



STRATEGIES for Education

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The Theme — Outlined

Let me begin by outlining, very briefly, my conception of the main theme for this Forum. Upon it I will base my deliberation on the sub-theme that has been assigned to me, namely, *Strategies for Education*.

To my mind, the main theme comprises three parts. The first part implies that the whole world is, presently, in an era called the Global Age. I do not think any amongst us dispute that. The New Global Age is already here, and we are right in it. Of course, there are pockets where the new age is yet to make its presence felt. The unprecedented advances in Information and Communication Technology has been instrumental in the New Age taking us by storm beginning, on a large scale, from hardly two decades ago. Speed of communication has made movement of information across the globe instantaneous. Spread of information cuts across not only national boundaries but also regional, continental and “hemispherical” boundaries. By virtue of this speedy instantaneous spread of information, all nations and societies suddenly found themselves to be in close contact with each other, as if living in close proximity, within a globe that is fast shrinking, as it were, into a Grand Village. That is the reality of the present.



The second part of the theme implies that Asia is Dynamic. This too is indisputable. We heard, from time to time, expressions such as Asian Tigers and Asian Dragons. We have been told, time and again, that the world commercial axis has now shifted from the Atlantic to the Pacific rims. The rate of economic growth of some countries of Asia has been described as phenomenal. Obviously, Asia *is* dynamic. Due to the current economic downturn, the Asian Tiger has been labeled the “Wounded Tiger”. However, lately, observers are quick to point out that they are now seeing signs that the Asian economy is fast rebounding. That means Asia still remains a tiger with great agility to bounce back.

The third part is actually a question, namely, how to lead the Dynamic Asia into the New Global Age. Since the first two parts of the theme are generally accepted as true statements of reality, our attention should be directed towards answering the question posed.

Role of Education

In my view, the dynamism of a country or region rests with either the abundance of its natural resource or the quality of its human resource, or both. Of these two, human resource is a far greater national asset. There are many examples to show that some countries are doing very well by virtue of their quality human resources despite their possessing inadequate natural resources. There are also examples to show that countries with rich natural resources are handicapped by their inadequate supply of quality human resource in sufficient numbers.

When we talk of human resources we are actually talking about education inclusive of training. Having recognised the importance of the role of education in efforts to build a strong quality human resource base, the questions to ask may include the following:

- (1) Are our present educational strategies capable of producing human resources able to handle new situations and circumstances that are already prevailing and that are likely to prevail in the New Global Age?
- (2) What are the factors to be taken into consideration when planning strategies for education for the New Global Age?

Before we proceed to answer these questions, let us briefly examine the general nature of education and training through time.

In the first place, education takes time to produce human resource. In this country, for instance, one spends six years in a primary school, followed by five years of secondary education after which one either enters the world of work or continues with two years of post secondary and pre-university education, after which one might want to proceed to college. It takes at least 6+5+2+3 making up a total of 16 years before one becomes a university graduate.

In the second place, whether we realise it or not, students of today are being taught and trained by teachers who are the product of one generation earlier, who themselves were taught and trained by their teachers coming from one generation before that. These present-day teachers, in turn, teach their students of today who will be facing, in due course, changing situations in the life or the culture of tomorrow.

Therefore, in the course of attending formal education, there are present, a series of "culture lags". The issue being raised here is whether teachers who were trained yesterday can teach effectively students of today who will lead the life of tomorrow? Some of you may be tempted to say, "So what? Isn't that the way our parents were taught and yet they survived in the life of their immediate future?"

My own reaction to it is this. It may not matter at all in those days when change did occur but it did at a slow pace. However, the New Global Age is characterized by (1) a mega speed at which information travels, and (2) the instantaneous spread of information in multiple directions reaching all corners of the globe in no time at all. In the past, change happened so slowly that people could afford to learn and adjust themselves taking their own time. In the present time, where change occurs so fast and spreads instantaneously in all directions encompassing the whole globe, if we take our own time to learn and adjust to the change, as we used to do in the past, we will be left behind, and Asia can ill-afford this if it wants to continue to remain dynamic. The dynamic Asia will lose its competitiveness in the larger global market in the New Age.

Thus far we can see the contradiction. On the one hand, speed and spread is so phenomenally fast in the New Age. On the other hand, conventional education is slow. Therefore, we have no choice but to think of appropriate strategies to handle the new situations. In devising new strategies, education must take cognizance of some factors.

Factors Education must Recognise

Now, what are these factors?

First, it must be recognised that IT opens up a lot of possibilities for education - possibilities unheard of before. Rigid school curriculum is fast becoming outmoded. Educational prerequisites that form barriers to accessing higher level of education may soon become obsolete.

“Our strategies aim to maximise the potential of human resource and cultivate target areas for growth.”



Second, it must be recognised that just as nations are becoming borderless, classrooms are likewise becoming wall-less. IT has made it possible for education to reach out to workers on oil rigs, students in their own homes, learners in remote villages. Education can reach the learners at times chosen by the learners. Strategies for education are no longer constrained by barriers. Strategies for education can now be enhanced by the availability of great numbers of alternatives and possibilities.

Third, it must be recognised that by virtue of IT's contribution to limitless storage capacity for facts, information and knowledge, and because large volumes of data can be handled at the same time, research activities enjoy enhanced capabilities, producing knowledge beyond the capacity of teachers and schools to retain their classical role of serving as reservoirs of information and knowledge for their students. The knowledge to be acquired through schools can now be accessed by students from non-school and non-teacher sources.

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Fourth, it must be recognised that because of the enhanced levels of sophistication and complexity of information and communication styles, what was considered sufficient education for citizens to become literate may no longer be true in the New Global Age.

Fifth, it must be recognised that New Global Age does not deny cultural identities of each nation and region. It does not pose threats to traditions and beliefs. It is being said that as there is a tendency towards internationalisation, there emerges a tendency towards tribalism. What this means is that, at macro level of communication, societies become global in approach and orientation. At the micro level, however, uniqueness of individual societies will remain. Globalisation does not change our colour skin to become similar or the same. Facial features of man all over the globe will remain the way they are now. Cultures may be borderless, but cultures are also group and society based.

Strategies for Education

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Given the scenario, what shall be the strategies for education for Asia, in particular, as it moves into the New Global Age? I would like to suggest some:

First, nations in Asia must learn to communicate with each other more intimately as they communicate with other nations globally. Our orientations towards nations of the west must be balanced with orientations towards member nations of our continent. It is evident that groupings of nations sharing similar economic interest and falling within a common geographic area have a legitimate purpose to serve. What this means is that each nation may exercise three modes of communication and collaboration with others. These are: (a) direct bilateral global mode, (b) intra-regional mode, and (c) inter-regional mode. Consistent with this, education must enhance a balance between intra-regional, inter-regional and global affiliation among Asian nations.

Second, to strengthen education in Asia, nations within it must invest heavily in IT-based education facilities. However, while to an extent it is true that IT facilitates the democratisation of educational opportunities for all, it is also true that the extent of democratisation depends very much on the extent to which the playing field is even.

Third, Asians must possess adequate level of literacy to enable them to be economically, socially and culturally adequate and functional. Mastering the 3Rs alone is no longer sufficient for effective functioning in a democracy. Basic literacy as we enter the New Global Age must consist of Literacy (ability to read and write effectively), Numeracy (ability to handle numbers to fulfil everyday needs), Computeracy (ability to handle basic IT usages), and Culturacy (ability to communicate and coexist in one's own culture as well as in cultures of immediate neighbouring groups.)

Fourth, one area of concern in IT is its uses and abuses. Education must promote a sense of moral responsibility and accountability among the IT learners and users. The last thing that we want is the emergence of IT anarchists due to default in our morality education.

Fifth, given the availability of varied educational opportunities and possibilities, maintenance of educational standards must be judged by educational performance and achievement at the end of each phase rather than fulfillment of certain qualifications at the entry point. If one passes an examination at the first degree level, for instance, does it matter whether one has completed one's primary or secondary education?

Sixth, in view of the rapid change and improvement in technologies, lifelong learning becomes imperative. Classrooms must not be confined to schools and colleges only. They must also exist in work places and community centers.

Seventh, Asia must maintain political stability if it wants to become more dynamic in economic activities, commerce and trade with their trading partners globally. Towards that end, it must diffuse situations that could lead to racial conflicts. Racism must be eliminated. Towards that, education must teach about the nature of prejudices - racial or ethnic; irrational thinking. Promotion of thinking skills should include ability to hypothesise, to make assumptions and to test the truth or otherwise of a given statement, an allegation, and a claim however convincing they are presented.

Eighth, quality human resource includes possession of creative ability and intellectual as well as socio-emotional capability. Schools as well as work places must lend support to the enhancement of these abilities.

Conclusion

One strategy that I have not listed is the provision of leadership education and training. I was tempted to suggest - but did not pursue - the idea of establishing an **ASIAN/ASEAN** Leadership Institute. For Asia to remain dynamic it is imperative that it prepares its future leaders to face challenges in the New Global Age.

Thank you.

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