasters in organizing this visit is also gratefully acknowledged. Finally, we would like to thank the participating teachers who cooperated very well in the entire tour.