Culture plays an important role in the manner in which people learn and specifically how students learn in schools and colleges. It influences the learning of other languages, pronunciation, sentence pattern and conversations. It influences the pitch of the voice during one-to-one talk, even while sitting around a table. It also influences whether to learn individually or in groups. ‘Amid rapid globalization and the spread of information and communication systems, the millennia-old cultural traditions, religious beliefs and social structures that shaped societies continue to influence education and the way people learn and behave.’ (UNESCO, 2010: 1). India is the largest democracy of the world. It is the second largest populated country of the world. It is a world in miniature. It is a large nation. It has 35 States and Union territories. It is a multilingual nation. It is reported that India has 418 languages, out of which 417 are living. The Indian constitution recognises the following languages: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. Hindi is the most spoken language in many States. Many States use English as their official language. Hindi and English are the national-level official languages. The national government agencies produce textbooks in English and Hindi. States not using Hindi or English as their official language produce textbooks in their State language. Indian culture is an example of unity in diversity. India has a sizeable percentage of indigenous population. They are known as scheduled tribes. Essential characteristics of the scheduled tribe communities are: primitive traits, geographical isolation, distinct culture, shyness of contact with the community at large and economical backwardness. As per the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MTA, 2010) and as per the census report of 2001, tribals constitute 8.2% of the total population and live in nearly 15% of the country’s areas. Groups vary in stages of development. At the national level, there are nearly 700 scheduled tribes. Among the States, Orissa State has 62 tribes, the maximum number in any State. ‘More than half the Scheduled tribe population is concentrated in the States of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Jharkhand and Gujarat’ (MTA, 2010: 22). In comparison to non-tribals, tribals are more simple and sincere. They are generally believers in supernatural beings and are victims of superstition and at times of exploitation by persons from non-tribal communities. Diversity has allowed various strains.

Cultural diversity can be a powerful lever for ensuring the contextual relevance of educational methods and content, and it reminds us that education is never a culturally neutral process: teaching and classroom learning do not take place in a vacuum, in isolation from their social and cultural
Indian culture believes that every individual, whatever may be the religion one professes, is the embodiment of the Divine. The religions are just like different colours of dresses. One chooses a specific colour, so also religion is a matter of choice. In ancient India, the great teachers gave distributed activities among their scholars, keeping in view each scholar’s need for integral development. There was no uniform methodology applied for all students.

Indian seers believe that Indian polity played a significant role in the development of world culture. According to Swami Vivekananda (1989a: p.115), Indian culture can teach to the world ‘The lessons of mildness, gentleness, forbearance, toleration, sympathy, and brotherhood’. Durant (1954: 633) highlighted the importance of Indian culture:

> It is true that, even across the Himalayan barrier, India has sent us such questionable gifts as grammar and logic, philosophy and fables, hypnotism and chess, and, above all, our numerals and our decimal system. But these are not the essence of her spirit; they are trifles compared to what we learn from her in the future.

The cultural pattern of a nation consists of folk tales, songs, dances, traditional costumes, festivals, language, or religious artifacts. In India, these aspects vary from one region to another.

**Indian beliefs and traditions**

Every nation has its own beliefs and traditions. Beliefs and traditions vary from one area to another. Certain beliefs are universal for the country. Early hours are considered excellent for academic activities. They are known as Brahma muhurta (pious moments). At times superstitions affect learning indirectly. An action related to superstitions that treated a particular time of day as inauspicious prevented a teacher from taking out his students from their school classroom to a nearby laboratory in a degree college, where arrangement had been made for making students observe the preparation of oxygen gas in the laboratory. Superstitions are created by vested interests. In many parts of India, if a cat crosses the road in front of a vehicle, the driver stops the vehicle, goes back a little and then continues.

**Stress on spiritual development**

Indian culture puts stress on spiritual development. According to Sri Aurobindo, the first distinctive character of Indian culture is spirituality. ‘Spirituality is indeed the master-key of the Indian mind; the sense of the infinite is native to it’(Sri Aurobindo, 2003b: 6).

**Similarity in approaches and outcomes of spirituality and science**

Indian culture accepts science as part of spirituality. It believes in the theory of evolution. The Hindu mythology describes ten incarnations of God. Like Darwin’s theory, it indicates the starting of incarnation as a fish from which it gradually evolves through various stages in the form of tortoise, animal, half-man and half-animal, dwarf, etc.

The evolutionary theory of humankind descending from primates is supported by anthropologists and confirmed by television personalities such as David Attenborough. Despite accepting this, it is not
unusual for the same people to profess to be Christians and accept all that the religion entails, including that their ancestors were Adam and Eve, and to be confirmed in their beliefs by their religious leaders.

(Morgan, 2003: 42)

Reality of the world

True Indian culture accepts the world as real and finds God’s hand behind whatever happens in the world. It believes that the world has been created by God and, by taking human birth at intervals, God has been making humanity progress in its consciousness.

Recognition of consciousness in matter

Indian culture recognises material as well as human resources at par. The story of Prahalada indicates that God is present in human beings as well as in material objects. According to Sri Aurobindo, matter is an expression of the divine. There is life in matter. It has the ability to communicate. An effective education makes a synthesis of matter and spirit. The West has generally neglected spirit. The East, especially India and some other countries, have neglected matter. The foundation of an effective education should have its pillars rising from both these aspects. The Mother and Sri Aurobindo have emphasised the consciousness of matter. Hence, material objects are to be handled with care. There is consciousness in both living and non-living objects. There is an obscure mind and life even in the cells of the body, the stones or in molecules and atoms. There is life in earth, rock, metal, gas, atom, electron and other more subtle yet undiscovered forces and particles that constitute material energy and form (Sri Aurobindo, 1972: 15–17).

Not to take care of material things which one uses is a sign of inconscience and ignorance. You have no right to use any material object whatsoever if you do not take care of it. You must take care of it not because you are attached to it, but because it manifests something of the Divine Consciousness.

(The Mother, 1978: 345)

There is an interesting anecdote that describes the experience of a teacher in handling a laboratory. The anecdote is as follows:

A science teacher once left his laboratory in the hands of the principal of the school located at Delhi and went to Pondicherry. While at Pondicherry, one night he dreamt that all the equipment in his laboratory was crying. He noted the dream. When he told his friends about the dream, they commented that it was the effect of his love for the laboratory. On arrival at school, he found that, on the date he saw the dream at Pondicherry, the school laboratory at Delhi had been opened to accommodate examinees and, at the end of the day, it was found that the wall thermometer had been broken, presumably by one of the examinees. A few days later, he again left Delhi for Ajmer. This time, he left the keys of the laboratory with a colleague. One night, while at Ajmer, the teacher saw in a dream that his film projectors were crying and giving out smoke. He had an urge to send a telegram to the colleague not to use the projector. As the teacher had already decided to resign from his job, he felt it might be awkward to send the telegram to the person who has to receive the laboratory charge from him after a few days. On arrival at the school, he came to know that the day he saw the dream, there was some trouble in running the film projector and also the film strip projector. Next day, when the projector was operated, smoke came out. The teacher then realised that, if he had sent
the telegram after seeing the dream, more damage to the film projector would have been avoided. A few days later, he was updating his stock registers to hand over the charge. It was late evening by the time he was going to close the laboratory door. At the time of closing the door, he felt as if the filmstrip projector placed in the cupboard next to the door was telling him that nothing had happened to it; only the wire had come out of the switch. He went back to the cupboard and took out the projector. It was a thrilling experience for him to find that the projector worked when he put the wire in the correct place. Again, while closing the door of the laboratory, he heard as if the 16-mm projector was requesting him to hand it over to a certain mechanic who could repair it. The teacher readily agreed to do it on the following morning, before handing over the charge of the laboratory. The same teacher was also in charge of sound equipment. Whenever the teacher got bored with long morning assembly programmes, there were problems in the working of audio equipment that made the authorities stop the assembly proceedings.

This anecdote shows that material objects have a consciousness and, if the individuals love them as living objects and take care of them, they reciprocate the love. Such experiences can be found in the case of persons who practise yoga.

Remaining happy in all circumstances

Indian culture stresses equanimity in all types of circumstances. Indian learned persons, who were real teachers, were not disturbed by worldly happenings. They were affected by neither sad nor joyful events. They had control over anger. They were not afraid of anything. They were still in all circumstances. Indian learning tradition normally accepts these actions of the ancient great scholars.

Fight against casteism acting as incentive for increased effort for learning

Casteism is an important part of Indian culture of the present India. Ancient India did not have casteism. ‘The division of castes in India was considered as a distribution of duties. A man’s caste depended on his dharma, his spiritual, moral and political duties, and his dharma depended on his svabhava, his temperament and inborn nature’(Sri Aurobindo, 2003a: 682–83). People were grouped into four categories: Brahmīn (scholars as well as religious workers), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (traders) and Sudra (manual workers), created according to the nature of their professions. As a part of the degeneration process, groups among these four categories developed and a large number of castes were created. Brahmins created the concept of severing personal contact with certain castes belonging to sudra categories. These castes were termed as scheduled castes. Before such caste-based division destroyed the Indian cultural heritage, social reformers started mobilising society against narrow casteism. Although a new religion, Buddhism, came up as a revolt against casteism, casteism continued to act as a tenet among the Hindus. In spite of efforts by social reformers and the government, casteism has been continuing. ‘Caste is the training school of undeveloped minds’ (Swami Vivekananda, 1989b: 306). Enlightened persons go beyond casteism. The worst form of casteism resulted in labelling a caste as untouchable. The Constitution of India termed such castes as ‘Scheduled castes (SC)’. Parliamentary seats are also earmarked for certain constituencies depending on size of the SC population. The number of scheduled castes varies from one State or Union Territory to another. According to the Ministry of Social Justice (MSJ, 2011), the number of scheduled castes in States varied from 95 in Orissa to 5 in Goa. There is a law against untouchability. As per the latest census report (MHA, 2001), scheduled castes constitute 16.2 % of the population. Among States, the percentage of scheduled caste population was highest in Punjab (28.85%), followed by West Bengal (23.02%), Uttar Pradesh (21.15%), etc. There is a reservation of government jobs for candidates belonging to certain castes. Initially such provisions were available for scheduled castes. A few years ago, this provision has been extended to a few other castes,
considered as underdeveloped. Students belonging to scheduled caste categories are also given scholarships. These might have increased the level of motivation to learn among those sections of society. In earlier days, marriages were restricted to castes. Education has brought in inter-caste marriages among educated persons. Caste-based reservations in jobs have worked in destroying caste-based culture, resulting in inter-caste marriages, which was unheard-of earlier. This has also resulted in bringing many castes marked as poor to middle-income groups. There is a feeling that students belonging to the castes that have reservations in various jobs and academic courses and special facilities in government might have an added incentive to pursue their studies more vigorously so that their jobs may take them out of the curse of casteism. The children of those who have got better jobs because of the caste- and tribe-based reservations strive hard to maintain their position in society.

High regard for learning

Indian society traditionally gives high respect to learned scholars. The Sanskrit phrase ‘Sa Vidya Ya Vimuktay’ (education liberates man) is widely accepted. Indian society is best regarded for its love of knowledge. The kings in ancient India used to send their sons to be trained by the teachers living in forests. Although kings could manage the institution, the students of these institutions including the princes, as part of their training in humility, had to go from one house to another to collect a handful of rice. Whenever such teachers used to visit the kings, the kings used to get up from their throne and respect them. The practice of paying respect to teachers is found in most of the institutions. Although India is a secular State, the worship of the goddess of learning Saraswati in the institutions is a common scene, even in government institutions.

Respect for the teacher and teacher-centered instruction

Traditionally, Indian teachers were scholars, having their schools away from habitation. Generally, these schools were located in the forests. The then kings had much respect for these gurus. The sons of kings used to get their education in these forest schools. The same respect for gurus has been the tradition in Indian culture. At the time of leaving the forest school after completing their studies, the disciples used to give guru dakshina (offering to teacher). This may be in the form of kind or action. There is a sad incident narrated in Mahabharata, the great Indian epic. A teacher named Drona was training the princes in the art of fighting. When the teacher found out that the skill in shooting arrows by a tribal boy named Ekalabya was better than the skill attained by the princes, Drona asked Ekalabya to cut off his right thumb as an act of guru dakshina, so that, later, Ekalabya could not excel over the skill of the princes. Indian culture has witnessed teacher-centered instruction. Traditionally, the Indian scriptures gave stress to memory. Capacity for learning was indicated by the capacity to memorise. Most of the Indian teachers, even today, are found taking pleasure in lecturing. They get disturbed when their lecture is interrupted by questions from the students. A decade ago, the writer worked as head of a post-graduate department of Education in a general college of a State government. While reading in the staff room, his reading was interrupted by a weeping lady teacher. She complained that, as the students created disturbance in her class, she left the class before the scheduled time. She was followed by the students, who complained that, when they put a question, the madam left the class without answering the question. Later, the madam explained that interruption by students made her forget the lesson that she had got by heart. Lack of adequate materials for self-study makes the students take recourse to rote learning. This continues even when such students become teachers. In spite of the availability of a large amount of research evidence that learner-centered instruction is superior to teacher-centered instruction, Indian culture continues to value teacher-centered instruction. If the community is not adequately educated, learning-centered instruction by school teachers is not given its due position.
Bond of love between teachers and students

In ancient India, the school centred on a particular teacher. The teacher lived with his family. All the students were treated as members of the family. The teacher’s wife was the mother for all the children. Although present-day India has been Westernised and teachers have been more attracted to private tutoring for getting extra money and/or to supplement low-paid remuneration, the culture of love for students is found in most parts of the country. Although private coaching for payment is found in many urban areas, many schools have extra classes without charging extra money.

Parents’ sense of responsibility for child’s education and shadow institutions (coaching centres)

Parents spend their time and energy for the education of children. About four decades ago, the author worked as a science teacher in an English-medium school. It was a fee-charging school generally meant for children from rich families. The school used to have a prayer class at the beginning of the day. A student was generally found to be late in reaching the prayer class and used to get punishment. On enquiry, it was found that the girl student concerned lived with a father who worked in an office as a low-paid employee. There was generally a delay in her coming to school as the daughter had to cook in the morning. The father strived for his daughter to get an English-language-medium education, so that she could get a better job. When children realise the efforts being made by their parents to finance their education, they become more serious in their learning. Parental efforts to provide better learning facilities for their children have given rise to a parallel system of shadow schools in the form of coaching centres, besides having one-to-one coaching at the learner’s residence, outside formal school hours. Such a student is required to enrol at school in order to get permission to appear at various public examinations. This practice of private coaching has been extended to the field not only of general but also of professional higher education. Such coaching is also found in other countries. South Korea failed to stop private tutoring (UNESCO, 2010: 12). In the case of formally educated families, parental feedback to the children helps them in their learning process. Although this strategy might act against developing independent learning skills, it helps students in performing better, particularly when the teachers in classrooms are not very effective, as they are drained of their energy in the private coaching classes being conducted by them outside school hours for extra payment. In the school systems in India, where private coaching by school teachers is not accepted by teachers, the students perform better in public examinations. This was found in the case of students of the Saraswati Sishu Mandir group of Schools in the State Board Examination of the State of Orissa in 2010.

Learning of an individual even while growing in the mother’s womb

Indian culture gives stress to lifelong learning from womb to tomb. It accepts the truth that the learning of an individual starts from the time of conception of the baby in the mother’s womb (Mohanty, 2007: 5). The Indian epic Mahabharata narrates a story in which the warrior Arjun’s son, Abhimanyu, while in his mother’s womb, could learn a specific technique of fighting a war that was narrated by his father to his mother. Indian culture believes that the types of thoughts and practices of a pregnant mother have an effect on the growing baby in the mother’s womb. In order to help this process, the pregnant mother is expected to read religious scriptures every day, perform fasts and other rituals, take vegetarian food and even abstain from sexual activities.

Respect for persons senior in age

Indian culture gives respect to elders. In a family, older persons are respected by younger persons. This is also seen in society. The elderly members in a family act as role models for the younger ones. The educated older brother or sister helps the younger ones in their learning at home.
Practice of learning from peers

Indian culture gives stress to learning from peers. When the Madras area of India was under British rule, the then practice of managing classes by class monitors that was prevalent in schools of Madras province was transported by the missionary Andrew Bell to Scotland. Madras College at St. Andrews stands testimony to this practice (Madras College).

Effect of joint family system on learning

The dominant role of the family is a vital element of Indian culture. The majority of people enjoy living in a family. Although formal education and jobs outside the traditional home have created nuclear families, the link with the original family is seldom lost. Large-sized families play a vital role in the development of speaking skills in children. The vital nature of the child also gets polished by the family. The observation of norms of behaviour by their parents in front of elders inculcates desirable behavior patterns in the growing children. An Indian student is influenced by the family in deciding about a career to be pursued. Love for the family also motivates the learner to change his/her attitudes and pursue the career suggested by the family. Most learners have the determination to succeed and help the family. Strong family linkage might be the motivating factor to work hard for success. However, large-sized families and closeness in family might have acted against developing independent learners. Indian students may not be good field-independent learners. Hence, they may be less detached, less competitive, less analytical and less logical in comparison to Western students.

Submissive learners

Certain cultures do not develop straightforwardness in learners. In Indian classrooms, as the teacher is held in high esteem, the students are not accustomed to argue with the teachers. The concept that the teacher is like a God dominates, and the question of a teacher stating wrong facts generally does not reach anywhere in the mind of the student. This trait is also an extension of what is learnt in the family. Teachers trained in the American style of teaching may find their classrooms difficult to handle.

Stress on non-verbal communication

Indian culture places more stress on non-verbal communication. In ancient India, when the school was located in the forests, away from normal habitation, the students were given various manual works to perform. Attaining the highest level of sincerity in these manual tasks was an indication that they were ready to learn. There are many anecdotes that convey the transfer of learning from teacher to student without using voice. In Indian classrooms, good teachers know the quality of learning of their students from their facial expressions.

Storytelling for emotional and social development

Indian family tradition has storytelling as a base for the emotional and social development of learners. Even in ancient India, storytelling formed the best media for teaching princes. The Sanskrit scholar Vishnu Sharma could transform the moral nature of wicked princes by narrating stories. In Indian tradition, the old members of the family tell stories to their grandsons and granddaughters. Well-knit family helps in such learning techniques.

Difference in culture of students and teachers as a barrier for effective learning

As indicated earlier, India is a world in miniature. There are many variations in spoken languages and customs. Certain spoken dialects are less developed and have no scripts. Lack of knowledge of spoken...
dialects creates problems for teachers in many tribal pockets. Lack of awareness about the local culture also makes it difficult for teachers to establish appropriate linkage with the community. This is one of the important barriers in achieving universalisation of elementary education in India.

Conclusion

Indian culture has been playing a vital role in generating a large workforce, not only for India, but also for other parts of the world. The universal brotherhood of the true Hindu religion, the dominant religion of India, has also played a role in getting the Indian workforce integrated with other cultures, while working abroad. This workforce, initially castigated as symbol of a brain drain has now been responsible for the rise of the Indian economy. The effect of culture on the learning pattern is being reflected in the level of learning being attained by Indian students, given adequate material resources to augment learning.

References


