

Rethinking Education

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Education and Environment

Education is seen as a process of training and instruction 'designed to give knowledge and develop skills'. The corpus is bulging with brilliant definitions of education, its aims and the many values associated with it. But, between the directive principles and the achievement of the objective lies man and this man is located in an environment. Among other things, these two factors are crucial to the process. The inclination and receptivity of the mind and the congeniality or hostility of the environment can seriously affect the ongoing process. When this process is operational, apart from the formal content, the student imbibes values from the environment in which he receives his education. This environment, being part of the larger environment, cannot remain unaffected and immune to it. Unrest and anarchy raging outside the academic institutions soon vitiate the atmosphere inside. No wonder, except for a few pockets of excellence, the portals of education now open to reveal a deadened atmosphere where the motivation to learn and the innocence needed to groom fine personalities is altogether absent.

At the outset, two things should be brought to light. Throughout history, we notice in the writings of men who matter, a veneration of the past, dissatisfaction with the present and a vision of the future. We may not pay serious attention to it, treating the same as the mindset of an idealist. But, even after the advent of numerous sages and social reformers, if the world is progressively becoming unlivable and mankind hurtling towards disaster with talks centring around the survival of the human race, it calls for some serious thinking. If we consider the tremendous response of the masses to the education imparted by the moralists and men of religion and then witness how the disciples kill the initial spirit by turning it into an organized form or subvert it for

political ends, one can only lament man's ingenuity. Secondly, if formal education is slowly becoming dysfunctional, is it the case that like other social institutions, it too is being questioned as outmoded? Things have come to such a pass that for the first time there are talks about sustainability. Compared to the short span of formal education in a person's life, there is a wider sense of education which continues throughout life, from the cradle to the grave, with or without the preceptor. The philosopher Dewey equates education with a way of life. Maxim Gorky regarded the world at large as his university. So, an unschooled and unlettered but knowledgeable and skilled person can be considered educated. In both cases, the person interacts with and influences the environment, natural as well as human, and informs it with values. Alternately, on some consideration—rationality, God or human nature—values are objective, i.e., choices can be guided and set right from an independent standpoint. Satprem shows how "our environment, our education, our atavism, our traditions have made the choice for us. At every moment they choose what we want or desire, what we like or dislike. It's as if life took place without us."¹ In the open-ended enterprise that life is, a two-way traffic goes on. Whether man or environment wields a bigger influence on the other is a moot question.

Has education alone transformed the uncouth barbarians from the twilight of history into the civilized and cultured art practitioners of today? (though barbarians still exist!), or is it the evolution of consciousness and culture which did the trick? The role of mind was pointed out earlier but it is, as Sri Aurobindo tells us, only one of the forms of consciousness.

Downtrend: Foreign and Local Causes

It is facile to blame the environment alone for the downtrend in education. Man's own selfish agenda, both at the personal and collective levels have contributed to it. Till education was directed by committed and selfless teachers the going was good. The personal, humane interaction largely succeeded in enriching the heart and mind of the student in a relatively unpolluted environment and when it pushed the accomplished scholar into the mainstream the harmony in society was not disturbed. Education was not treated exclusively as a means to a selfish end but as a self-fulfilling experience.

The colonial masters brought an alien system of education and that too for ulterior motives. The ill-effects of introducing an imported and alien system of education to the body of the nation are much too serious. It alienates the person from his immediate environment and distorts his perception of his own culture and history; in extreme cases even creating disorganized or split personalities. Also, this elitist education benefitted very few. After many years of independence, our own political bosses have proved to be no less iniquitous. A more sinister development is taking place when the political parties in power have made audacious attempts to change and re-write the school and college syllabi to propogate their own party ideology. This interference and corruption in the field of education beats all. Even earlier, with social mobility and increased opportunity for education of the masses, one hoped for a happy turn of events but this platform was inadequate to transform a society plagued with many infirmities. Disinterested teaching, neglect of value education and not sensitizing the students to the ills of society resulted in dropouts and a production of very ordinary future citizens of limited vision. The interaction between the teacher and the taught became increasingly impersonal. Education, especially higher education came to be perceived by the students as a stepping stone to landing a job. It fostered a spirit of inveterate competition and a mad scramble for appropriating limited seats available. The finer values of co-operation and bonhomie were thrown out of the window. Education should normally foster humaneness, tolerance and also act as an instrument of enculturation. If the recruits from the centres of learning function in a society bereft of these values, it would grievously harm everybody. Imagine the health of a society which comprises of a limited number of 'successful' persons and a majority of 'failures', nursing a life-long grouse for missed opportunities. It is nothing short of a dehumanization of society where the blunted mind would even find it hard to respond to the notes of salvation.

If we survey the world scene today, we find that it is the master politician, the money baron and the technologist who are calling the shots. The voice of the preceptor and the philosopher is barely audible and they are being relegated to the background. But, it is left to them to initiate a rethinking about education, to engage in a dialogue with the avant-garde besotted with a sense of self-righteousness and, with the participation of the majority, embark on a programme of self-correction, to plot a safe trajectory towards emancipation.

New Orientation towards Education and Values

First and foremost, it is profoundly important to value education *per se*. No headcount has been done but through ignorance there has always been a sizeable population deeply sceptical about the worth of education, for whom the passage through school and college has been tortuous. The runaways and the drop-outs form the extreme group. Nobody convinced them that the present imperfect and unsatisfactory state of affairs in education is no indicator of the original joyous experience it provided, from the moment the student became oriented. It once touched and involved the life of the aspirant in a big way. The knowledge which it imparted substantially changed the person and did not remain a mere dissemination of information.

The period of education is also valuable as it is the rare moment when the mind is in a state of readiness to receive and interface with knowledge. The ego, with humility, lowers its guard to acknowledge a power that may elevate and transform the total self.

Thus, faith in the process may be retained even if new methods and strategies of education in tune with the times are adopted. Education has to be valued not for its training and instruction component, but for what it is eminently capable of - invigorating the spirit and strengthening the mind to handle the fast paced data from the globalized world relentlessly engaging our attention. So, the traditional staid classrooms may give way to cyber-halls of education replete with teleconferencing facilities or the open and distant modes of learning, now coming into vogue, may be the order of the day but that we are engaged in an important enterprise should always be at the back of the mind. Like the karma which the Geeta speaks about, there is no easy escape from the process.

Cultural Dimension of Education

On the cultural dimension, we are confronted with a complex situation. The problems of traditional versus modern education has eluded any satisfactory solution. Baidyanath Saraswati, anthropologist, while comparing the two, points to the merits of traditional education which "strives to expand the spheres of existence through social awareness", fostering also a cosmological awareness and a technological awareness which is "relating creativity to ritual enforcement of life". On the other hand, modern education instructs us in a way of life which is "limited

by self-centred consumerism which allows man's ego to establish itself as the conqueror of nature".² In the light of traditional wisdom these new attitudes may certainly undergo some modification, It is too early to decide whether modern education can be considered emancipatory in any sense or is essentially corrupt. If traditional education neatly fitted into a world view and prepared people to accept and perpetuate the extant institutions, e.g. the *varnashram dharma*, and the four *purusharthas*, in India, modern secular education has no such references and offers no succour to the person who has little faith in those institutions.

Education and Social Change

For restructuring our lives and to remain in command of the situation, a trenchant understanding of the current processes of social change is indispensable. The right attitude towards the products of science and technology is yet to be formed for we have not yet experienced its complete effect on our lives. Each new invention which we lap up alters our life style and demands a new adjustment. The crisis of man and environment is too real to be slighted. We are yet to be educated on how to achieve a balanced development between scientific breakthroughs and our own inner progression. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with modern technology but there is a need to educate ourselves so that it does not fully appropriate our attention which has to be kept free for surfing one's own self and the forms of consciousness, to explore where one is heading, individually as well as representatively. The structure of new education should have material as well as spiritual bearings, should be sensible to the capabilities of the man in the street. It should have multiple exit points for people with more mundane concerns.

The early man could survive in a cloistered world, but the contemporary man cannot easily turn his back on the spectacular world of today. Human exchange and not human isolation is the new watchword. Even education, if it has to retain its validity, cannot be insulated from the fast developments in ideas and the chief currents sweeping the world. It relies on them for the constant upgradation of its formal contents, the curriculum and the new methodologies consonant with them. New media are gaining ground. Virtual reality of the cyber world is projected as the sentient metaphor for human interaction, an inexorable meeting place with the otherwise distant

and inaccessible reaches. Will a new education inform this recurrent experience with the appropriate emotions?

New Roles for Education

Contemporary education has to vigorously address itself to the problems of parochialism, fundamentalism and terrorism which are paralyzing society. What education can immunize against these blights on our community? Also, we have to recognize the inherent value of non human life. For the sustainable societies of the future, man will have to acknowledge the inter-dependence of each living member in the ecological community. Arne Naess describes this deep realization as akin to a spiritual experience of the unity of nature and the self.³

In the last analysis, an education that makes us aware of the liberating influence of religion would be its highest expression. This 'religion of man',⁴ divested of all dogmas and rituals would relate all men like never before.

REFERENCES

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3. Arne Naess, quoted in Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life*, Flamingo, 1997, pp.11 and 12.
4. Title of the Hibbert Lectures delivered by Tagore in Oxford in 1930. Later published as a book: *The Religion of Man*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1931.