

VISIT OF BRITISH TEACHERS TO INDIA: A REPORT

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Abstract

Under the Teachers' International Professional Development (TIPD) Programme of the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers a visit of 20 teachers from UK was arranged to India. They had an opportunity to visit some selected schools and research/training institutions. Interaction with educational administrators and voluntary workers was also arranged along with some exposure to cultural programmes. The visit programme offered a good learning opportunity not only for British teachers but also for Indian teachers. Such an interaction arranged periodically in Commonwealth countries would facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences.

Background

A group of 20 primary teachers from Newham Local Education Authority and New Forest Local Education Authority in east London visited India in the period from February 12 to 22, 2003. The visit was arranged under the auspices of the Teachers' International Professional Development (TIPD) Programme of the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT), London. The Institute for Oriental Study (IOS), Thane (Maharashtra State, India) hosted the visit. The academic aspect of the programme was arranged by CASTME-Asia. It was planned to provide a glimpse of the education system in India and to arrange interactions with different groups of people associated with school education in India.

The visit programme had five components:

1. Visits to different schools in the district of Thane
2. Visits to research and training institutions
3. Interaction with managers and volunteers
4. Seminar on teaching creativity across the curriculum
5. Sight seeing/cultural programmes

The visiting teachers were given a booklet providing details of the education system in the state of Maharashtra. It had a daily programme with brief information on the institutions to be visited. This report gives an account of the interaction the visiting team had with teachers, teacher educators, administrators, voluntary workers and school students.

School Visits

In India one finds a tremendous variation in school systems. An attempt was made to expose the visiting team to various schools in the vicinity of Thane. Five different schools were chosen for this purpose: an Ashram school, a school for the mentally disabled, a school for the urban poor, a school for urban middle class and an international school. In each school the visiting team had an opportunity to interact with the teachers as well as with students.

Ashram School

Ashram schools modelled on the ancient Indian *gurukul*¹ system cater to the hitherto neglected tribal population in India. A girls' school located in the Sahyadri ranges was chosen for the visit. The school provides education, food and accommodation free of charge to girls from tribal communities that are usually isolated from the mainstream. As a welcome gesture to the visiting team, the schoolgirls put on a show of folk dances for which they had dressed in their traditional style.

The British teachers wanted to see the classroom interaction and distributed themselves among different groups. Despite the fact that the medium of instruction in the school was Marathi (the language of the state of Maharashtra) the visiting teachers could establish good dialogue with the teachers and students. In one of the primary classes a lesson from the textbook on Marathi was being taught. British teachers could witness how easy it is to read Marathi, which uses an alphabet that is phonetic in nature in contrast to the Roman alphabet.

School for Disabled Children

The teachers were taken to a school for mentally retarded children located at a *taluka*² place. They could interact with teachers and also see some material prepared by children. This interaction enabled them to know how teachers are trying to prepare the disabled children to perform their essential chores and to earn their livelihood. A few teachers from the visiting team were themselves associated with special schools in the UK. They were able exchange ideas on how British teachers try to tackle this problem.

The visiting teachers left the school with mixed feelings. On one hand they appreciated the work done by the principal/the teachers and the progress made by the students. On the other hand they realised the constraints of resources and finances under which the school management had to work. Some of them had, in fact, showed willingness to help the school. It is hoped that this willingness actually translates into material and financial support.

School for the Urban Poor

A visit was arranged to Abhinav Vidyalaya, a school managed by an Education Society and catering to the poor people in the city of Kalyan. As a part of its annual programme a science exhibition was arranged in the school with the participation of students from all the schools under the Society. The visiting team could see this exhibition and interact with the students who had brought their exhibits. Although none of the team members was a specialist in science they appreciated the idea of a science exhibition, as it offered them an opportunity to see creativity expressed in exhibits by both rural and urban students. They were impressed by the fact such an exhibition is arranged not only by the school management but also by the education department of the state government on a regular basis.

Apart from the science exhibition, a quiz on general knowledge was also organized in the school on the day of the visit. Since the quiz questions were asked in Marathi teachers could not take active part in it. However, they liked the idea of arranging such competitions periodically as it adds to the knowledge base of students. Some of them could discuss the nature of questions posed in the competitions with local teachers.

School for the Middle Class Urban Population

A half-day visit was arranged to A.K. Joshi English Medium School in Thane that caters mainly to the middle class population in the city. During the period of the visit there was an exhibition of craft material made by school students. A variety of artefacts prepared by children were displayed systematically in the exhibition. Visiting teachers showed interest in knowing the material used and the way the exhibits were prepared. What attracted them most was the *rangoli*³ pattern prepared using coloured powders. Some of them even wanted to buy the powder and learn the skill of preparing *rangoli* designs.

The weight of a school bag is an issue of concern in India. In most of the schools, young children are expected to carry a huge load with a large number of textbooks and notebooks everyday. The school has initiated its own programme to tackle this issue at the kindergarten stage, since the pupils at this stage are too young to carry heavy bags every day. The focus has now shifted to teaching through the 'play-way' method that makes the children enjoy school education. Teachers reported that their students now love to come to school. It is hoped that the pilot scheme implemented successfully in this school would have a contagious effect and spread in the entire city soon.

An International School

A half-day visit was arranged to Ram Ratna Vidyalaya, an international school for boys. The school provides residential facilities to both teachers and students within the school campus, offering opportunities for longer interaction between teachers and students as well as between students and students. The school attempts to offer modern education with a focus on Indian culture and tradition. It has all the modern facilities like a laboratory, a computer room with dedicated internet connection and good lecture rooms. Boys from different states of India and also from other countries attend the school. The admission is based on an entrance examination organised every year for entry into grade 4. The school follows the curriculum framed by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and provides education from grades 4 to 10.

When the team reached the school, teaching hours were over and the students were doing their homework in their respective hostels. A visit was arranged to hostels where boys of grades 4 and 5 were staying. They were busy in their studies under the guidance of supervising teachers. British teachers could establish dialogue with the students in a short time. This interaction enabled them to explore the topics they study, the relationship with their teachers, and the nature of peer interaction among the students.

Visits to Research and Training Institutions

The education system in India receives support from various educational and training institutions. It is, therefore, necessary to know about these institutions to have a good feel for the system. With this in mind, visits were arranged to selected research and training institutions in the vicinity of Thane.

Institute for Oriental Study, Thane

Being the host institution, the first visit by British teachers was arranged to the Institute for Oriental Study (IOS), Thane - a unique institution devoted to conducting studies in oriental learning. Many of the teachers were astonished to see the treasure of knowledge that existed in ancient and medieval periods in India. Specifically the issues related to the education system in India before the colonial period, science and technology in ancient India, and administration and architecture in the olden days were discussed. In addition,

seminars and colloquia organised by the Institute were described.

The IOS library has a good collection of old books and manuscripts. The visiting teachers could look at some of the rare manuscripts from the medieval period, and some old artefacts, found during excavations. IOS does not have a direct influence on school education. Nevertheless, the library and museum of the Institute are open for school students. Practising teachers are encouraged to bring their students and open the treasure of ancient knowledge to them. The facilities of IOS are also used by research workers and academicians interested in oriental learning.

Dayanand Institute of Educational Management and Research, Panvel

Dayanand Institute of Educational Management and Research (DIEMR)) is a recently established institution working in the areas of educational management and research. Located within the campus of a school at Panvel (a *taluka* place in Raigad district) it undertakes studies involving school students and teachers. Since the focus of the activities of DIEMR is on creative education, it undertakes activities to encourage creativity among the students. In this regard, art and science exhibitions are arranged periodically by the institution for teachers and for students. The important feature of the visit to DIEMR was the close interaction between the visitors and the teachers of the school, with a variety of issues concerning primary education in both India and Britain being discussed. The free exchange of ideas between the groups of teachers from two different educational systems included discussing problems related to multicultural education and inclusion in the classroom.

During the discussion, it was pointed out that there is a great importance to teaching science and mathematics in Indian primary schools. Candidates offering science at the higher level not only receives great respect but also stand high in their chances of getting jobs. The importance of science and mathematics education at the higher level is transmitted to primary schools too. The curriculum is a bit loaded in concepts and teachers strive to fulfill the demands placed by the curriculum. The teaching of science, however, is devoid of practical activities because of resource limitations and large classroom sizes. In the UK, on the other hand, teaching is mainly based on project work and on offering practical experience.

The need for teaching moral values to the students was recognised by the teachers from both India and the UK. It is notable that efforts are made to inculcate values in both countries. In the UK it is called Citizenship Education, whereas in India it is known as Moral Education. Because of the strong family bonds in India, many of the moral values such as respecting elders, behaving properly in the group, etc. are developed socially. In fact, most of the parents feel that schools need not worry about teaching values related to social interaction. Instead, they advocate that the schools should concentrate more on teaching formal school subjects. In the UK, however, inculcating these values in schools receives importance, with less reliance being placed on social and family sources.

Although the present Indian education system is modelled after the British colonial system of education, there are differences in the two educational systems arising out of cultural variations, as well as the divergent post-colonial histories. Teachers could see the differences clearly. More striking was their observation of similarities. The leader of the British team commented, "The distance between India and the UK is about 7000 km, but the problems are similar". One positive observation by the visitors was that concerned personnel are trying hard to work out the solutions to overcome these

problems both in India and in UK. On this ground there is a lot that can be shared between these educational systems.

Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education, Mumbai

Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education (HBCSE) is a 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, cognition and science communication. It is the nodal centre of the Government of India for the National Olympiad Programme. HBCSE undertakes projects both in rural and urban areas to design methods and materials to improve teaching of science and mathematics in Indian schools. Of the manifold activities of the center, two projects in primary education were chosen for presentation. The first was on the Curriculum Development Project, highlighting the salient features of the new science curriculum under preparation. The second presentation was based on the project undertaken in collaboration with a voluntary organisation to conduct in-service training of primary teachers. The programme led to the development of a two-tier mode of teacher training.

HBCSE has an exhibition on the History of Science within its campus. It highlights various stages in the development of science and technology. The special feature of the exhibition is that it attempts to provide a balanced view of history, highlighting the contribution of eastern countries like China, India, etc. in shaping modern science and technology. The visiting team had an opportunity to see some of the exhibition panels. The teachers also had an opportunity to visit the integrated laboratory that is used to design low-cost concept-based experiments in science. Demonstration of some of the interesting experiments developed at HBCSE was organised. The visitors were also shown the low cost kit developed for schools that have no laboratory.

Comprehensive College of Education, Mumbai

The visit to the Comprehensive College of Education was arranged with the aim of familiarising the British teachers with the method of preparing prospective primary and secondary school teachers. They were able to interact with the faculty of the college and learn about the course content of the training programme, and were also taken to a room that displayed a variety of teaching aids prepared by student teachers. Some of the students came on the stage to express their opinions about the pre-service training that they have received from the college.

Apart from arranging regular courses for student teachers, the college also manages a centre for distance education for practising teachers. The college faculty work as resource persons during contact sessions of the distance learning programme and supervise the project work of the students. The faculty also shared their experiences of working with such students who are slightly over-aged as compared to the regular students. Some of the students undergoing distance education also came forward to share their experiences.

Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini, Uttan

Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini (RMP) is a unique research and training academy working for the capacity building of voluntary activists and elected representatives. RMP attempts to spread the idea of good governance in society. The institution, which is equipped with all the modern facilities to organise training programmes, seminars or conferences, is extensively used by the educational institutions and corporate sector. In a formal

presentation organised by RMP, the visitors were acquainted with the educational activities of the institute. Some of the artefacts prepared by local tribal artisans were also displayed.

A seminar was arranged on *Vedic*⁴ mathematics to familiarise the teachers with this unique system of mathematics education devised in India. The speaker explained the short Sanskrit formulae in the form of shlokas and demonstrated their use in mathematical calculations. Using these formulae he could make calculations involving big numbers within a short time. To begin with there was a little reluctance on the part of the visitors towards learning the mathematics, as many of them did not have a background in this subject. Soon, however, the resistance decreased and the teachers started enjoying the tricks presented by the speaker.

Interaction with Managers and Volunteers

Although interaction in the classroom is governed by the teachers, school education in India is influenced by various factors, school management being one. Teachers' associations also influence school teaching indirectly. In addition, there are voluntary agencies working to support school education. Familiarity with these organisations is necessary in order to get the full picture of the Indian education system. With this in mind, interaction was arranged with the members of school committees, teachers' associations and voluntary agencies. A brief account of this interaction follows.

Interaction with Members of School Management Committees

The schools in India are usually controlled by school committees. Different schools are managed quite distinctly. In order to familiarise the teachers with these diversities, an interaction was arranged with the members of school management committees from about 20 schools in the city of Dombivali, a metropolitan suburb of Mumbai. Representatives of the school management committees described how they struggle to provide formal education to the masses. Some of them focused their attention on various co-curricular activities undertaken in their respective schools. It was made clear that apart from teaching formal school subjects, the majority of schools spend time and energy in arranging activities like arts and science exhibitions, sports meetings, elocution/debating competitions, etc. There was also a demonstration of a few sporting activities for the benefit of the visitors. The peculiar activity called *lezim* impressed the visiting group, as it uses a simple instrument and displays unity among a large number of students. Many of them resorted to purchasing *lezim*⁵.

Dialogue with Members of Teachers' Association

There are teachers' associations at district, state and at national levels. The district of Thane has subject teachers' associations in addition to headmasters' associations. A half-day interaction was arranged with the members of the teachers' associations to acquaint the visiting team with their activities. Executive committee members of the Thane district Science Teachers' Association, Mathematics Teachers' Association and Headmaster's Association made themselves available for discussion. It was clear that apart from periodic meetings of their members, these associations organise in-service training courses for teachers. A notable feature of the associations is the organisation of special examinations to identify hidden talents among the students. The visiting group was amazed to note that teachers spared their own time for the activities of these associations without any monetary gain.

Discussion with Members of Voluntary Organizations

A special feature of Indian education is that there is a band of voluntary workers striving to support school education. Interaction was arranged with members of selected voluntary organisations in the district of Thane. Members of Gram Mangal, an organisation working for the education of disadvantaged children, discussed the problems of rural students and elaborated teaching techniques developed by them to facilitate learning. Their teaching is focussed on child-centred learning that draws upon the concrete experiences of students through activities and experiments. Another organisation that made itself available for discussion was Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), a voluntary agency working for the overall development of *vanvasis* (*vanvasis* are people living in forests). The VKA representative narrated their experiences in creating awareness about rights and duties among tribal communities living in Thane and Raigad districts. Yet another organisation that made presentation was Jana Kalyan Samitee (JKS). JKS representatives presented their experiences of a mobile laboratory that goes from one place to another showing experiments to school children in Thane and Raigad districts. It must be noted that the mobile laboratory comprises a kit of apparatus on a small jeep. It is taken to different villages where a teacher accompanying a jeep driver demonstrates experiments.

Vivekananda Ashram, a voluntary organisation, attempts to teach the tribal people to make optimum use of local resources. The Ashram provides motherly care to about 100 poor and orphan children from tribal communities. Apart from encouraging the children to undertake their studies the Ashram also focuses on teaching useful professions. The visiting group spent their time in looking at various facilities of the Ashram. What interested them most was interaction with the students. Even though many of the students had difficulty in communicating in English, the interaction continued for a long time. Through this, the teachers learned about the schedule of their activities, the nature of the school they attended, the subjects that they study, the nature of examinations that they face, etc. Students, on the other hand, made it a point to know from them what they taught and how British children are different from Indian children.

The visit to Vivekananda Ashram provided opportunity for the teachers to witness the effort made by the Ashram to support school education. They could see that in the absence of this support the students would not have had schooling. They could also see how the alumni continue their contacts with the Ashram and try to pay back their debts. In fact, when the teachers entered into the hostel rooms they noticed that the alumni were supervising the study of their younger brothers and sisters. They were informed that the Ashram management gets help from different groups of people. Some of the British teachers even expressed their willingness to donate a computer to the Ashram for use by the students. It is hoped that this materialises soon.

Seminar on Teaching Creativity across the Curriculum

Teaching creativity is an important objective of school education. Efforts are made to enhance creative ability among the students both in the UK and in India. A day-long seminar was arranged at the VPM's college campus at Thane on 'Teaching Creativity Across the Curriculum'. Apart from the entire visiting group, it was attended by school-teachers, representatives of school management committees, school headmasters, members of voluntary organizations and teachers' associations.

The seminar was inaugurated by a noted educationalist in Information Technology. By

recalling his personal experiences, he emphasised the role of teachers in enhancing creative thinking among the students. He also observed that an Indian always considers himself/herself under the debt of father, mother, society and teacher. It is this feeling that draws tremendous respect for the teachers in India.

A group of teachers from Newham Local Education Authority made a long presentation to describe various activities undertaken by them to develop creativity among the students at primary level. The description included skills of creative thinking in arts, crafts and music. Groups from different schools made presentations based on the efforts made by their respective schools. After that a presentation was made based on designing games and interesting activities to teach science, mathematics and geography. The presentation brought home the point that games and attention-catching activities can keep the children engaged in academic pursuits.

Sight-seeing and Cultural Programmes

One of the important places that were chosen for sight seeing was Gharapuri Island, a site of magnificent Elephanta caves consisting of beautiful carvings, sculpture and a temple of the Hindu God *Shiva*⁶. It is one of the world's heritage sites designated by UNESCO. The sculpture carved out of solid basalt rock creates a representation of heavenly mountain residence of Lord Shiva. Sight-seeing was also arranged to the city of Mumbai. Some of the sites visited were the art galleries, the Gateway of India and the beautiful sea coast of the Arabian Sea.

A few cultural programmes were arranged as a part of the visit programme. Some of the schools that the group visited attempted to show folk dances and songs. In addition, special programmes by professional artists were arranged. The visit to Gharapuri Island coincided with the Elephanta festival, which enabled the visitors to experience a beautiful *sarod* recital and *bharatnatyam*⁷ by two famous personalities of India. A special *sitar* recital was also arranged for the visitors. The programme that appealed the teachers most was a dance performance. Apart from classical dances of India like *kuchipudi*⁷ and *bharatnatyam* the dance group performed folk dances of various regions of India. The accompanying commentary in English explained the genesis of each dance, the clothes worn by the artists and the special features of different dances. A question and answer session at the end of the dance programme was an added attraction. The interesting epilogue of the cultural programme was the visit to a cinema theatre. During an informal discussion, it was realised that the teachers had curiosity about Bollywood films, as the film industry in Mumbai (popularly known as Bollywood) is one of the biggest in the world. Taking account of this, a visit was arranged to a cinema theatre in the city of Thane that screened a new Hindi film.

Summary and Implications

The visit programme described in this report was the first of its kind. It was planned based on the understanding of special features of Indian education and Indian culture. From the feedback received from the teachers, the plan seems to have worked well. As mentioned earlier, the visit was arranged under the auspices of the LECT. A representative of LECT also accompanied the team, and gave the following feedback:

The programme aims are: (1) To provide international professional devolvement to teachers through study visits around particular curricular themes and (2) To build relationships with overseas countries and to establish long term links. These aims were met through (1) Visits to a variety of schools - primary, secondary, government, fee

paying, (2) Interaction with staff and specialists in the field of education (3) Interaction with pupils and (4) Attendance of seminars which put the whole education system into perspectives

There was an opportunity to visit a wide range of institutions to see how they all work and inter-relate. Hotel facilities and support by hosts were excellent. There was also an opportunity to experience the cultural flavour. It would be better if there was opportunity to spend longer at one school, enabling teachers to observe lessons in progress and to see more of what happens during a normal school day. A reduced schedule over the first day would be advisable to allow a period of acclimatisation. Time should be given at the end of some days for reflection and discussions among the teachers. In summary, it was an excellent and well-planned programme incorporating professional and cultural activities across wide areas.

As the visit progressed, the British teachers and their Indian counterparts have realised 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 setting. The Teachers International Professional Development Programme thus has the potential to build a strong collaboration between teachers from different cultures. CASTME should think of furthering such exchange programmes in various Commonwealth countries.

Acknowledgements

Organisation of the visit of British teachers to India involved a large number of institutions and personnel. The visit was sponsored by the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT), London. We are grateful towards the officials of the LECT for their support and advice. The Institute for Oriental Study (IOS) agreed to host the visit. It is a pleasure to thank the management and the staff members of IOS for their support. A variety of schools in and around Thane were approached to arrange a visit of the British teachers. We are happy to record that the school management, principals and teachers of the schools offered their unreserved cooperation. Visits were also arranged to training and research institutes in and around Mumbai. We would like to thank the heads and staff members of these institutions for their cooperation.

As part of the academic interactions, a day-long seminar was arranged at the Thorale Bajirao Peshawe Sabhagraha, Thane. We would like to thank the management of the Vidya Prasarak Mandal for providing facilities for the seminar. We also acknowledge the excellent inaugural lecture delivered by Prof. D. B. Phatak, Director, Kanval Rekhi Institute for Information Technology, Mumbai. The cultural programme was an important part of the visit. We take the opportunity to thank the officials of the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation for making a visit to Elephanta Festival a memorable event. The British teachers could witness the performance of two famous Indian personalities.

Cooperation received from the British teachers was excellent. They soon adjusted with the changed environment and took the visit as a learning opportunity. Indian teachers were keen on highlighting salient features of the Indian education system and knowing more about the education system in UK. The discussions between teachers were lively and fruitful. In fact, on many occasions, the discussions had to be stopped to stick to the

planned schedule of the visit. We express our gratitude for the cooperation received from the teachers. Students in the schools were very cooperative. Although many of them had difficulty in expressing themselves in English they managed to communicate effectively with the British teachers. In addition to answering questions asked of them, some of the students even went further to enquire about the difficulties faced by their counterparts in the UK. We greatly appreciate the eagerness and enthusiasm displayed by the school students.

Notes

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 the educational curriculum, importance was given to personality development and inter-human relationships.
2. *Taluka* is a subdivision of a district.
3. *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 auspicious occasions.
4. 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 and most Indian sacred literatures.
5. A gadget made of iron chain attached to a wooden handle that makes a pleasant sound when shaken.
6. A member of the Hindu trinity. Other two are *Brahma* and *Vishnu*.
7. One of the traditional Hindu dance styles practised since ancient times.