

Education & Indian Nationalism

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The British Concept of India

The spirit of nationalism was hovering in the Indian air when J. Krishnamurti was born in 1895. Slowly, it took hold in the consciousness of the people. By the turn of the new century, Britain had consolidated her hold over the Indian territories and had laid the foundations for a centralized state. All parts of British India were then bound into a single unit by a strong bureaucracy, a standing army, communication networks and a newly articulated educational system. Influential British historians argued that India was a British creation without a common language and religion, that India was not and could not be a nation. According to John Stuart Mill, the roots of nationalism are nurtured by people who share a common identity in the form of historical memories, 'pride, humiliation, pleasure and regret', attached to common incidents of the past. India's past, he implied, would not provide any such cohesive ideology to command the loyalty of all the peoples of India.

For contemporary Indians, whose defining experience was of religion, language, family and caste, the new ideology presented a many-faceted challenge. Deeply influenced by the foreign presence, by the degradation of Indian society that they had learned to live with, men as different as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dayanand Saraswati evolved an idea of an Indian past to meet the British challenge. By the second decade of this century, when the imperial government began introducing reforms that would eventually lead to representative democracy in India, a new dynamic had entered the situation.

The search for a cohesive ideology gradually produced an identity attractive enough to inspire the majority of Indians to challenge alien rule. In forging a national Indian identity, the powerful force of religion

began to dominate the vocabulary of politics. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a moderate who was convinced that political freedom had to be won through the gradual education of the public, wrote of the complexities of the problem:

The number of men who can form a sound political judgement in the country is not large, but you can find a number of thinking men, filled with an honest but vague longing for the emancipation of the country, ready to follow any plausible leader, whom, in their heart of hearts, they believe to be wholly against the foreigner.

Gokhale's letter was addressed to Annie Besant, another prominent moderate on the Indian political scene.

Annie Besant's India

Before coming to India, Annie Besant had been identified with practically every radical social movement in England; she had fought for women's emancipation, for trade unions, and for the rights of free thinkers. She had also been an active member of the London School Board. When she settled in India, she brought this rich experience of social and political protest to the Indian scene. She made her home in Benaras, a city with a long tradition of Hindu learning and religiosity. Giving up political action she began devoting her vast energies to building a nationalistic ideology for India and to creating an educational base from which to disseminate this ideology.

Annie Besant sensed that the newly founded English school system was alienating Indian youth from their heritage and effectively denationalizing them. Her educational aim was to define a spiritual identity with nationalistic overtones out of ancient Hindu sources, and to actively promote values that derived from that definition. With ceaseless energy she worked to realize her vision; she raised funds to set up The Central Hindu College for boys, and later a similar institution for girls; she taught the Ramayana and the Mahabharata; she wrote text-books on the eternal doctrines of Hinduism—she called it *sanatana-dharma*;—and translated the *Bhagavad-Gita* into English. She was eventually able to draw a devoted group of pandits, teachers, engineers and businessmen around her work. With their assistance she set up schools and colleges in different parts of India.

Annie Besant felt that India possessed an ancient soul that would come into its own when the country was freed from the political

domination of foreign rule. True, the Indian people did not share language or religion, and did not belong to a single racial type. However, she now argued, race, language and religion constituted only the outward form of a country. 'The real spirit or *atman* lived in a cultural unity that transcended language. The prayers and hymns of Hindu ritual name her sacred rivers, her sacred cities, from Hardwar to Badrikedarath in the North to Kanchi and Rameshvaram in the South, from Dvaraka in the West to Jagannath in the East.' She wrote that Hinduism was the only ancient civilization to survive continuously into modern times, and also remarked that all the religions of the world had found a home in India. For her, Krishna's words from the *Gita* represented a Hinduism that was non-aggressive: 'Mankind comes to me along many roads. By whatever road a man comes to me, on that road do I welcome him, for all roads are mine.' She wrote that Hinduism 'makes no converts, it assails no beliefs, it is as tolerant and as patient as the earth.'

Annie Besant was convinced that higher powers were working out a larger spiritual design in India. The central motif of this design was Lord Krishna's promise in the *Bhagavad Gita* to return to Earth for the sake of saving the good, establishing righteousness and destroying evil. Her expectations were centred in the figure of the fourteen-year-old Krishnamurti, a young Telugu boy. At the age of seventeen she sent him to England, in the hope that he would gain entrance to one of the great universities and acquire the grace of manner and the learning that befitted a World Teacher.

In 1913, Annie Besant entered the Indian political arena. She successfully altered the scene by unifying a politically fragmented landscape, divided between moderates, extremists and the Muslim League. As President of the Congress in 1917, she reminded her audiences of ancient Indian ideals that must be resurrected in the new India. Between 1923 and 1925, she rallied the moderate group opposed to Gandhi, and drafted a constitution that proposed Dominion Status for India within the British Empire and limited the franchise to educated Indians.

Annie Besant's nationalism had something in common with the nationalism of the poet W.B. Yeats, who had tried to vivify the Irish spirit with the help of esoteric religions. Both were elitist, fearful of those 'delicate qualities of mind that would be lost in a mass movement.' Yeats led a literary movement in Ireland that would nourish Irish consciousness with beauty. Annie Besant sought nourishment in

a 'perennial philosophy' and in education. She felt that with sufficient instruction the common people could gradually be drawn into a nobler political culture.

With Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha* beginning to win the hearts of the majority of Indians, Annie Besant's vision failed to carry the day. Neither Motilal nor Jawaharlal Nehru supported her position. From 1925 onwards her life seemed to hurtle towards tragedy. Everything she had stood for, everything she had built and hoped to hand over to future generations appeared to be threatened.

Krishnamurti's Critique of Nationalism

A sense of being Indian was briefly awakened in Annie Besant's young protegee by the colonial and racial atmosphere of England, which had prevented Krishnamurti from working in a hospital during the First World War. But this awakening did not survive into the thirties, when he turned his face against nationalism to such an extent that he was once publicly questioned as to whether or not he was a British agent.

In 1929 Krishnamurti made his famous declaration that truth is a pathless land. He said that no system of belief organized around leaders or gurus could be effective. Then he stepped out of the framework that Annie Besant, with her enormous energy, her organizational gifts, and her power to attract talent, had built for him. Instead of engaging on the larger canvases of national politics and organized religion, he invited men and women to join him in unravelling assumptions that govern their lives.

Krishnamurti believed that both nationalism and organized religion are basically divisive, because the sense of identity they foster is exclusive. As Hindus, we define ourselves by rejecting others. In thus defining ourselves and rejecting others, we thrust our worst fears on to them. Thus a cycle of hatred and fear takes root which eventually leads to violence. Brotherhood is an ideal, he asserted in his later writings; the fact is that men and women do not live in amity. Freedom from strife is not gained by reaching towards ideals of brotherhood, but in coming face to face with the psyche in strife.

Krishnamurti's critique of idealism and Utopian visions supported a more general critique of the search for self-identity. In his view, all group identities are oppositional and divisive; and he set out to neutralize the desire to find security in group identifications. He raised

a different issue and asserted a different fact: 'You are the world. You are not a Russian or an American, you are not Hindu or a Muslim. You are apart from these labels. You are the rest of mankind.'

Consistent with his insights, Krishnamurti did not take his vocabulary from the rich storehouse of Indian philosophy. He created his own discourse, forging a new vocabulary and establishing his own educational institutions for the purpose of communicating his teaching.

The Secular Nation-State

Historians tell us that nationalism is a fairly recent European idea. The concept of sovereign nations, able to defend their rights by legitimate use of violence, is an outgrowth of several hundred years of cumulative European experience—of the industrial revolution and the unified states that emerged between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries; given form by philosophers like Rousseau who articulated the mystical notion of the 'General Will' of a sovereign people. In the twentieth century, fuelled by concepts of ethnic identity and economic growth, these ideas spread to non-European parts of the world. Thanks to Jawaharlal Nehru's vision, the Indian Constitution discounted ethnic and religious differences, and opted instead for a secular democratic nation. And yet a secular definition of the nation-state has not ended conflict between the sub-cultures of India. On the contrary, in some real sense, it has exacerbated these conflicts. For these reasons the secular state now stands challenged on many fronts.

The present essay examines the ideology of nationalism as it pertains to education in India. There is a fundamental bond between the state and education. Modern states depend on the educational system to produce 'good citizens'—in other words, to reinforce national identities. The era of the nation-state as the most effective social and economic unit was the product of certain historical needs that the world may have outgrown. It may be necessary now to re-examine these needs and also the concepts on which they were based. This examination should be undertaken in the context of two opposing currents that influence how history and economics are taught in our schools.

Searching for Roots in a Finite World

As a consequence of shrinking resources, internationalization of markets, and a fast changing technology, people all over the world are looking to secure their roots. Even in the United States, where ideals of democracy and equal rights forged a nation out of diverse peoples, creating a distinctive secular identity, pressures from ethnic sub-cultures are pulling the curricula of schools and colleges towards 'multi-culturalism.' In *The Disuniting of America*, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., reacts to these efforts with scorn. Emphasizing that public education should help to create a dynamic American culture embedded in secular and democratic values shared by all citizens, he suggests that ethnic values are best cultivated in the home. Towards the end of his reasoned response, Schlesinger poses a question for America that equally confronts every country seeking to create a national ideology out of its own past. What are the traditions to which multi-cultural education in a democratic framework ought to turn? Can these traditions furnish a dynamic ideology? In a provocative aside, Schlesinger wonders whether cultures that practised *sati* and foot-binding can come up with anything that would meet this challenge.

A second current distinguishing the present time is the need to adjust to the realization that the earth's resources are limited. Our present criterion for evaluating success of a nation is its ability 'to simultaneously provide military security [and] ensure sustained growth.' This criterion holds out prospects of increasing conflict over resources, between groups within the nation and also between nations. Following a decade when the nations of the earth spent more than three trillion dollars on armaments, we can allow ourselves to imagine an ideology that looks beyond securing national interests to secure the interests of the planet, and in the process also secures the interests of marginalized peoples within the nation.

How do we educate our children so that human beings live peacefully on the Indian earth? How can we restore our rivers and our forests? Can an overpopulated India allow tribal people to live in their own forest spaces? Within the framework of these questions, Krishnamurti's critique of the divisive and competitive character of nationalism not only makes sense, but also offers an alternative model of thinking about education in India. Instead of equating nationalism with spirituality, Krishnamurti urges us to renounce group identities as partial, divisive and outdated.

India as the Original Multi-Cultural Society

Denys Forest, an English historian, has written: 'Exploring India's history is rather like sailing by some huge irregular cliff face, composed neither of one uniform substance . . . or even of well defined strata, but with rocks of all the ages jumbled together by a series of seismic shocks. At no level ... is it possible to rule a horizontal line and say that before this the term "India" meant one thing; after it something else.'

This heterogeneity in social structures is a distinctive feature of Indian society. In a train plying between Bombay and its suburbs, for instance, an atomic scientist might rub shoulders with a worker belonging to a tribal society' that lived with stone-age tools until the twentieth century. D.D. Kosambi, a Marxist historian who described this phenomenon as 'the survival within different social layers of many forms that allow the reconstruction of totally diverse earlier stages', was the first historian to account for its deep roots in India's ancient past.

According to Kosambi, India, a country of 'long survivals', might have emerged as a more homogeneous society in the twentieth century, if its mode of development in the ancient world had been more like that of European cultures—if violence had been an instrument of subduing the cultures of technologically less advanced people. 'Indian society seemed to develop more by successive religious transformation than by violence,' he concluded, adding that society 'failed to develop further for much the same reason.'

India is the original multi-cultural society. It is also one of the longest surviving continuous cultures on earth. Like the myriad species of plants and animals that make up the natural world, the many religions and races that inhabited one of the geographically most diverse continents, India's sub-castes formed interconnecting loops, competing and co-operating while forming complex webs of interaction that returned to the earth what it took. Under the impact of the materialistic values of a technologically driven society, traditional communities are either crumbling or competing for a greater share of India's limited resources. A new challenge is in the air: how to rebuild that respect for the earth that we are losing while still retaining the values of the modern world—equality and justice. An ancient text may point the way:

When Shvetaketu was twelve years old, his father Uddalaka sent him away from home to study the Vedas, saying: 'Find a teacher, my son. None in our

family is a Brahmin by name alone'. After twelve years of study, Shvetaketu returned home well versed in the Veda, with his Brahmin identity secured; but 'stiff-necked, arrogant, and self-willed.' It is then that his father Uddalaka taught him a lesson. 'Fetch me the fruit of yonder Banyan tree,' he ordered. When Shvetaketu had done what he was told, Uddalaka asked him to split the fruit. Pointing to the tiny seeds inside the fruit, Uddalaka said, 'Split a seed'. After Shvetaketu had split the seed, his father asked, 'What do you see?' 'Nothing,' Shvetaketu replied. Then his father taught him a lesson: The infinitesimal space in the heart of the seeds is the source from which the great Banyan springs. It is also the source of the great universe. 'You are that,' Uddalaka told his son, giving him an identity that connected with the cosmos.

Among the several lessons contained in this story, two points are supremely relevant to the times in which we live. The first is that living things are interrelated. The second is that group identities and individual identities derived from a group are limited, and need to be set aside in order to discover the deeper, more universal spirit that makes a whole out of a multitude of parts.

New Directions for Education

To weave the above text into the fabric of Hinduism and present that religion as offering a secular ideology for all the peoples of India will not work. These attempts run into difficulties precisely because Hinduism, due largely to its own past history, does not command the loyalty of all the peoples of India. For very different reasons several tribal peoples, Dalits and religious minorities, are citizens of India but do not regard themselves as Hindu.

This points towards new policy goals for education in India—goals that give priority to the Indian *earth* rather than to the Indian *nation*. Politicians in government will continue to garner votes by appealing to caste and religious identities. Concurrently, the educational system will work to neutralize this thrust. Humanities will teach that all people on this earth whatever their race or social status, have a common ancestry and a shared pattern of pre-history. History will encourage an impersonal understanding of the past and detachment from national prejudice. Physics will promote conservation of energy. Biology will teach children to value the diversity of nature. Chemistry will examine ways of repairing the damage human beings are doing to the earth. Schools will find ways to help regenerate their local environment. Children will be taught to see themselves not through their national,

religious, caste or class identities, but as human beings. As human beings they will learn to live together on a finite earth. Long ago, Krishnamurti had this issue in clear focus when he said:

When you consider something as yours, think of the care you bestow on it! Without cultivating that feeling that it is ours—our world, our earth, our rice field, mango tree. . . we turn to ideas and systems ... As long as the world is divided. . . we shall never solve this problem. So it seems to me that the most important thing is ... to bring about this feeling that it is our world, our earth, our garden (Madras 26Dec53). It is not the rich man's earth or the poor man's earth. It does not belong to Russia or America, to India or China. It is our earth, yours and mine, to be lived on, to be enjoyed, to be cherished. (Bombay, 3 Jan 60)

Along these lines, a curriculum for Indian schools could focus on sustaining the earth. Concern for the earth has a common and universal appeal. Having found our natural common ground, the search for an abstract and artificial ideology could cease.

This way of thinking may in turn fortify us against Schlesinger's scepticism about our ability to create a dynamic identity that is relevant to the contemporary world. At the end of the twentieth century, when many cultures are closing in on themselves, when water and air are becoming commodities, the words of the *Upanishads* could certainly inspire a programme of regeneration with ample momentum to sustain the theory and practice of education for a thousand years. In the long term it may restore India's natural environment and reclaim space for ancient livelihoods.