

## MAULANA – THE EMPEROR OF LEARNING

(Address given on National Education Day – 2011 at St. Xavier's College of Education  
(Autonomous), Palayamkottai)

Article

"I feel greatly privileged to participate in today's function to celebrate the National Education Day and commemorate the birth anniversary of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. This great freedom fighter, Islamic scholar, secularist and institution-builder needs no introduction to this audience. It remains to his credit that the course of modern independent India and indeed, our Constitution, were guided by his firm belief that democracy cannot function while citizens remain illiterate.

Maulana Azad was an intellectual par excellence. His profound and vast knowledge, sharp and luminous intellect, steadfastness of purpose, philosophy of life and incisive worldview continues to inspire us all. He contributed to the laying of a strong foundation for education in India. His commitment to provide secular, liberal, modern and universal education is relevant even today and continues to guide us for achieving education for all. The corner stone of his education policy was his conviction that democracy cannot function without the eradication of illiteracy. His philosophy on education is reflected in the National Policy on Education and remained a corner stone for many commissions and committees which built upon the broad framework of that policy. In fact, addressing the conference on All India Education on January 16, 1948, Maulana Azad emphasized, "We must not for a moment forget, it is a birth right of every individual to receive at least the basic education without which he cannot fully discharge his duties as a citizen". He emphasized educating the rural poor and girls. As Chairman of the Central Advisory Board of Education, he gave thrust to adult illiteracy, universal primary education, free and compulsory education for all children upto the age of 14, girl's education, and diversification of secondary education and vocational training.

Maulana Azad made no compromises on national unity and on educating the citizens of India. He was an ardent advocate of Mahatma's Basic Education and of vocational training and adult education. He laid the base

for higher education and for technological and scientific research and education that was instrumental in industrialisation and the recent emergence of knowledge-based industries. He was also clear about the primary purpose of education. In an address to the first meeting of the Central Advisory Board of Education, he said: "The primary aim of any system is to create balanced minds which cannot be misled".

The National Education Day is a fitting occasion to enquire into the need for, and role of, education in our national life. The National Policy on Education 1986 mentions the following:

Education is essentially for all; this is fundamental to our all round development, material and spiritual.

Education has an acculturating role; it refines sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to national cohesion, a scientific temper and independence of mind and spirit – thus furthering the goals of socialism, secularism and democracy enshrined in our Constitution;

Education develops manpower for different levels of the economy; it is also the substrate on which research and development flourish, being the ultimate guarantee of national self-reliance; and finally.

Education is a unique investment in the present and the future.

About 2 million children are born every year. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan launched in 2001-02 as the main vehicle for providing elementary education to all children in the 6-14 age group has ensured almost universal access to primary education. It addresses the educational needs of over 190 million children. Focused interventions have

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ensured that the gender gap in enrolment at elementary level is reduced significantly. Furthermore, the Gross Enrolment Ratio in respect of SCs and STs has rapidly increased narrowing the gap with the rest of the population.

Yet, problems remain. The impact of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in areas listed in Schedule V and VI of the Constitution, among SCs and STs, Muslim concentration areas and slums has not been very significant, while the issue of access has been largely addressed, the huge drop out rate at the elementary level of over 43 percent is a cause of concern. It is more disconcerting that there are huge social gaps in drop out rates, with drop out rates at elementary level for SCs at over 52 percent and that for STs at over 63 percent. In large states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan, over 50 percent of SC children do not even go beyond the primary level of education.

I am happy to share with you that in the year 2009, we have achieved a key vision of Maulana Azad. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 recently enacted will bring access to quality education to an estimated 160 million children, presently out of school.

There are other important questions about the content, quality and outcomes of elementary education. Who teaches in these schools? What is the teacher-pupil ratio? What is taught? How is it taught? Do the students attain skill levels commensurate with their age and grade? Are the teachers adequately trained? Are we training them in sufficient numbers?

A critical element of the Eleventh Plan strategy in education was to achieve a paradigm shift from access to quality. Surveys done by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) on student learning and achievement have shown that outcomes have not been commensurate with the investment, especially in the case of mathematics and science.

The Annual Status of Education Report 2009 brings out some relevant and interesting facts. While 96 percent of children in the 6-14 age group in rural India are enrolled in school, average absenteeism is in the range of 25 percent, going up to 40 percent absenteeism in states such

as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Over 30 percent of children in Grade One could not recognize alphabets or know numbers from 1 to 9. The percentage of children in Grade 5 in government schools who can read at Grade 2 level has remained at 50 percent for the last four years. In other words, half of the children in government schools in rural areas are three grade levels behind in terms of outcome and achievement. Around two-thirds of children in government schools in Grade 5 have been unable to do division problems. The Report also reveals that many students are resorting to paid private tuition across the country, in both government and private schools, and even at Grade One.

This dismal picture of elementary education's quality and outcomes contrasts sharply with the achievement of near universal access, and the landmark legislation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009.

We in India recognize that the task of nation building, reducing poverty and ensuring education for all, cannot be met without a large stock of human capital equipped with quality knowledge and skills, to foster a knowledge society. To meet the requirements of Education for all (EFA) and to provide secondary and vocational training to the youth, we require millions of teachers. The young may be hungry for learning, but we may not have quality teachers to ignite their minds. The social order must respect teachers who all play a pivotal role in building a peaceful and just society.

In higher education, we are faced with four major challenges - access to higher education; ensuring excellence; increasing global interaction and growing use of technologies.

Unlike many other countries, where the young working age population is fast shrinking with higher dependency ratios, India has a demographic advantage with about 70% of the population below the age of 35. But this advantage can only be realized if opportunities for education expand on a massive scale. India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of around 12.4% is unacceptable considering that the world average is 23.2%, 36.5% for countries in transition, 54.6% for the developed countries,

and 22% for Asian countries. We are committed to achieve a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 30% by 2020.

The globalisation of higher education has also added newer challenges in terms of quality assurance systems, issues of mutual recognition and equivalence of degrees and transparency in the regulatory structures of national systems of higher education. Towards this, our Government has initiated several reform measures. An independent mandatory accreditation system is being proposed. We also plan to introduce legislation to prohibit and punish malpractices and adoption of unfair practices in higher education. Further, a legislation to facilitate the entry of foreign education providers is also under consideration.

The implications of new and more diverse modes of delivery based on Information and Communications Technology (ICT) including e-learning, open educational resources and mobile technologies needs to be understood and harnessed. The ICT revolution worldwide has facilitated ready access to information and diverse knowledge. It is, therefore, important that our Universities and Colleges develop a system of knowledge management to reap the benefits of the information technology revolution. We have already launched a National Mission on Education through ICT which in the next three years will provide internet connectivity to over 20,000 degree colleges and over 10,000 departments in Universities.

A globalised world will ultimately require the outsourcing of human skills in regions which will witness a 'demographic deficit'. Skilled human capital will have to be imported to certain regions to sustain economic growth. In that sense the developed world has a huge stake in ensuring that the human resource available in large numbers in developing economies is adequately empowered by investing in their education and skill development.

We also need to focus on specific issues highlighted by the Mid Term Appraisal of the Eleventh Plan:

First, systemic issues such as teacher absenteeism, single teacher schools and multi grade teaching need to be resolved;

Second, we need to address equity concerns of the disadvantaged, vulnerable social groups and urban-

deprived groups with regard to access and retention; and Third, all quality issues impacting on the learning outcomes of children must be addressed as a priority.

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We must remember that ensuring access to education without a commensurate focus on quality and outcomes will result in, as the Assessment Survey Evaluation Research (ASER) 2009 report notes, the 'right to education' remaining merely a 'right to schooling'.

The three major issues of education in today's world, namely access, equity and quality need to be addressed in a holistic manner to ensure that our systems of education and research not only contribute to nation building but also to create a knowledge society, with values of sustainability, peace and development. This was the vision of our great leaders. This is the vision that underlines all our policies and programmes.

Let me conclude by quoting Mahatma Gandhi, Father of the nation on Maulana. "Maulana is the Emperor of learning. I consider him as a person of the caliber of Plato, Aristotle and Pythagorus". I again request all gathered here to pay tribute to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a freedom fighter, revolutionary journalist, social reformer, champion of communal harmony and a visionary Education Minister. I am sure his vision, ideas and action will continue to inspire us in translating our endeavours to provide quality education for all.

I wish the National Educational Day celebration all success and thank the authorities of St. Xavier's College of Education for inviting me to inaugurate today's function".

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

- **Oliver Wendell Holmes**

There can be no friendship without confidence,  
And no confidence without integrity.

- **Samuel Johnson**