

**RIGHT TO EDUCATION [RTE] INDIA:
EXPLORING THE HELLENIC INCLINATIONS**

*R.Vidya, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science,

Abstract

The international community has always expressed its eagerness in furthering the cause of education through making it accessible and affordable to all. India has taken tremendous efforts to provide quality primary education to all through the implementation of the RTE Act. Interestingly, the nature and the basic objectives of the Act closely fall in line with the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle. The article intends to examine the Hellenic inclinations of RTE and attempts to draw parallels between the educational thoughts and principles of the aforementioned Greek thinkers, and the significant provisions of RTE.

Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a testimony to the indispensable nature of rights (Gopalkrishnan, 2004). Apart from natural rights, civil, political, economic and social rights are guaranteed by the State. Modern states consider the protection and promotion of the rights and liberties of their citizens as their primary responsibility. In the broader category of rights, rights of children assume greater significance as many a time the beneficiaries depend on the other sections of the society for their promotion and protection. Children are the most vulnerable section of society. Also, they are seldom capable of seeking justice in case of violation of their rights and liberties. Hence the international community has taken enormous efforts to protect and promote the rights of children. The destinies of the nation-states depend on the future of their children and so the predominant function of any government is to ensure peace and harmony for its children, facilitating the overall development of their personality.

The concept of a welfare state has further strengthened this mission of the nation-states. The international community has expressed its solidarity in this regard through a number of conventions.

*Madras Christian College, Tambaram East, Chennai- 600 059.

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in the year 1959. This declaration lays emphasis on the rights of children to protection, health care, education and nutrition (“United Nations”, n.d.). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a comprehensive document enlisting the political, economic, social, cultural and civil rights of children (“Save the Children”, n.d.). Both these documents are a clear manifestation of the keen interests of the world communities in securing and promoting the rights of children. It is significant to note that these documents have acknowledged education as an important requisite for the attainment of the rights of children (“United Nations Human Rights”, n.d.). The right to education thus becomes indispensable to the well-being of children worldwide. This right is inherent and inalienable to all humans despite social, economic and cultural differences and it is in a way connected to the realization of other human rights, making it the most significant of all other rights (Husain, 2014).

RTE in India

India has expressed its deep commitment to these conventions through various legislations passed from time to time in support of the rights of children and eventually securing their best interests (Gopalkrishnan, 2004). A landmark legislation in this regard is the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE). The Act provides free and compulsory education to children between the age group of six and fourteen and it gives effect to Article 21 A of the Indian Constitution (Rao, 2011). The Act aims at universal primary education which has for long been a distant dream for India (Rai and Kumar, 2010). Apart from free and compulsory education in government schools, the Act also mandates a 25% reservation of seats for the disadvantaged groups and weaker sections in private unaided schools (Rao, 2011). Moreover, it also ensures the availability of neighbourhood schools within a radius of 1 km for Class I to V and 3 kms in the case of Class VI to VIII (Tyagi, 2012).

In the case of children who have not enrolled themselves in elementary education, special training would be provided to enable their enrollment into age-appropriate classes. RTE promises not just education but quality elementary education. For this purpose the Act specifies norms and standards to be adopted by the schools and also lays down conditions pertaining to the appointment of teachers, teacher-pupil ratio and the designing of curriculum (Tyagi, 2012). The Act stresses on the role of the teachers in the achievement of its

aspirations and hence provides a detailed description of teacher-appointment norms and standards; it also explicitly spells out the duties of the teachers (Husain, 2014). In order to facilitate the increase in the enrollment of the migrants and other such sections of the people, the Act prohibits denial of admission on grounds of unavailability of documents pertaining to proof of age (Tyagi, 2012). The Act thus aspires to ensure universalization of primary education and attempts to effectively deal with those factors that have prevented the achievement of the same. Apart from being mandated to reserve 25% of seats at the entry-level, private schools are also expected to abide by the norms and standards prescribed by the Act to ensure quality elementary education and to prevent discrimination of any kind in such schools.

In the case of aided schools, the Act ensures the setting up of School Management Committees comprising local authorities, parents or guardians, teachers and local educationalists (Tyagi, 2012). Therefore the Act concentrates on not just government schools but also brings within its purview the aided and unaided private schools. The redressal of grievances pertaining to the right to education of children is taken care of by the National and State Commissions for the Protection of Child Rights (Husain, 2014). The Act is all-comprehensive and addresses all avenues contributing to quality elementary education and it is a serious attempt towards child-centred policies, making primary education an important agenda of the nation. Education is clearly made the responsibility of the State assigning specific duties to all other stakeholders (Husain, 2014).

Hellenism and RTE

Interestingly, the various provisions of RTE, especially, the concept of a comprehensive state-controlled system of education bears great similarities with the educational thoughts of Plato and Aristotle. Plato, for instance, was the first to devise a comprehensive system of education, completely organized and managed by the state through authorities such as the supervisor of education, specifically appointed for this purpose (Basu, 2011). Plato's concept of education as explained in his 'Republic' is all-comprehensive, making education one of the primary and essential responsibilities of the State (Waterfield, 1993). It was education that enabled humans to reach the pinnacle of truth. Of all the forms of knowledge, the one obtained through mind or wisdom was the greatest. Plato accorded great significance to education in *Polis*. Nevertheless, RTE is an outcome of the State's commitment to quality education, understanding its significance in the modern era

(Waterfield, 1993). Plato's scheme of education prescribed elimination tests at different levels in its search for the philosopher-king but primary education was given to all classes in the society (Waterfield, 1993).

Parallels can be drawn to RTE's objective of free and compulsory education for children within the age group of six and fourteen. Just like the Platonic system of education, RTE also mandates the development of the overall personality of the child and hence apart from strengthening the curricular aspects, it also encourages co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, stimulating the creative elements in children. The dialectic method of teaching of Plato and Aristotle encouraging children to actively participate in the teaching-learning process, though not explicitly mentioned; nevertheless, it is implicit in the various provisions of RTE (Waterfield, 1993). Plato was very clear that in the endeavour to discipline the children, they should seldom be humiliated (Waterfield, 1993). RTE also has taken the stand of never hurting the psychology of the children and hence corporal punishments of any type are prohibited; also, any such violation of the rights of children would lead to severe repercussions for the school and its management.

The broad objectives of RTE closely fall in line with that of the Hellenic system of education such as education contributing to national unity and integrity, strengthening civic responsibility, harmonious development of state and society and the influence of reason in moulding the future of children (Waterfield, 1993). As mentioned by Plato, RTE also specifies that education aims not just at the individual's growth but eventually should benefit the nation at large (Basu, 2011). Plato holds the teacher in high regard, and they are considered the most important in the teaching-learning process. The Platonic disposition clearly calls for utmost commitment and conviction from the educators (Waterfield, 1993). RTE also heavily leans upon the teachers in seeking its objective of achieving universal quality primary education. Hence, it is no surprise that it deals explicitly in its various provisions about teacher training and recruitment process and gives a detailed account of their roles and responsibilities. It entrusts upon the government the responsibility to recruit teachers of great quality and to ensure their accountability in the discharge of functions. The Platonic system of education did not exhibit any kind of gender inequality and so does RTE and in fact, it encourages and promotes the education of girls.

In the case of Aristotle, the objective of his proposition vis-à-vis education was synonymous with that of the broad objective of humans itself as expressed in his

“Politics”(Basu, 2011). The supreme good that every individual aspires for is happiness and that was possible only through education. It was education that enabled humans to travel the path of self-realization(Basu, 2011). RTE also opines that it is universal primary education that can enable humans to achieve their primary or basic objectives in life. It is only education that can awaken humans to the realities of life enabling them to achieve the greater virtues of generosity (Dung, Trang, Vy, 2016). Aristotelian system of education also propagated freedom as one of the goals of education and the provisions of RTE do emphasis on a child-centred approach in the teaching-learning process, giving children a taste of freedom from a very young age (Basu, 2011). Freedom for Aristotle was however not being idle but rather the time to contemplate on the philosophies of life (Basu, 2011).

Education was meant for both the mind and the soul and hence subjects such as reading and writing, physical education, music, and drawing were inevitable in his scheme of learning (Dung et al, 2016). Language was considered to play a highly significant role in the process of learning. RTE also stands by this visionary through encouraging learning via vernacular language. Similar to Plato’s views, he assumed that the foundations of *Polis* could only be based on education as a good and stable state was a result of not mere fortune but knowledge and purpose (Basu, 2011). Furthermore, Aristotle was very critical of education being left to the institution family. This Aristotelian notion found an “unintentional” acceptance in RTE when it conveniently chose to be silent on the concept of home-schooling. Aristotle envisaged the democratization of education through making it the responsibility of the state, thereby ensuring its access and availability to all. Those qualities of the leaders of a state such as loyalty to the constitution, administrative capacities of a great order and virtue and justice could all be achieved only through education (Dung et al, 2016). This again reminds us of RTE that strives for access and availability of quality primary education to all and the significant role it can play in the process of nation-building. Aristotle was assertive in his opinion that the primary duty of a legislator was to systematize the system of education in the State and this would be regarded as the greatest contribution of the legislators to their State (Basu, 2011). His education through reason included learning by induction and learning by demonstration and this appears to be the intent of RTE too.

Conclusion

Thus RTE portends strong leanings and inclinations toward the Hellenic system of education especially in its concept of state-controlled education. Both Plato and Aristotle strongly believed that education was the mandate of the government and the primary

responsibility of the state. They both opined that the failure of the Athenian system of education was the result of minimal government interference and the family had undue influence in the process of education (Waterfield, 1993). Hence, Aristotle and Plato expounded their theory of education on the assumption that state control was an essential requisite for the success of the system of education. Though RTE explicates also on the role of parents in achieving universal quality primary education, it nevertheless places the maximum onus on the state.

The two Greek thinkers considered *Polis* as a community created through education and its perpetuation depended on education being imparted to all its citizens. Similarly, the basic rationale behind the enforcement of RTE is that primary education is a requisite for the existence and development of modern societies and hence needs to be the primary agenda of the state. The system of learning prescribed by the Greek thinkers was *Paideia*, a comprehensive system of learning facilitating both the physical and mental development of the citizens (Waterfield, 1993). Though there is no explicit mention of the system in RTE, it is better understood that RTE envisages both the physical and mental well-being of the children at the primary levels. Despite its limitations, the RTE is undoubtedly a landmark legislation pertaining to primary education in the country. Its provisions interestingly fall closely in line with the aspirations that the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle had for their *Polis* centuries ago. It is believed that RTE too would lead to the establishment of a just society, similar to the one that was envisaged for the *Polis*.

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