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Flourishing of All: Education for *Sarvodaya to Antyodaya*

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Abstract: Education is and can be a source of empowerment and human flourishing. Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar not only were born in two different communities in India, but also had different ideologies regarding the ways and means for the wellbeing and development of Indians, specially those who belonged to the lowest rung in the society. Gandhiji who promoted basic education aimed at the economic and cultural empowerment of all people, whereas Ambedkar viewed education as a tool to uplift the marginalised, the underprivileged and depressed classes in the society. Education for a long time has been in the hands of the affluent and the elite, depriving the people in the lower strata from its benefits. The need for education today

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is to be a tool that not only liberates the weaker sections, especially Dalits, from ignorance and injustice but also becomes an instrument that strengthens their resolve to face the challenges that life and society places before them in a creative and confident manner.

Keywords: Education, Sarvodaya, Empowerment, Pedagogy, Liberation. Consciousness, Humanisation, Human flourishing

Introduction

Learning is an ongoing process and education, be it formal, informal, or non-formal – aims at building the society and empowering persons. Education has within it the power to craft the mind, build people, and mould a new generation and thus reflects the assumptions of society. Education is a tool that has within it the capacity to empower the individual and this in turn ushers a social change. Therefore, education brings in about a critical consciousness which in turn helps to transform society. Dr Cyril Desbrulais who has been an educationist, has always tried to impart education to empower the subaltern and always aimed that education is to be liberative force... To him, who has been one of my inspiration with deep reverence I express my tribute through this essay on education that has to be reaching to the least and the last.

When we view education from the perspective of people, we also see it as an ethical enterprise. Education is not merely a way of being, it is also a way, art of becoming. Therefore, education has to be the highest task of human culture.¹ Both Gandhiji and Paulo Friere had known this well that prompted them to make education a source of empowerment.

Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of our nation, through his many writings and Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher in his *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and other works brought

forth the need to build, reform and transform society through education of the marginalised, oppressed and the weaker sections. Mahatma Gandhi's aim for *sarvodaya* which literally means, 'universal upliftment', aimed at making education informal in nature, rural-centred, craft-based and self-sustaining. It was to prepare Indians to develop a wholesome personality and to improve the quality of life. Paulo Freire through his work brought out the need to provide the world's poor and oppressed with educational experiences that make it possible for them to have better control over their livelihood.

Hence this is an attempt at the 're-reading' of Mahatma Gandhi and Paulo Freire in today's context. This attempt is essential given the global context of the Indian educational system and the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Education to foster social change has to reassert the primacy of human beings, especially of the weaker sections, which ensure empowerment of the underprivileged. Social change is not an option but an essential requirement of every educator. Hence a critical analysis of education in the present context and from the perspective of these two significant thinkers is a positive step in this direction.

1. Education as Power

Education today has to be a positive force in building peaceful communities in a fast-changing world. The question is: how does one look at the whole arena of education, the different approaches towards it, and the methodology employed for imparting education to the masses. The approach towards education would decide the content matter, the methodology and outcome of the process of education. The postmodern scenario of our society calls for a new methodology, new approach; and a

totally new outlook towards the students, the teachers, the subject matter, and the society at large. Education has undergone rapid change though the basic framework of the British-imparted style of education still continues to exist in many parts of India.

Education is power.² The history of our nation shows that certain sections of the society were barred from learning, from reading sacred scriptures, from attending schools and from participating in intellectual debates and discussions. Education remained for long a tool in the hands of the elite who, at times, used it to suppress the weaker sections. Even today education, at times, becomes a prey to the elements and forces of certain groups that have vested interests thus failing to serve the national interest or the interests of the poor. Commercialization and politicization of education are the symptoms that reveal the role of vested interests in the field of education. Therefore, it is important to think of education as an organism promoting not only *sarvodaya*;- which means ‘well being of all’, – a concept made popular by Mahatma Gandhi; but also aims at *antyodaya* – well being of the least, lost and the marginalised in the society. Education is not and cannot be neutral. It needs to have a focus and direction in life. Right to education is a human right. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act came into force from April 1, 2010. Accordingly, every child in the age group of 6 to 14 years are to be provided free and compulsory education in an appropriate classroom in the vicinity of his/her neighbourhood. (RTE Act, 2009). This is certainly a milestone in the history of education in India. But ‘how much of this act remains a mere documentation than an action plan for people’s wellbeing’ is a question worth pondering.

2. Clarification of Terms

Sarvodaya: is a term which means ‘universal upliftment’ coined by Mahatma Gandhi, who borrowed this concept from Ruskin’s *Unto the Last*. The well being of the individual is contained in the well being of all people. Therefore no one section can claim priority or importance over the other. The aim of education must seek the welfare of all people and not of any particular section of society.

Antyodaya would literally mean ‘rise of the last.’³ *Antyodaya* signifies the focus on the bottom stratum of the society. It does not merely focus on the weak, poor or the marginalised, rather it looks at the lowest rung in the society and aims at the upliftment of the poorest of the poor, lowliest and the most marginalised sections of the society.

3. Highlights of the Gandhian Concept of Education

Education was one of the areas close to the heart of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji believed that education is a pivotal activity on which not only the social, but also the moral, political and economical progress of society ultimately depends on.⁴ Gandhiji always aimed at the total well being of the person, and did not focus on only one area of life. The ideology was that education must draw out and stimulate the spiritual, intellectual and physical faculties of children.⁵

Character building is an important aspect of Gandhiji’s scheme of education. He would not compromise his values of non-violence and truth and would speak of formation of character as an important aim of all education. Education is for the building up of character. Therefore, truth and non-violence has to be integral part of any education that aims for character building of the pupils.

For Gandhiji education has to foster all-round development of an individual. For him, mere literacy is no

education. He said, – By education, I mean an all round drawing out of the best in child and man – body, mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning. It is one of the means whereby man and woman can be educated. Literacy itself is no education.”⁶ For this Gandhi advocated not merely literacy but total education that would look into all the spheres of human growth. Education is to go beyond caste-class distinctions and for this he advocated ‘Basic Education’ which would take care of the total well being – physical, mental, spiritual and emotional. The human being is one therefore all dichotomies in the sphere of education have to be avoided.

Gandhiji who advocated Basic Education, speaking of its aims and objectives said, – “Basic education will provide a healthy and moral basis of relationship between the city and the village and thus go a long way towards eradicating some of the worst evils of the present social insecurity and the poisoned relationship between the classes. It will check the progressive decay of our villages and lay the foundation of a just social order in which there is no unnatural division between the “haves” and the “have-nots” and everybody is assured of a living wage and the right to freedom. And all this would be accomplished without the horrors of bloody class war or a colossal capital expenditure such as would be involved in the mechanization of a vast continent like India. Nor would it entail a helpless dependence on foreign imported machinery or technical skill. Lastly, by obviating the necessity for highly specialized talent, it would place the destiny of the masses, as it were, in their own hands.”⁷

Gandhiji was conscious that Western type of education has created only labourers for the British government and, therefore, his concept of Basic Education, has to suit India’s socio-economic and cultural scenario and is to cater to the needs of Indian masses. Therefore, mere literacy which would

create clerks for British offices was not Gandhiji liking. So he aimed at education that would not only take care of imparting knowledge about how to live but also inculcate skills for a decent livelihood. So learning a craft that would provide vocation was an integral part of Gandhiji's scheme of education,

Education is not only for life but also for livelihood. Therefore, learning a craft as part of our educational system was art for Gandhiji. It must be taught in a scientific manner so as to the child interested in such a study. "I would, therefore, begin the child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training... I hold that the highest development of the mind and the soul is possible under such a system of education. Only every handicraft has to be taught not merely mechanically as is done today, but scientifically i.e. the child should know the why and the wherefore of every process."⁸

Gandhiji's belief that a vocation should have economic value and that there is nothing baneful in it is also the view supported by educationist John Dewey who said, "to charge that the various activities of gardening, weaving, construction in wood, manipulations of metals, cooking, etc., which carry over these fundamental human concerns into school resources, have a merely bread and butter value is to miss their point. If the mass of humankind has usually found in its industrial occupations nothing but evils which had to be endured for the sake of maintaining existence, the fault is not in the occupations, but in the conditions under which they are carried on. The continually increasing importance of economic factors in contemporary life makes it the more needed that education should reveal their scientific content and their social value."⁹

Yet another feature of Gandhiji's educational philosophy is the self-supporting aspect of the craft chosen as a means of education. Gandhiji believes that the handicraft should, besides developing the personality of the child, make education self-supporting. The craft chosen should be so learnt that its produce should have economic value. The self-supporting aspect of education can be viewed in two ways, namely, education that will help one to be self-supporting, in later life and education which in itself is self-supporting.

In short, Gandhiji's *sarvodaya* scheme of education had the following tenets. Compulsory education for all boys and girls between the ages of 7 and 14 years and it is to be imparted through some craft or productive work and this work scheme should be self-supporting while the mother tongue should be the medium of instruction.

The final result of education is liberation. For Gandhiji, education is something that truly liberates human beings from all bonds and oppressive structures. Besides, character-building Gandhiji made *sa vidya ya vimuktaye* (education is that which liberates) one of the most important aims of education. It has been the motto of the Gujarat Vidyapith founded by Gandhiji in 1920.¹⁰ Thus Gandhiji established a framework of education which is people friendly in general and poor friendly in particular.

4. Highlights of Paulo Freire's View on Education

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, philosopher, and influential theorist of critical pedagogy is best known for his influential work 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. He spoke and wrote extensively on the liberative potential in education. Freire who reflected on the Brazilian scenario advocated a principle of education for liberation, education for justice, and education for all.

The work of Paulo Freire within a short while gripped the attention of people and countries beyond Brazil and awakened to the new reality of educating the oppressed who would, in turn, get off their shackles and experience freedom. It began as a struggle for national development but later it aimed at a new awareness among people who would examine the social situation in which they find themselves and take an initiative in order to transform these oppressive structures by active participation in the struggle for justice and thus empower them against the dehumanising forces and powers.

The vocation of every human being is to be fully human: yet, this vocation is thwarted, distorted, and destroyed by dehumanising forces who through injustice, violence and force, take away what is human. Freire was very conscious of the dehumanising forces that operate in society. Therefore humanisation of an individual and the entire society seemed to be the main task at hand for him. He would say, 'Dehumanisation distorts both the oppressor and the oppressed. Therefore the historical task is the liberation of both oppressor and the oppressed. There is fear of freedom for the oppressed.'

Any pedagogy in order to be of value has to be a humanising and liberative pedagogy. In the pedagogy one can trace two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes the pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation. In both stages, it is always through action in-depth action that the culture of domination is culturally confronted. In the first stage this confrontation occurs through the change in the way the

oppressed perceive the world of oppression, in the second stage, this happens through the expulsion of the myths created and developed in the old order, which like specters haunt the new structure emerging from the revolutionary transformation.¹¹

The pedagogy is for the oppressed and not for the oppressor because the oppressor would never feel the need nor is he aware of the call of the oppressive elements caused by him seeking its eradication. Oppressor being in an advantaged position would prefer to keep the status quo. So it becomes the task of the oppressed to become aware of their dehumanizing situation through critical consciousness which would lead them to usher in freedom and liberation.

Friere's method has two distinct features: In the first, the individual becomes conscious of both his oppressed reality and the decisions the oppressors impose; the second refers to the initiative of the oppressed to fight and emancipate themselves from the oppressors. This would naturally arouse resistance from the oppressors and would require courage to withhold any move that tries to break or suppress the moment, and this can only be done by the self-awareness of their own status and that of the oppressor.

In his work Friere strongly criticized the 'banking' system in the education which treats the student as an empty vessel that needs to be filled by the teacher. A lot of importance is given to lecture and memorisation with little importance given to reflection of what is being memorised. This will only make people passive and submissive to oppressive roles.¹² It will bring in loss of interest in life and liberation. Therefore a change of pedagogy is important to counter this trend. The authentic approach must enable people to become conscious of their situation with a desire to change it.

Freire was very particular that the present context is what really matters. Therefore the starting point of the programme content of education or political action or anything must be in the present context, the existential, the concrete situation that in truth depicts the reality of people here and now. Therefore all the discussion on education must be context-based. Many a time our content of education, methodology and curriculum are disconnected from life. They are archaic, away from the here and now, “centred on words emptied of reality they are meant to represent, lacking in concrete activity could never develop a critical consciousness. Indeed, its own naïve dependence on high sounding phrases, reliance on rote, and tendency toward abstractness actually intensified our naivete.”¹³

He said the education our situation demanded would enable men to discuss courageously the problems of their context – and to intervene in that context; it would warn men of the dangers of the time and offer them the confidence and the strength to confront those dangers instead of surrendering their sense of self through submission to the decisions of others. By predisposing men to reevaluate constantly, to analyse – “findings” – to adopt scientific methods and processes, and to perceive themselves in dialectical relationship with their social reality, that education could help men to assume an increasingly critical attitude toward the world and so to transform it.¹⁴

Change in educational system has to be ushered in through a political movement in which people are conscientised and made aware of the oppressive forces that are prevalent in the society, their deprivation and the oppressive structures that are prevalent would be manifested through this process of conscientisation which would reveal their socio-cultural deprivation. Thus he believed that mere

educational changes will not transform society, and any change in education or in society is possible through a political movement: a movement of the masses.

He was wary of technological developments, for he believed that the technology in fact was helping the oppressors than the oppressed. Many times technology was used against the oppressed. When a human person is prevented, disabled and made incapable of expressing himself, it was violence. Poverty itself is violence. This reality cannot be changed by our consciousness. It can be changed only through political, revolutionary action.¹⁵

He firmly believed that schools do not shape society nor they have the power to do so. It is transformative political action alone that can bring about social transformation. He has borrowed a great deal from Marxian principles that emphasized economic determinism. Though he does not specifically use the word superstructure and infrastructure Freire states that education is at the service of the rich and the powerful oppressors. Only liberation would liberate the oppressor too. Hence, a pedagogy of the oppressed when put in force will enable true liberation and humanisation of both the oppressed and the oppressor.

5. The Present Educational Scenario

Gandhiji and Paulo Freire were concerned that education to be of any value must respond to the challenges and questions raised contextually.¹⁶ Hence, it is important to contextualise the educational scenario today in the light of globalisation and postmodernist settings. With the prevalence of market economy influencing and at times guiding and governing educational curriculum and policies the plight of the poor and the marginalised has been one of deprivation and oppression. Some of the salient features of modern education would include among other things – greater advantage for students

from the city, with the easy availability of technical and media education and information opposed to the rural poor who at times struggle due to lack of basic facilities like electricity in their villages. So, in such scenario technical skills seem important and are easily accessible for the rich and the wealthy. In such a situation, traditional knowledge and skills get replaced or displaced by a higher degree of learning and skills. These are in dire contrast to the principle of equality and nation-building.

There is a greater demand in the current scenario for the students to think critically about information, solve problems, communicate and collaborate, create new products and processes, and adapt to change and this will place them in a better footing than others.

Today's education calls for a number of skills, to name a few: automation, caused by computerisation in many workplaces, and skills in communication and problem solving, and also human skills. As there is a corporate change due to technology, globalisation and such competitive forces, companies have radically restructured how the work gets done. Many companies have flat organizational structures with less hierarchy, and workers experience greater autonomy and personal responsibility. Students are expected to be able to use what they learn in school to understand critical information, and so there is a need to apply learning to real life situation.

There is also a need for broader competencies: students who are able to solve new problems and think critically with strong interpersonal skills for communication and collaboration, creativity and intellectual flexibility and also self-sufficiency including the ability to learn new things when necessary. This is needed for times when there are less predictability and less stability.

The current scenario promotes competition among the urban rich and rural poor students and in this rat race the loser is the poor who is weak socially, economically and not in the position to face these tough challenges of the society he gets thrown out of the system and this may, at times lead to frustration and loss of hope in life.

In the mechanized society with limited job opportunities, it becomes the 'survival of the fittest', which would naturally throw the poor out of the race in the society. Hence there is a need to empower the weak, strengthen the rural-based children and youth by providing opportunities, fostering critical consciousness and at times even challenging and questioning the current oppressive global culture in order to create a more humane culture that would give space and opportunities for the weaker sections to progress enabling them not only by providing opportunities for livelihood but creating conditions for living a dignified human life.

6. A Movement towards Antyodaya

It will be a too simplistic generalisation to attribute the concept of Sarvodaya to Mahatma Gandhiji and *antyodaya* to Paulo Freire. Both these thinkers in their writings have spelt out the well being, upliftment and empowerment of weaker sections.

Gandhiji desired that all children under the age of 14 are to be educated without any restriction. The Right to Education which is now a human right aims towards fulfilling the dream of Gandhiji. The weaker and subaltern sections are not to be deprived of the educational opportunity. Education, in itself should not be understood as merely primary education, but as Gandhiji suggested, education not just for living but also for a decent livelihood.

Freire who was aware of the societal structures controlling the education system in Brazil called for a change. Given the globalized context, one can see the market forces guiding and

governing the choice of subjects, curriculum, exam patterns today to a great extent. It is the industry and job market which indirectly holds a sway on the educational institutions today. As a result there are few takers for the humanities like Sociology, Anthropology, History, Philosophy etc. while there are increases in sections for commerce, MBA, BCA, Visual communication, Media and related areas of study. It is important that the society that seeks to uphold values does not get swept away by market forces. This calls for a critical consciousness that would free education from market forces.

The overall goal of education is a 'living' and not merely for earning a livelihood. As education is for life, there is a need for upholding a value-based life, formation of character, rebuilding society, challenging oppressive structures and developing a critical consciousness. In such society the weak, poor and the subaltern sections will have a voice and a place to assert their identity and seek justice, or else they will be swept away by the oppressive market forces. As Freire stated it is humanisation that is to be the main aim of education and not mechanisation nor marketisation.

Growing in critical consciousness would enable the subalterns to face the onslaught of oppressive and exploitative structure of the society. Freire clearly noted that it is those people who are conscious and vigilant that could face the onslaught of the oppressive forces collectively. Though he was influenced by Marxian ideology, he established the need to unite and face the oppressive onslaught on education in the globalised world.

The competitive mode of education brought in by the technological growth, and the use of English as medium of instruction has in fact deprived many rural youths to enter

into competitive urban educational institutions; which, in turn, brings in not only low self esteem in an individual but provides less opportunity in rising up the ladder of economic progress. Education in the mother tongue though has its advantages, has made many incapable to face competition as many of the technical, computer-savvy job centres deem English so essential.

While merit is given importance in government-managed institutions, the competitive structure puts the rich and the powerful in a better position than the others. It is important that the government and other supportive structures provide means and measure to empower the weak with tools of knowledge and communication that would enable them to face the onslaught of the rich and powerful who would sweep off the educational and employment opportunities in the society today.

As Paulo Freire indicated the students of the lower rung of society too must be equipped with similar skills and possibilities that the rich, urban youth are exposed too. In a dialogue with Ira Shor, Paulo Friere expressed the need to study the standard usage and technical skills because of the political realities facing the teachers and the students who live in a non-egalitarian society. What we need to invent are liberatory methods which develop student command of correct usage and of job skills while encouraging them to respect their own idioms and to criticize the very nature of the unequal job-market.¹⁷

Education for social transformation is the key principle in Gandhi and Friere. Social transformation is an ongoing process and there is continuous critique of the society through the medium of education. Given the current scenario it is unlikely that the oppressive forces are open to the critique. The educational system must challenge any attempt to domesticate

the masses and direct education by determining the curriculum, syllabus and other academic activities. Social transformation would also mean a critical consciousness of the existing reality, which would enable the student to question, critique, challenge the existing structures in order to build and transform the society.

In his work *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, Paulo Friere chalks out different dimensions of liberative education which would in turn help in transforming the society and herald *antyodaya*. Education today needs to go beyond classrooms to the homes and communities that we live in. The ‘banking system’ which Friere criticised as dehumanising, to some extent continues even today which in turn makes the students only ‘receivers’ without providing them the opportunity to share their wealth of knowledge.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi and Paulo Freire still continue to inspire the field of education through their creative writings and speeches. These thinkers who had a preferential option towards the poor and oppressed not only sought education for all masses but sought special attention for the marginalised sections that are deprived of educational opportunity. Though the context of the thinkers and world scenario has changed much since these thinkers expressed their view on education, their guidelines still find an echo and meaning in our world today where education continues to reel under the domination of oppressive forces who many a time make students only receivers and fail to bring about the element of justice for the weaker sections. This is not to paint a completely negative picture of education. There is a continuous rethinking on education at the government level in particular and at the level of society

in general which would eventually and hopefully would free education from the shackles of market forces and give it its due place in our society by empowering the weak, the poor, and the marginalized. This can lead to the flourishing of all!

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