

People's Education in India Perspective of Jadavpur University

By Asoke Bhattacharya and Tandra Mitra

During the turmoil of the late sixties and early seventies the world was practically out of joint. The Vietnam war, its escalation in Laos and Cambodia, the dropping of Napalm and the devastation of the Ho-Chi-Minh trail were the nightmarish experiences of the period. The Sorbonne students' uprising in 1968 and its cascading effect were signs of impending changes. In Indian sub-continent and particularly in West Bengal, the Naxalite peasant revolt, making and breaking of the United Front Government and the emergence of Bangladesh were symbols of people's frustration with the prevailing system and their desire to develop an egalitarian society.

The first United Front Government that came into power in West Bengal in 1967 lasted only for nine months. But within this short span of time the peasants understood that the days of superexploitation by the landlords were numbered. The land reform movement in West Bengal started in 1967. In 1969 with the second United Front in office, the movement spread in the countryside like a prairie fire. Unfortunately the second United Front was also shortlived. It remained in office for only thirteen months. However, the forces that were unleashed in 1969 were something to reckon with. The Left front - a more consolidated group from amongst the constituents of the erstwhile United Front assumed office in 1977. Again the principal agenda of the government was land reform. Operating Barga - the task of granting recognition to the share-croppers - continued in full swing for more than five years.

During all these political and economic struggles literacy occupied a back seat. There were of course individual attempts to impart literacy to the rural and urban poor. But these endeavours never gained any momentum. No serious attempt was made either on behalf of the state or central government to eradicate illiteracy. The leftist parties had all along demanded compulsory primary education. But it never dawned on them that even in spite of compulsory primary education, the huge illiterate adult population would not be covered. Compulsory primary education was also not full-proof - a considerable percentage of drop out had to be tackled.

From independence achieved in 1947 till 1978, the Central Government tackled or sought to tackle the problem of illiteracy through the Department of Social Education. Only in the year 1978 a separate Directorate of Adult Education Programme (NAEP) was launched. From 1986 onwards, as the situation got out of hand - statistics showed that by the year 2000 AD India would have within its boundary half of the world's illiterate population - that eradication of illiteracy programme got some prominence. The Universities and institutes of higher learning were asked to participate in the programme of literacy through the Departments/Centres of Adult and continuing Education. In 1988 the National Literacy Mission was created to eradicate illiteracy. The National Literacy Mission (NLM) within a short time became a strong movement.

National inspiration came in 1990 when Ernakulam, a district in the province of Kerala, the southernmost state, became the first illiteracy-free district in the country. In 1991 the whole state of Kerala was declared literate. Kerala achieved this feat by making literate 2.280.000 people.

The Kerala experiment and its enthusiastic outcome inspired other states to follow. West Bengal, one of the industrially advanced and socially conscious states was in the throes of a veritable social transformation so far as the literacy scenario was concerned. From 1990 to 1994 the inhabitants of the state witnessed a social movement unprecedented in the country in which literally millions were thronging the class rooms and Operation Blackboard reached almost every corner of the state. Large districts with staggeringly high figures of illiteracy were achieving the target of complete eradication of illiteracy and millions of men and women - poor and underprivileged - were having a new experience unavailable to them for centuries.

This unprecedented social movement, which cut across all boundaries of religion, politics, caste, creed and language presented a unique opportunity of creating a mass of self-reliant people through a comprehensive programme of post-literacy follow-up, pooling the resources of various agencies of the state and central government, NGOs, autonomous bodies etc. In the absence of such a programme the tide would turn to the opposite direction. In that case these people would be permanently opposed to any progressive social movement. Unfortunately, for the last three years, the movement is showing signs of

withering. The enthusiasm which was shown by various voluntary organisations and especially the people, is waning steadily due to lack of leadership. Under the circumstances Jadavpur University proposes to place before the policy makers and the international community its own experience as well as the most successful experiment in the field of people's awakening - the experience of Denmark and the ideas of Grundtvig - so that a comprehensive programme along with mop-up operations are taken up in right earnest.

Experience of Adult, Continuing Education and Extension Centre of Jadavpur University (ACEEC/JU)

Over a decade ACEEC/JU has been engaged in implementation of adult literacy programme in rural areas in line with the operational plan drawn up by University Grants Commission (UGC). The Centre undertook the task of making literate a large number of individuals through a network of adult education centres spread over the whole adopted area in Sonarpur Block of South 24 Parganas district. Right from the inception the Centre was confronted with a barrage of questions from the participants of the programme. Many of the learners questioned the usefulness of the programme where literacy would not lead to improvement in their quality of life. Hence the Centre had from the very beginning devised a whole gamut of post-literacy continuing education scheme for follow-up actions to ensure continuity of contact with the motivated learners in the community.

In designing the post-literacy continuing education programme ACEEC/JU always gave priority to the need of the neoliterates for development of consciousness in socio-economic matters as also in matters like health, hygiene, family welfare etc. Which would ultimately result in uplift of quality of life for the beneficiary. First-hand experience of extension work taught that without a judicious mix of consciousness development and skill development programme the basic objective of literacy and post-literacy programme could not be met.

With this perspective ACEEC/JU collaborated with McGill University of Canada for achieving some of the targets envisaged. The project involved development of a self-sustaining programme of providing literacy and post-literacy follow up. It was designed for crea-

ting an information system that identified educational needs of the served regions and led to a strategic plan to design curriculum, determine programme resource needs and monitor performance. This helped to develop appropriate course materials, teaching manuals and audio-visual materials. Five functional areas namely literacy, management, agriculture, health care and women's empowerment were identified for transfer of knowledge and experience. The training of trainers concept was instrumental in this project. The project enhanced accessibility to literacy and functional skills for the rural population particularly women, landless labourers and underemployed. The project was conducted in active liaison with rural self-governments, cooperatives and various agencies.

With the successful completion of the project, the Centre, in accordance with the UGC guideline, set up three Jana Shiksha Nilayams or Post-literacy Centres in three Gram Panchayats or village conglomerations to continue the activities in a planned manner. It conducted discussions, seminars and debates on burning issues of the day where rural people participated in large number. It regularly offered courses for development of skill particularly for the women. It regularly offered to the local population a large number of books and periodicals through a library system which was also equipped with TV, VCR, audio-cassette players etc.

Experience over a decade in conducting such literacy and post-literacy programmes drove home some basic issues. It was felt that individuals isolated from one another, largely unemployed, cannot effectively utilise the skills acquired through such programmes for economic benefit of his/her family or community. In fact, mutual cooperation is essential for achieving tangible results.

While experimenting with the above-mentioned ideas it was realized in a hard way that the government authorities dealing with cooperatives were thoroughly inappropriate to deal with a situation where millions of men and women - poor and under-privileged would form thousands of cooperatives. Red-tapism, bureaucratic bungling and total apathy for understanding the needs of the poorest of the poor characterise the present set-up. A host of laws and bye-laws, frightening and cumbersome, are standing in the way of comprehensive rural development.

The Ideas of Grundtvig and the experience of Denmark

The extensive land reform movement and development of three-tier Panchayet system of self-governance together with the struggle for eradication of illiteracy characterise a significant stage in the development of people's consciousness in West Bengal over the last one and a half decade. To retain this gain and achieve further success in this direction it will be necessary to adopt such policies which will help solidify this amorphous mass of neoliterates into a self-reliant and purposeful segment of humanity. For helpful guidance in this matter we may turn to People's Colleges of Scandinavian countries and especially of Denmark. Reference to this unique movement was first made by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the former President of India and Dr. Meghnad Saha, the renowned physicist way back in 1948/49 in the report of the University Education Commission.

When the People's College movement was initiated in Denmark a century and a half ago, the Danes had just completed a thorough-going land reform although the people were still poverty-stricken, largely unschooled, privilege-ridden and despirited. In considerable degree as a result of the People's college movement, the Danish people rose from ignorance and poverty to about the highest general level of education and well-being among all the nations of the world.

The part which the People's Colleges have played in this transition is suggested by the fact that a third of the rural people attend them, while another third come under their direct influence. A considerable number of the members of the national legislature and almost eighty percent of the cooperative leaders in a country, where cooperatives play a major economic role, are educated at People's Colleges.

A description of the Danish People's college is appropriate to a study of Indian Universities. The conditions under which it came into being are strikingly similar to those in India. Nicolai F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) began promoting his ideas of the People's College in 1839 in much the same way as Gandhi presented the Basic Education idea just a century later. Culturally the Danes had lost their bearing. Everything foreign was in high favour. The native language was being displaced by German. Defeated in war in 1813 the nation was officially declared bankrupt. Norway seceded after 400 years of union. Educated Danes were completely under influence of foreign

scholarship. Instead of being aroused by these conditions, the Danish people sank into hopeless apathy, expecting national extinction.

It was in such an atmosphere that Grundtvig, at the age of 47, began to agitate for the folk high school idea, arousing men and women to the importance of education for the common people and to love of the fatherland and loyalty to it. Within Grundtvig's life-time there was a strong movement in favour of his ideas.

Grundtvig was opposed to the prevailing system of education in Denmark. He said that it resulted in producing a higher caste of educated while masses of the country were left in ignorance to slave for them. It would not do to have the whole population become professors, state officials or paupers, he said. Grundtvig believed that a national awakening must begin with a spiritual enlightenment of the common people. The mother tongue should be a common factor.

According to Grundtvig, the aim of the People's Colleges should not be examinations and an assured livelihood, but for each individual the development and enlightenment which would bring their own reward.

The schools which Grundtvig's disciples had created (and the tradition is still continuing) were located in open country. The students lived in close association with the teachers often in one building. The furnishings were simple, sometimes meagre and the students were not educated away from the simple living.

The People's Colleges created an intellectual and spiritual climate in which progress seemed to be the natural course. The People's Colleges did not have separate courses for cooperatives yet Denmark developed a large and successful cooperative movement and most heads of cooperatives were men and women from people's colleges.

(This section is paraphrased from the University Education Commission Report of 1948/49)

How Education could be linked with 3-tier Panchayat system - general guideline following the example of Denmark

The land reform movement and development of people's consciousness motivated the Government in West Bengal to delegate power and resources at the very grass-root level. The three-tier Panchayat system in West Bengal - which started operating since 1978 - is an

enviable contribution in practising democracy at the lowest level of administration. The advantage of having such a well-oiled representative system of self-governance through which percolate almost fifty percent of the state budget can now be creatively utilised for development of people's education and culture and for creating the basis of a sustainable rural development. We present a scheme for consideration of the policy makers and planners.

1. Each gram panchayat (village level) should develop a People's Basic School or Jana Shiksha Nilayam (JSN) where adult literacy programme and post-literacy continuing education programme will be conducted in a planned manner. No one without basic literacy skill will be entertained by the Panchayat. Every such member will attend the basic literacy programme conducted at the Panchayat on a regular basis. Separately neoliterates will be encouraged to visit the JSN regularly to reinforce their literacy skill. Regular talks, discussions and debates will be organised for the neoliterates. Some training programmes in agriculture, rural-industry, health, hygiene etc. should be organised. Panchayat should declare incentives/prize-money etc. to outstanding participants. State government should provide adequate funds for conducting such programmes. A monitoring cell consisting of local opinion leaders not connected with the JSN or Panchayat should regularly inspect the activities and submit report. Supervisors conducting such programmes should be employed on contract basis. Those found inadequate for the task should be replaced by new recruits.
2. Each Panchayat Samity (Block level) should develop a people's high school. Adults in the age-group of 18-35 should be encouraged to join this high school. The entrants to this school should be selected on the basis of performance at the JSNs. These high schools will be residential in nature. Subjects like national history, culture, etc. should be taught. Community singing should be part of daily activity. Students will be encouraged to learn music, drama, recitation etc. Besides, the students should be encouraged to develop skill in the area of his/her preference. A number of skill development programmes should be made available. Basic commerce subjects like book-keeping and accountancy should be taught so that on finishing the course the students can

form and manage cooperatives. Individuals with business acumen will also be encouraged to start business.

3. Each Zilla Parishad (District level) should develop a 'People's College'. Here training will be given to specialize in areas like language, literature, cultural activities, various trades of production, entrepreneurship development etc. These colleges should be residential in nature too. Entrants to this college should be selected on the basis of performance at the 'People's High School'. Those selected should be prepared to act as trainers at the People's High Schools and the Jana Shiksha Nilayam or People's Basic Schools.

In all these institutions predominantly rural boys and girls should be selected. Efforts should be made to ascertain that those who have strong desire to go back to the village should find preference. All teaching jobs in these institutions should be on contract basis. Persons not found suitable should be terminated after the contract period. Each tier should allocate funds for these institutions. The government should allocate funds for these institutions in the budget itself. These institutions should also carry messages of women's empowerment, anti-dowry campaign, democracy, human rights, movement against social evils like superstitions, improvement of quality of life through maintenance of ecological balance, awareness in matters of health, hygiene, mother and child care etc.

Finally the eight universities of the state should guide and monitor the programmes through the Adult, Continuing Education and Extension Centres existing in these Universities. This will give the necessary linkages at both ends to innovate programmes. The Nodal University of the state should prepare a coordinating body that would see to it that uniform quality of education exists in all these institutions throughout the state. The Adult Education Directorate, the State Resource Centre and the Department of Panchayat should have representatives in this apex body. Representatives from such diverse sectors will ensure that there remain checks and balances and no department or institution has an exclusive say in the development of policy.

Proposed Plan of action of Jadavpur University

Jadavpur University through its Adult, Continuing Education and Extension Centre proposes to carry out the following range of activities to creatively implement the Grundtvigian concept of people's education.

1. It will set up in collaboration with international organisations and especially the Centre for Grundtvig Studies of Aarhus University, the Grundtvig International Centre for Study and Research in Adult Education. The aim of this Centre will be to implement - through pilot projects - the Grundtvigian concept of people's enlightenment.
2. This International Centre will conduct studies on the historical perspective of the Grundtvigian movement and its relevance for countries of the third World, especially India. It will strive for arriving at a synthesis of the concepts of Grundtvig, Tagore, Freire, and Gandhi.
3. The Centre will prepare a master plan for literacy and post-literacy activities in India in the urban and rural sector.
4. A master plan for development of People's Colleges and rural Universities similar to that of Scandinavia will be prepared for consideration by the government of India. Jadavpur University itself will act as such a rural university and will integrate a number of People's Colleges and Folk High Schools in its catchment area.
5. The Research Centre will prepare syllabi and comprehensive reading materials for various stages of literacy and post-literacy. In doing this the researchers will share the experience of Denmark and other Scandinavian countries.
6. The Research Centre will invite scholars from Denmark and other countries of the world to study the literacy and post-literacy activities in India today and suggest ways and means to improve upon the current programme. Indian scholars will also visit Denmark and other countries to learn from their experiences in people's education.