

## Inaugural Address: National Conference on Theosophical Education

by Chittaranjan Satapathy



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It gives me great pleasure to be present at this unique, and perhaps first of its kind, national conference on Theosophical Education.

From the early days of the modern theosophical movement, which started with the establishment of The Theosophical Society in 1875, its pioneers have taken a great interest in education per se and the right kind of education in particular. In a way, a theosophist's approach to education was greatly influenced by two underlying considerations that Madame Blavatsky gave voice to in *The Key to Theosophy*.

1. When asked what she considered as due to humanity at large, she said, "Full recognition of equal rights and privileges for all, and without distinction of race, colour, social position or birth."
2. "No fellow has a right to remain idle, on the excuse that he knows too little to teach. For he may always be sure that he will find others who know still less than himself. And also it is not until a man begins to try to teach others that he discovers his own ignorance and tries to remove it."

The founders of The Theosophical Society, Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, on their arrival in Sri Lanka in the 1880s did a great amount of work to restore traditional teaching by establishing Buddhist Theosophical Schools which within a few years gave rise to over 100 BTS schools. This was of great significance to the revival of Buddhist culture and tradition there.

Colonel Olcott's pioneering work for educating the poor children from marginalised sections of society is very well known. The concept that through education the underprivileged and disadvantaged can be enabled to stand on their own feet and fight for what is due to them was formulated and given a practical shape by Colonel Olcott much before similar work was started by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar. Several Olcott Panchama Schools were started in and around old Madras. The first one that was started in 1894 by Col. Olcott using his own meagre

financial resources continues today and has since been upgraded recently as Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School. It was started as a free school with 45 students including nine girls. Even today no fees are charged to any of the students who go through a life transforming experience at the school. Theosophists alone rose above caste considerations to be the first lot of volunteer teachers at the school.

One of the lesser known aspects of Col. Olcott's work for reviving and opening several Sanskrit schools needs to be mentioned here. This was in line with the emphasis that the founders of The Theosophical Society gave to traditional education and learning of Sanskrit, a language in which many ancient books of divine wisdom were written. Equally important was Col. Olcott's great foresight in establishing The Adyar Library and Research Centre, and collecting over 18,000 palm leaf and other manuscripts, which contains about 45,000 books. It was for the first time that this library published the complete set of 108 major Upanishads with original texts and commentaries in Sanskrit and with translation in English.

Col. Olcott's able successor Dr Annie Besant's work in the field of education would require several pages to be adequately recounted. A number of schools and colleges bearing her name stand testimony to her work in the field of education. The founding of the Benares Hindu University would not have been possible but for her donating the Central Hindu College in 1913 which was established by her in 1898 along with the land and all other assets. Her work advancing the cause of women's education in the country and bringing the Scouts and Guides movement to India is well known. In 1913 she established the Theosophical Education Trust. Among other things she emphasised that education should make the young Indian more religious, for she believed a nation must have spirituality. She was clear that education must foster national unity, discipline, perseverance, a sense that all work is honourable and prepare the students for public life.

Dr Besant elucidates her views further in *Education in the Light of Theosophy* (Adyar Pamphlet No.16). She says that the fundamental teachings of Theosophy have altered our views of the child. The child cannot be considered as a soul fresh from the hands of God but an immortal individual taking birth amongst us after gathering experience from many such births earlier. Dr Besant says that to the Theosophist each child is a study, and instead of imposing his or her own will on the child, the theosophist tries to discover through the young body the features of the indwelling owner, who may be wiser than its elders. What Dr Besant says in this book was put into practice when she and other Theosophists educated the young Krishnamurti who later went on to become a World Teacher apart from establishing many schools for children seeking to provide a different kind of education.

Maria Montessori lived for eight years in the Theosophical Society campus in Adyar and worked from there. Four of this educationist's books: *The Absorbent Mind*, *Reconstruction in Education*, *Peace and Education* and *The Child* have been published by the Theosophical Publishing House. She recognises that children have a personality of their own and carry within them the beauty and the dignity of the creative spirit. She is of the view that the school should not be a prison for children ignoring the exigencies of their spirit and soul. The emphasis should shift from forcing them somehow to fit into the society ignoring their present needs.

Way back in July 1940, the then President of the T.S., George Arundale, published "A statement of Principles of Education" regarding what he considered to be the fundamental principles of theosophical education. In that statement he talked of co-ordinating existing theosophical educational activities in various parts of the world.

He outlined the following principles of Theosophical Education:

- (1) True education must seek to help to encourage the growth of vital energising forces of will, wisdom and love in each student.
- (2) The students must be acquainted with the basic truths of unity and brotherhood of all life.
- (3) The students must realise that nothing grows alone and that there is nothing external which is not related to them.
- (4) Perfect justice and therefore perfect love rules the world.
- (5) There is a Great Brotherhood of religions.
- (6) There is a Great Brotherhood of the nations and all Humanity, and all of us are children of one life.
- (7) Theosophical education should include study and exercises, whether physical, emotional, mental or spiritual, designed to help the student tread the way of service, to be of a sharing and helpful nature.

If these principles have to be applied in our schools, and I have no doubt they should be, first of all we must have teachers who understand these principles and who are happy to imbibe and follow them.

Many of the schools supported by the members of The Theosophical Society today cater to the educational needs of the underprivileged which, with very few exceptions, merely enables them to get some employment. Though ethical and moral education is part of the curriculum in these schools, most of them do not really provide theosophical education. We need to reflect how best the present generation of theosophists can address this issue.

Krishnamurti writes in his book *Education as Service* published by the Theosophical Publishing House, "It is sad that in modern days the office of a

teacher has not been regarded as on a level with other professions. ...But really the office of the teacher is the most sacred and the most important to the nation because it builds the character of the boys and girls who will be its future citizens.” This is another issue needing our attention.

I wish this conference all success and wish that all of you have very fruitful deliberations under the able guidance of Brother Vic who has become a pioneer and icon of promoting theosophical education in recent times. May his dreams of having at least one hundred theosophical schools by the turn of the century come true.