

# Education and India's Poverty

Prof. V. V. John

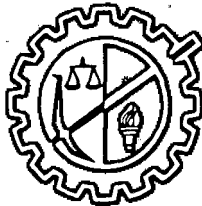


**FORUM OF FREE ENTERPRISE**

PIRAMAL MANSION, 235 DR. D. N. ROAD,  
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**"Free Enterprise was born with man and  
shall survive as long as man survives."**

**—A. D. Shroff**

**1899-1965**

**Founder-President**

**Forum of Free Enterprise**

# EDUCATION AND INDIA'S POVERTY

Prof. V. V. John \*

I am mindful of the honour that has been conferred on me in being asked to deliver this year's A. D. Shroff Memorial Lecture. These lectures perpetuate the memory of a remarkable man who was greatly concerned about the economic welfare of the people of India, and the ways in which free institutions could bring about such well-being. The speakers in previous years have been men who could speak authoritatively on economic and other public problems and suggest answers. In venturing to speak to you on "Education and India's Poverty", I cannot claim the expertise of previous speakers. This does not, however, inhibit me. As things are today, every citizen has a right, and even the obligation, to have opinions on education and on poverty. I am grateful for the opportunity given me to exercise the right and discharge this obligation, in so public a manner and under such earnest auspices.

The poverty of India has been the subject of able economic analyses in recent years. Three studies that I have consulted are: *Poverty in India*, by Dr. V. M. Dandekar and Prof. Nilakantha Rath, *Challenge of Poverty in India*, edited by A. J. Fonseca, and *Poverty in India, Then and Now, 1870-1970*, being the Dadabhai Naoroji Memorial Lectures delivered in Bombay in 1973, by M. L. Dantwala. These books provide scholarly guidance on the concept of poverty, on ways of measuring it, and on the magnitude of its harrowing presence in our country. The plentiful statistical data and the calculations based on them that these learned works

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\* Prof. John, eminent educationist, is a former Vice-Chancellor of Jodhpur University, and at present with the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla. This is the text of the tenth A. D. Shroff Memorial Lecture delivered under the auspices of the Forum of Free Enterprise in Bombay on 27th October 1975.

present have rescued the discussion of poverty from emotional generalities. But the discussion has perhaps moved to the other extreme of becoming a recondite academic exercise for scholars, the outcome of whose learned debate should be awaited before programmes of action could be taken up. This is a development unintended by the scholars. And fortunately, some of them have spelt out their findings in terms intelligible to the common man. And in simple terms, the finding is that, on a conservative reckoning, more than 250 million people in this country, including 100 million children, will go hungry to bed tonight; they had done it yesterday, and the same prospect awaits them tomorrow.

Greatly beholden as we are to the economists for their masterly presentation and analysis of data, it is necessary to insist that poverty is not chiefly an economic problem; it is a moral problem. The economists have rescued the problem from vague generalities, to which the responses had been largely sentimental. The sentiment, however, is not to be despised or abandoned. The need is to infuse it with intelligent understanding, and make it the motive force in programmes of action. This is one of the high tasks of education today.

Once the facts of poverty are clearly ascertained, there is, however, a possibility that the sheer size of the problem might seem to make compassion an impracticable and irrelevant approach. In the developed and affluent countries, there is a growing body of opinion that reckons world poverty to be beyond the capacity of international aid to ameliorate; there is, therefore, no wisdom in letting more of the aid go down the drain. There is even a growing apprehension that those parts of the world that are underdeveloped and will not develop in a hurry, pose a threat to modern civilisation; the developed countries are, therefore, endangering their own survival by coming to the assistance of the poorer countries who will continue to be poor and continue to be a menace to civilisation.

An extreme statement of this position is reportedly contained in a futuristic French novel by Jean Raspail,

entitled: *The Camp of the Saints*. Famine has spread over Asia, and a million hungry people from Calcutta take over all the ships in the harbour and sail to Europe in search of food. The squalid details of the journey are given in such a vivid manner as seemingly to justify the ferocity with which the citadel of civilisation deals with the armada on arrival. Compassionate people find that there are limits to what compassion can accomplish. Civilisation decides to cut its losses and to protect and preserve what it can amidst the advancing floods of want and misery. I have not read the novel, but only the reviews, and am therefore unable to decide whether the author writes in earnest or is employing an extreme form of irony. But the impatient and even callous response to world hunger that the novel reports is spreading in the developed and affluent parts of the world.

Much as we should welcome a world outlook on world problems, foreign impatience with our continued indigence should not worry us too much. We are grateful for the help that has come to us in our hour of need, but such help, if extended beyond a limited period, is likely to keep us in need indefinitely. What should, however, worry us are certain attitudes nearer home, in regard to tackling the problem of poverty. There are people amongst us who have decided that the poor will be with us for a long time to come, and that the wise course is to let the poor perish and opt for quality programmes for the numbers we can afford. They do not put it so crudely, for fear of the wrath of the multitude, but all the elegant phrasing they indulge in does not conceal the fact that they are giving up on the ideal of an egalitarian and just society.

I propose to illustrate my point by drawing your attention to what is happening in the field of education. Our educational system is a scandalous pyramid of privileges, despite the continual rhetoric about universal education, equalising educational opportunity and using education as an instrument of social change. The Kothari Commission Report refers to "the growing awakening among the masses who, suppressed for centuries, have now awakened to a sense

of their rights and are demanding education, equality, higher standards of living and better civic amenities.". I refrain from saying anything here on the condescending term "masses" (used many times in the Report) in referring to the people of India. If people have awakened to a sense of their rights, it would seem that they are being put to sleep again, in the most skilful manner.

I shall limit my comments to the way the people's demand for education has been met. Enrolments have increased at all levels of education, and the most notable of all is the explosion of numbers at the university level, more than tenfold in a quarter century. This swelling of numbers has been achieved through allowing a large number of sub-standard institutions to come into being, and by lowering curricular requirements. At the time that the Kothari Commission submitted their report, they had publicly acknowledged that our first degrees in arts, science and commerce were no longer meaningful academic qualifications. In the nine years since the report was submitted, the situation has not changed. People have merely been given the illusion that educational opportunities have expanded.

Meanwhile, in the apparent search for quality, a privileged sector has grown up in education, where the expenditure from public funds has been ten or fifteen times the *per capita* expenditure in other, more generally accessible, sectors. No one denies that it costs money to train good professionals, scholars and scientists. And the country needs them. But if the country is to pay for their training, the country has a right to expect an adequate return. On a situation analogous to our own in Tanzania, President Nyerere expressed himself in these words: "Some of our citizens will have large amounts of money spent on their education, while others have none. Those who receive the privilege therefore have a duty to repay the sacrifices which others have made. They are like the man who has been given all the food available in a starving village in order that he may have strength to bring supplies back from a distant place. If he takes his food and does not bring help to his brothers, he is a traitor.

Similarly, if any of the young men and women who are given education by the people of this Republic adopt attitudes of superiority, or fail to use their knowledge to help the development of this country, then they are betraying our Union.” (Introduction to Tanzania’s *Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development*, 1964)

In India, however, considering that unemployment threatens even well-trained professionals, and there is no unwillingness among trained personnel to accept public employment, it may seem needless to insist that those on whose education public funds have been invested should be willing to produce a commensurate return for the investment. With us, the complaint may seem to relate to those professionally trained young people who migrate to affluent lands in search of more remunerative employment. This is what is referred to sometimes as the “brain drain,” as unpleasant a phrase as the phenomenon described, indicating a sort of intellectual sewage through which human beings pass into a polluted sea of affluence. The worry over the brain drain is often overdone. For demographic reasons, if for nothing else, there is a case for exporting trained manpower from India; there will always be plenty left behind for our needs, large as they are. Unthinking laments over the brain drain may lead to embarrassing predicaments such as we have been facing lately over the difficulties that the British Medical Council raised in regard to recognising the medical degrees awarded by our universities. Our protests were based on more than a matter of prestige. Otherwise, we could have reacted by withholding recognition of the medical degrees of British universities. And if we were really concerned over the brain drain, this gives us a chance to call our doctors back home from Britain. I am told that this would greatly dislocate the National Health Services in Britain. The trouble is that simple question such as whether they need our doctors, and whether we want them back in our country, are not put straight and answered straight. Meanwhile, clearing our mind of any cant about the brain drain, we should decide that if people want to go, we should let them go. We cannot hold them back, without subtracting from the freedom of the rest of



us who want to stay. The only claim that the state can make on the emigrants is the return of the money spent on their professional training.

My finding is that the lament over the brain drain is a clever hoax. I have known scientists and technologists in positions of power, who would not lift a finger to get our bright boys back from abroad. The lament however continues, and is a performance put on for the benefit of the laity. It is a simple device for creating a scarcity psychosis in regard to brain power and expertise, so that the experts who are already in position may receive higher emoluments. We have learnt this trick from the profiteering operators in the commodity market.

I should like to tarry a little longer over this metaphoric discussion of the Indian brain. The real brain drain is within the country. (I find the phrase distasteful, but also find it a useful shorthand in discussion.) Brains that should be working full-time in the service of the people are either not working to full capacity, or allowing themselves to be diverted to tasks unworthy of high intelligence. Far too many of our intellectuals have accepted the roles of hirelings and courtiers. They would seem to be the only ones who are working their brains to full capacity. The rest have accepted indolence as a way of cultured life. To put it rather crudely, the dream of every educated Indian is to draw a full-time salary for part-time work, the more part-time, the better.

Limiting myself again to the field of education, it may be recalled that until a little while ago, our colleges and universities in most parts of the country had more holidays, scheduled and unscheduled, than working days. There used to be general uncertainty about the dates of examinations and of the commencement of the terms. Vice-Chancellors and professors used to bewail that it was unreal to talk of educational change and reform so long as peaceful conditions for the normal functioning of educational institutions did not exist. The peaceful conditions they had been pining for have arrived. The campuses are quieter than they have been for

the last 30 or 40 years, the stage is apparently set for the radical improvements that we had been promising ourselves. But there are as yet no signs of change. I have in recent weeks asked more than one vice-chancellor what use he proposed to put the new opportunities to. I got the impression that my question was considered officious and impertinent.

I have looked into the "twenty-point programme" for some clue to the changes we might expect in the field of education. I am not ignoring the fact that the "twenty points" are mainly concerned with economic matters. But there are areas in which economic development would be unthinkable without educational change. I find that the last three of the 20 points have a bearing on education. One of them promises food and other essential commodities at controlled prices in students' hostels. Another relates to the supply of textbooks and stationery in educational institutions, again at controlled prices. The last point relates to the expansion of apprenticeship programmes in industry and trade, so as to provide for more employment.

The 20 points in the programme, each of them unexceptionable and beneficent in itself, could do with some public elucidation and discussion. Intellectuals, who could have been expected to render this service to the state, have instead chosen to sing uncritical hosannas. They must have been abashed by the Prime Minister saying the other day that the 20 points were a tentative and incomplete beginning, and further measures would be needed to ensure the welfare of all people. We have not heard from our economists about any further measures they consider necessary.

I would suggest that the searchers of "relevance" among our curriculum-makers should find in the proposed economic reforms material not only for discussion in the classroom, but also for study based on field experience. The programmes of reform include such old commitments as the equitable distribution of land, relief of indebtedness and workers' participation in the management of industry. These call for

detailed regional studies, as well as theoretical consideration of the larger issues of equality and the social order. Land reform, for instance, would mean different things in different regions. Its impact in Kerala is different from what it would be in Bihar. In fact, the universities and colleges in Bihar should be able to tell us why Bihar, with more land laws on the statute book than any other State in India, has even today a more exploitative land system than any other State in the country.

Hilaire Belloc once said that all controversy was ultimately theological. I would hazard a similar simplification and claim that all problems are ultimately educational. There may be areas in which this generalisation may seem to be of doubtful validity. But it certainly will apply to the problem of poverty. This is acknowledged by the Kothari Commission, who in the very first paragraph of their Report, declared, "On the quality and number of persons coming out of our schools and colleges will depend our success in the great enterprise of national reconstruction the principal objective of which is to raise the standard of living of our people." And in listing the programmes of national development on which the country is engaged and the difficult short-term problems, the first in their reckoning is the problem of hunger; they quote Mahatma Gandhi who said, "If God were to appear in India, he will have to take the form of a loaf of bread."

The Commission acknowledges that "the elimination of ignorance and of grinding poverty accumulated over centuries of inertia and exploitation is not an easy task." To make even a beginning with the task, there is something more important and urgent than vocationalisation, uniformity of patterns which has bewildered everyone and the reform of educational credentials, on which a great deal of fervour is currently being worked up. The first requirement is to sensitise the beneficiaries of the system in regard to the lot of those outside the privileged circle. Education should not only train the intellect and impart productive skills, but also deepen and refine sensibility. Young people are however able

to pass through college and university without ever being disturbed by the emotions of compassion and of gratitude. On the moral plane, or more correctly, on the immoral plane, the only lessons learnt are those of self-seeking.

Students in prestigious institutions, and even the faculty, have generally no idea of the disproportionate amounts that are spent on them from public funds. How else can we explain the strident demand made by the students of one of these institutions for substantial improvements in the menu in their hostels without any increase in their hostel fees? It is an institution in which the *per capita* expenditure from public funds average more than Rs. 10,000 a year.

The young learn from their elders. Some time ago, there was a teachers' agitation on one of our university campuses, and it took the form of a "relay hunger strike" by batches of teachers. The demand was for higher emoluments such as had been sanctioned in the Central Universities. They drew angry comparisons between their work and the work done in the favoured universities. They are not known to have made any comparisons between their lot and the lot of school teachers. It was also strange that, in a country where millions went hungry to bed every night, these educated men expected to make an impression by ostentatiously missing two or three meals in a row.

I know of only one good definition of a nation. People do not become a nation by inhabiting a particular territory, or professing the same religion, or speaking the same language. They become a nation by being concerned about one another's well-being, and by having common moral and cultural goals. The extension of human sympathy and concern should not stop at national frontiers, but should ultimately cover the whole of the human race. The nation is only a preliminary step to this wider concern. There are elements in our education that seem to reverse this process, stunt the generous impulses of youth, and turn them into self-centred climbers and careerists.

This may seem an unjustified indictment, considering the progressive and radical noises that are widely heard on our campuses. Even at their most articulate, did the noises amount to anything more than shadow-boxing between the right and the left, and such undefined concepts as socialism and capitalism? Education will not, however, be able to become an instrument of social change until the slogans and clichés are put away, and attention is directed to the realities of the social order in the country.

A distinguished friend of mine, a teacher of philosophy, said some time ago that the urgent need of the country is to put aside everything else and spend the next six months in deciding to call everything by its real name. This will be a sort of reversal of the process that produced Orwell's Newspeak, in which "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength." Similar semantic turn-about is happening to words like progressive, radical and reactionary. All this verbiage is a conspiracy against the poor, for the battle over spurious ideologies is delaying the clear-headed apprehension of the human condition, and the training for meaningful action for its amelioration. Apparently distressed by the evils generated by the inequitable distribution of property, some persons have decided that social justice is impossible to achieve until the right to property is removed from among the fundamental rights enumerated in the Constitution. They did not make any distinction between the accumulation of property in the hands of a few, and widely distributed property, that is, small ownership duly safeguarded against the greed of plutocrats. They did not specify who should be in charge of property, once private property was abolished altogether, though it was not difficult to guess who would be in charge. They did not bother to examine why the land legislation in most of the States, aimed at curbing landlordism and limiting the size of holdings, has not been implemented. They would seemingly ask the landless and the poor to wait until the more radical change proposed in the Constitution is carried out. It reminds one of the story of the poor man who stopped a rich man on the road and asked for alms. The rich man said haughtily, "I don't hand

out money on the street." "So what should I do?" asked the beggar, "Open an office?"

One of the economic programmes of the Government aims at enforcing a ceiling on land holdings and distributing land to the landless. Such distribution of ownership should be possible in regard to other forms of property also, besides land. I would suggest that the feasibility of such wide dispersal of ownership should now become the subject of study in our colleges and universities. Instead, professors would tell you that "land to the landless" is a quixotic programme. They have calculated that if all the surplus land in the hands of big landowners were distributed, it would not mean more than half an acre each to the landless households in the villages. They would therefore ask for the abolition of the right to property. They do not want to acknowledge that an economic holding means different things in different parts of the country, that the state or the community could help the small farmer with agricultural inputs through co-operatives or otherwise, that the programme of land distribution need not be so arithmetically worked out as to leave nothing but uneconomic holdings. In Kerala, even the tenth of an acre that was given to tenants has been found to be viable. Our theorists should also take cognisance of the fact that widely distributed property means widely distributed power, both economically and politically, and should be the surest safeguard against exploitation and tyranny. Have these who demanded the abolition of the right to property carefully examined the consequences? If they would not, the universities should.

In this connection, I should like to read to you an excerpt from a little known book by G. K. Chesterton, entitled *Irish Impressions*. He gives an account of a debate on property held in the old Abbey Theatre in Dublin, in which he took part at the instance of W. B. Yeats. Recalling the debate, Chesterton writes, "My own argument was confined to the particular value of small property as a weapon of militant democracy, and was based on the idea that the citizen resisting injustice could find no substitute for private

property; for every other impersonal power, however democratic in theory, must be bureaucratic in form. I said, as a flippant figure of speech, that committing property to any officials, even guild officials, was like having to leave one's legs in the cloak-room along with one's stick or umbrella. The point is that a man may want his legs at any minute, to kick a man or dance with a lady; and recovering them may be postponed by any hitch, from the loss of the ticket to the criminal flight of the official. So in a social crisis, such as a strike, a man must be ready to act without officials who may hamper or betray him; and I asked whether many more strikes would not have been successful, if each striker had owned so much as a kitchen garden to help him to live. My opponent replied that he had always been in favour of such a reserve of proletarian property, but preferred it to be communal rather than individual; which seems to me to leave my argument where it was; for what is communal must be official, unless it is to be chaotic."

I have indulged in this apparent digression on property in order to indicate how a certain type of self-acclaimed progressives might do the poor out of the little that the state is now committed to doing for them. I reckon it a failure of education that issues relating to the social order, particularly those relating to the removal of poverty, are not being carefully examined in our colleges and universities, and instead, theories are being accepted on trust from elsewhere, mostly in unintelligible language.

Until very recently, there have been economists on our campuses, who were all for increasing the gross national product at all cost, irrespective of the possible and almost certain maldistribution of the product. Their argument was that if wealth does not increase, all we shall be able to distribute would be poverty. In their view, there was no harm if, for a while, the rich grew richer and the poor became poorer; there would be time enough to distribute the wealth later. We were all to await the day of the grand renunciation when the rich would give up their wealth, and bureaucrats would give up their power, and the common man would come into his own.

We have been told that in the developed countries of the world, industrial development came first, and the elimination of poverty came later. This painful process has left its memorials in English poetry. Elizabeth Barrett Browning asked, in *The Cry of the Children*,

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,  
Ere the sorrow comes with years?

And Thomas Hood, in *The Song of the Shirt*, lamented.

O God! that bread should be so dear,  
And flesh and blood so cheap!

Meanwhile, Henry George was warning his countrymen, in his book on *Progress and Poverty*, "So long as all the increased wealth which modern progress brings, goes but to build up great fortunes, to increase luxury, and make sharper the contrast between the House of Have and the House of Want, progress is not real and cannot be permanent." It is some measure of the imitative character of our culture and of our education that our theorists seem to see no alternative to letting history repeat itself amongst us, according to the British or the Russian model. We would do well to take note of the warning that every time history repeats itself, the cost has been going up.

It is the business of education to ensure that history does not repeat itself unless we want it to. But at the moment, we are witnessing Clio's costly, repetitive performances even in the field of education itself. As in the economy, so in education too, the poor are being asked to wait for the millennium. This is the meaning of what is being known as the "selective approach", in quality education. Since there is not enough room in the quality institutions, and not enough money to multiply such facilities, it seemingly stands to reason that admission should be on a selective basis. And it is just too bad that in competitive tests, boys and girls from poor homes secure low grades and have to stay out. Political pressure has secured quotas for certain sectors of the poor, such as the scheduled castes and tribes, but the



prestigious institutions to which they are somewhat reluctantly admitted, have not so far developed satisfactory programmes to enable these academically ill-equipped students to function competently. Before they further commiserate themselves unduly over the difficulties that these new responsibilities have imposed on them, they might profit by reading what UNESCO's International Commission on Educational Development, says (in *Learning to Be*) about the serious brain damage that is done to infants in poor countries owing to protein deficiency. This indicates how poverty becomes our educational problem.

I sat in recently on a discussion of "Education as an Equalising Agent". The discussion was largely on the sociological and psychological plane, and there were frequent references to the findings of sociologists like James Coleman and Christopher Jencks, and of psychologists like Jenson and Eysenck. The participants were concerned over the failure of education to achieve social mobility enough to become an equalising agent. Someone referred to Lipset's brief summary of Coleman's findings; "Schools do not make any difference; homes make the difference." There was also some reference to the circumstance that education, far from being an equalising agent, seems to aggravate inequality. And one participant even ruefully remarked that it was an awful untruth to claim that all men were created equal.

That all men are created equal is not a sociological or psychological pronouncement. In fact, the statement does not make sense on that plane. It makes sense only on the moral and spiritual plane. The equality of men is based on the truth that the things that differentiate them are not nearly as important as the things that they have in common. But it is the differences that form the content of sociology and psychology. If all men were alike, there would be no need for psychology or psychologists, and even less of sociology or sociologists. That men are different does not prevent them from being equal. And any effort towards achieving equality through eliminating the differences is fraught with

ominous consequences. It is the way to the Orwellian nightmare of *Nineteen Eightyfour*.

Education is being distracted from its true mission through a spurious concern with an incomplete and largely untenable notion of equality. The equality that, according to Christopher Jencks and his fellow sociologists, is unattainable through education, is what can be measured in terms of performance in the traditional academic system, and ultimately in terms of personal income. Within the given social order, largely organised on the basis of income differentials and consequent social status, the contribution that education can make to eliminating the differences may be marginal. Such modest endeavours may often turn out to be no more than concessions made by the beneficiaries of the *status quo*, so as to avoid serious challenges to the prevailing system.

The task of education is to enable everyone to develop his or her own capacities to the utmost. To achieve this end, the first requirement is to give up our habits of writing off whole sections of the younger generation as academically unredeemable. We shall also have to give up our demographic laments over the country being inhabited by too many people. With even larger numbers on his hands, Mao Tse-Tung declared, "Even if it (Chinese population) should multiply many-fold, it is completely manageable." He added, "Among all things of the world, . . . only if we have men can we perform all kinds of miracles." In a just social order, where man does not exploit man, and everyone is provided the opportunity and inducement to develop his own energies and talent to the utmost, and acquires the knowledge and the skills that such energies and talent make possible, equality will not be measured in terms of the equality of income, but in terms of self-fulfilment.

The full development of human resources, for which education is the most potent means, is the way to realise the true ideal of equality. On the way to such a consummation, however, the state will have to adopt an equitable policy of

restraints on incomes and wages, and of a guaranteed minimum of both. Such measures will be resisted both by the beneficiaries of the capitalist system and by organized labour in the modern sector of the economy. It is one of the tasks of education to overcome such resistance by spreading an understanding of a just social order. Commitment to such a social order, which prevents the accumulation of economic or political power in the hands of a few or in the hands of the state, and ensures an equitable distribution of whatever wealth there is, is a necessary postulate to any system of education aiming at the full development of human resources and the establishment of a just social order. Perhaps it is not correct to mention it as a postulate. The right sort of education and the right sort of social order are so interdependent that it would be incorrect to insist that either one should precede the other.

*The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise*

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—Eugene Black

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