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Education: The Indian Tradition

Dr.V.Kulandaiswamy, Secretary, Vivekananda Institute of Management Studies, Coimbatore

REVISITING NATIVE WISDOM

Education as a discipline is universal and ubiquitous. As such it is wide and deep and forms a subject matter of research in so many dimensions. Indian Tradition may be one such dimension. This paper is devoted to this aspect of education.

Education has been given a pride of place in the Indian society from the very ancient times. The native perception of education reveals that learning was held in high esteem. According to the thought leaders and poets of yore, education is boundless; what one has learnt is only a handful and what is yet to be learnt is as vast as the universe. As much as you learn, so much you realize your ignorance. Learning is worth pursuing even by a beggar. “Of all the charitable acts such as establishing choultries and building temples in thousands, giving education to the poor is the highest form of charity”, says the great Tamil poet *Subramania Bharathi*. Education is an imperishable wealth and learning is a lifelong process. *Thiruvalluvar* asks: How is it that a person does not continue his learning till death, when a learned person has the opportunity to make every country and every town his own. (*Tirukkural: Chapter 40 verse 10*).

A sangam poet (around 2nd century AD) glorified the learning in the following manner:

*Support the teacher by all means,
Offer all you can with devotion,
Bestow best attention to acquire knowledge
With the mind fixed and calm; because:
Even a mother tend to show preference*

*Towards the talented one among her children,
Among the citizens born in the same clan
The king prefers to seek advice
Not from the elders, but from the wise
Among persons of different social segments
The person of lower social status
Commands respect because of his education.
Education therefore is a great equalizer.*

(Puranaa nooru: Translation –Mine)

So also, the teacher was held in high esteem in the Indian society. The Upanishad, the ancient scripture, calls upon:

“let the mother be your god; let the father be your god, let your teacher be a god to you, and let your guest also be a god to you”

Nannool, a treatise on Tamil grammar lays down the manner in which a student should behave with the teacher.

“Bestow worshipful reverence towards the teacher ,and act according to his wishes; let your heart be filled with love towards him; follow him like a shadow ;and at the same time neither be too close nor keep away and be in a safe distance as if you are near the fire”

(Translation –mine)

It is paradox that in a country which nurtured such lofty thought and gave highest respect for learning have the dubious distinction of being the country with the largest illiterate population.

Modes of learning

The main source of learning in olden days was Guru. Disciples lived with guru and the learning was through living with guru and serving him, which was called *Gurugrahavasa*. Therefore there is intimate personal contact between guru and *shishya*.

The independent learners follow different modes as revealed in the literary works.

Frog in the well model:

The individual scholar learns the scriptures or texts of his choice by himself intensively and does not feel the need to seek other sources of learning. This attitude is similar to that of a frog in the well which thinks that the only source of sweet water is the well in which it lives. (*Source: Pazhamozhi nanooru verse-5*). This type of attitude towards exclusive learning is found among the religious sects in medieval

times

Honey-bee model:

The knowledge seeker, apart from learning the scriptures or texts, interacts with other scholars and seeks other sources of learning as well as the practical wisdom, like the honey –bee which collects nectar from all kinds of flowers. This model advocates multiple sources of learning.

Eagle on the palm Tree:

The method advocated for higher spiritual learning is quite different. Sage *Tirumoolar* suggests that the spiritual practitioner should isolate himself, away from the company of others. One of the well known professors of education in this part of the country, Prof.H.Visweswaran used to tell “scholarship in isolation and friendship in company”.

Like the eagle that lives on the palm tree and hibernates there, only those who constantly meditate on god get the bliss (*source:Thirumanthiram*).Even for secular education concentration is the best method of education. According to Swami Vivekananda,”The very essence of education is concentration of mind, not the collection of facts”

Dimension of education:

The *first* essential features of education are imparting skills and know how to people to *create wealth* and make life comfortable and happy. It is the material dimension of education. *Arthasasthra* and *Thirukkural* entreat people to create wealth. Yet in India the vocational skills had been imparted not much by formal education but by family tradition .Unlike in the western civilization, the materialistic pursuits were not encouraged in India and so much so the contribution of Indian education in modern times towards innovations, science and technology is not significant despite the fact that ancient India has excelled in many aspects of learning such as medicine, astronomy, mathematics, architecture etc.,

As a Nation we have stagnated for centuries in the field of science and technology and the advent of western education has to a great extent bridged the knowledge gap. Swami Vivekananda laid great emphasis on learning from the experience of the west in respect of science and technology.

Another, more important dimension of education is *character building*. In fact the ethics had been the core of Indian literary tradition. The great epics namely, Ramayana and Mahabharata are monumental in exhibiting the ethical way of life. There is a genre of literary works which lay down ethical codes and behavioral norms in Indian literary tradition in every Indian language. At the very inception of learning pupils are introduced to the ethical codes as an integral part of learning. As such it is not ‘A for Apple’; it is A for aspire to be ethical. In fact shaping character supersedes all other dimension of education. The

entire life should be entwined with ethical conduct. Possessing character is considered to be great virtue as well as the passage to salvation. Following three courses will ensure salvation: Earn wealth to give away for charity; produce great literature to spread ethics; speak words that convey love and grace
(Source: *Thirikadugam*)

In literature ethics is subtly blended with worldly affairs. For instance a young lady suffers due to separation of his lover. She laments to her friend that she feels weak and weary;

- like a tree under whose shadow an unethical person stand,

- like an old man who lived an unethical life.

Ethics is therefore exemplified in every aspect of Indian life.

The educational philosophy of Swami Vivekananda is anchored on character building and man making
'Swami Ranganathananda Says:

“What are you is equally important than what you do. Indian Education distinctly differ in this aspect and lays emphasis on what you are and how you have to be”.

Spirituality is yet *another unique dimension* of traditional Indian education. It is the strong undying aspect of Indian culture which draws inspiration from the perennial philosophy and deals with the experience of inward spiritual depth and dimension and reveals the true immortal and divine self, *Atman*, ever pure, ever illuminated and ever free. It shares the profound inward journey of a spiritual person and the vertical ascendancy and meta-physical spiritual pursuit towards higher dimension of growth of sages and siddhas. This spiritual education is called *para-vidya*.

Spirituality and religion are the backbone of India. It is the India's signal contribution to humankind. The ancient Indian education was not confined to material pursuits and literary excellence. It is a search towards the soul and inward journey that dives into self.

The essence of Upanishad is the revelation about soul (Atman). The soul is immortal, pure, infinite, omnipotent and omniscient. The core of Upanishad is found in the Bagavad Gita:

“The soul is never born nor dies; nor does it exist on coming into being for it is unborn; though the body is slain, the soul is not “.

(Bagavad Gita Chapter II verse 20)

These ideals are lofty and indicate a higher plane of existence that human beings should aspire. To have the ideal is one thing and to apply it to the details of daily life is quite another thing. The idea of extended self, the same *atman* found in every living being, should make a profound impact on the attitude of individuals such as: Treating alike pleasure and pain and gain and loss, empathizing every living being, relinquishing attachment etc. Swami Vivekananda thought that this idea of sameness and omnipresence of

soul should be preached for the amelioration and elevation of human race. Swami devised practical Vedanta out of this spirituality, and preached:

- Unshakable faith and self confidence
- Fearlessness and courage of conviction
- Strength of character and skill in action
- Non-attachment to the fruits of action.

The sum and substance of the wholesome, balanced education has been synthesized by Swami Vivekananda in the following words:

“The education which does not help common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy, and the courage of a lion, is it worth the name? Real education is one that enables one to stand on his own legs”.

(Source: Vivekananda his call to the Nation, A Compilation, Advita Ashrame, Calcutta: 1979 , P.49)

Only experts should say whether Indian system of education has the healthy balance of all the three components namely material, ethical and spiritual, capable of creating material wealth, men of character and spiritually evolved persons. If the Education incorporates these three components it will be like the “golden flower that emanates pleasant fragrance”.