

The Hindu View of Education

Ram Swarup

Published by
Ram Swarup
C-58, Maharani Bagh
New Delhi-14.

Printed at
Naya Hindustan Press,
Chandni Chowk,
Delhi-6.

THE HINDU VIEW OF EDUCATION

RAM SWARUP

VOICE OF INDIA

New Delhi

Published by
Ram Swarup
C-58, Maharani Bagh
New Delhi – 14.

1st Edn.: 1971
Pdf: 2015.

THE HINDU VIEW OF EDUCATION

(Text of a speech at the convention of the Akhila Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad held in New Delhi on November 1, 1971.)

Mr. Chairman, sisters and brothers, first I thank the organisers of this convention for inviting me here this evening and thus providing me an opportunity of being with you. When they first invited me to speak to you on the subject of education, my first impulse was to decline the offer. I never thought that I was a specialist of Education, or specialist of any kind for that matter, but the attraction of being with you was there and it conquered all my reluctance and all my scruples and, I am afraid, even all my prudence. For what have I to tell you which in all probability you do already know? Therefore, please do not expect anything from me which is new or exciting. But I shall try to express what are probably your own thoughts.

Friends you belong to a great organisation. You belong to an organisation in which India sees hope. Today, youth movements and student movements all the world over tend to stand for dissipation and distraction. They are governed by tendencies and impulses which are not always for the good. They are permanently in revolt and most of the time they are talking of their rights. The campuses are becoming places of turbulence, unrest and agitation. But you belong to a movement whose inspiration is different, whose principles are different, whose ethos is different. Your thinking is constructive. You are patriots. You love the heritage of the country. You believe in the idea of duty; you believe in self-discipline rather than in telling others

what they should do; you believe in self-reform rather than in reforming others. This kind of approach is needed not only by our own country but by the whole world.

You know what kind of influences are running riot in our country. Our youths are increasingly being seduced by alien ideologies, by ideologies of materialism, hedonism, nihilism, communism, disunity and division. Under their influence, many unsuspecting and idealist young men become strangers to their own good. They become agents and allies of people who have their eyes on our country, who want to enslave us. In the past, these forces combined to divide our country. They are combining again and are set on an open war-path in a bid to annex what remains of a once united India.

But you have stood firm rock-like against the avalanche of these forces. In standing erect, you are helping the whole country to stand erect. Your influence is for the good in the country as well as in the University campuses. The elements that stand for rowdism, disintegration and denigration of our country and culture dislike you and fear you. That is the measure of your success. That explains why I wanted to be with you this evening. There is a merit in seeing and meeting good men.

Now let us turn to the subject of discussion this evening. The subject is : “Educational Planning in a Developing Country”. I do not believe that the subject is happily worded. “Developing country” is a euphemism for a backward or “under-developed” country. In fact, till recently, countries of the East were called by this unadorned name. But now we are supposed to have arrived at a “take-off” stage and consequently we have been promoted from an under-developed country into a developing country. After this “break-through”, our cultural and educational leap is assured; henceforth, we shall leap with geometric progression till we land God

knows where. Or, perhaps, this promotion is a concession to our sensitivity. We may be backward but we are also human. We could afford being flattered a little.

Nor does Planning always solve problems. On the other hand, many times it deepens them, particularly those connected with the deeper cultural life of the country. For the Planning Commission is west-oriented. It must be having on its staff and as its advisors hundreds of men fresh from the Harvard University. Our ruling elite sees in India nothing but backwardness and wants to solve all problems by wholesale import and imitation.

Today, India may be backward in certain material performances but it was never backward in philosophies, theories and speculation that concern the deeper aspects of man, his happiness, his self-discovery, his education. India's literacy-ratio may be low today, but its education is still one of the highest. As Gandhiji pointed out, in a country where the Ramayana is recited by the lowliest, in the remotest corners, the incidence and the quality of its education must be very high indeed.

Even in the matter of literacy-ratio, it was one of the highest till yesterday. According to an estimate quoted by W. Adam, an official of the East India Company, in his "A Report on the State of Education in Bengal", published in 1835, in the then States of Bengal and Bihar, there were about 100,000 indigenous elementary schools, or one school for every 31 or 32 boys of school-going age, as Mr. Adam calculates. Mr. Ward, who wrote in 1818, enumerated 28 institutions of higher learning in the city of Calcutta alone where Nyaaya and Smriti Shastras were taught. Hamilton said in 1801 that within the limits of the 24-parganas, beyond the limits of Calcutta, there were 190 seminaries, all indigenously maintained where Hindu Law, Grammar and Metaphysics were taught.

The Indian system of education was so economical, so effective that some of its features were exported to England and Europe. The “monitor”, the “slate”, the “group-study” were directly borrowed from the old Indian practice. A short account of this practice is available from an eye-witness report of a European named Pier Della Valle published in 1623. But 200 years later around 1800, two Britons, Dr. Bell and Mr. Lancaster, who were servants of the East India Company, introduced in England a “New System of Schooling,” embodying Indian practices of teaching. Both claimed originality for themselves. In the controversy that ensued, it was found that both had borrowed from India without acknowledgment, of course. In this connection we have the testimony of Brigadier-General Alexander Walker who served in the East India Company from 1780 to 1810. While reporting on teaching methods in Malabar, he says that the new British “system was borrowed from the brahmans and brought from India to Europe. It has been made the foundation of the National Schools in every enlightened country. Some gratitude is due to a people from whom we have learnt to diffuse among the lower ranks of society instructions by one of the most unerring and economical methods which has ever been invented.” According to him, by this method, “the children are instructed without violence, and by a process peculiarly simple”.*

Let us now return to the problem of Educational planning. It is difficult to decide where to begin; for education is a vast subject. It could be regarded under various divisions and aspects—all legitimate aspects. All these divisions and sub-divisions have their specific problems and requirements and all perform specific needs. The vocational or technical education is important in a society where old skills are dying out and new ones have

* Taken from the papers collected by Shri Dharampal from the India Office Library, the British Museum, etc.

yet to be acquired. Child Education is in itself a vast subject. Then there is the question of the education of the more gifted students in the more abstract and advanced learning and more sophisticated technologies. A nation's very life depends on the mastery of these new masters. A nation must also attend to the demands of a more liberal and humanistic education which more truly moulds a nation in the long run. Education must also strengthen national consciousness and unity and prepare men for the rights and duties of citizenship. Then there is the economic side of education, like the question of allocation of funds to education as a whole and to its various departments. Then there is the question of a *lingua franca*, the question of a medium of instruction, the question of appropriate text-books. All these are important questions and a nation is called upon to tackle them.

But obviously we cannot go into these questions here. In fact, I shall discuss neither educational planning nor its various problems except perhaps indirectly. These are better discussed by distinguished educationists like Justice Chhagla, Dr. Swamy, Prof. Bhai Mahavir M.P. and others who have been in close touch with these current problems. What I have chosen to discuss, with the permission of the organisers of this symposium, is a somewhat different but related subject. My subject is: The Hindu View of Education. What has India thought about education? Is there a definition of education or are there certain principles of education which could be called Indian or which expressed the soul of India faithfully?

I believe that the question is not without a bearing on the current controversies and problems of education. If we want to be the architect of our true future, we must understand our past. It may be that while exploring the past, we may come by some seed-ideas which are true for all times. If that happens, those ideas may give us some direction and guidance in our current educational planning.

A nation's theories about education depend upon its theories about man. Its definition and understanding of education depend upon its definition and understanding of man.

If we regard man as a physical entity, our approach to education would be of one kind: if we regard man as a mental being, our approach would be of a different kind. But if we regard man as a spiritual being, our educational formulations are bound to be different.

Only for the sake of clarity and analysis, we have set these definitions apart. In actual fact, they cannot be kept apart. For man is one and he is an amalgam of all the three elements. Therefore, no nation can build exclusively on one definition or even two. No one of these definitions could be neglected completely. But it is a question of emphasis and that emphasis lends its particular colour and turn to the whole educative effort.

In India, from time immemorial, Hindus have regarded man predominantly as a Spirit. I say predominantly, for man's physical and intellectual natures were not denied. Rather they were regarded from the vantage-point of the Spirit; they were moulded in the life of the Spirit; and they subserved the life of the Spirit. This emphasis on Spirit as the true shaping reality of man gave Indian education and culture a peculiar colour and individuality.

But what does it mean, this definition of man as a Spirit? Let us raise this question and find out if this is more than a slogan, more than a pleasant-sounding phrase.

According to the ancient Indian seers, there is a greater Life beyond and behind this apparent life; there is a larger World enveloping this apparent world. They saw that the life of the senses and the mind is only a segment of a greater life of the Spirit. They also saw that this larger life of the Spirit is also man's true life,

his true home—anywhere else he feels a stranger. So these seers taught that man should live in the spirit of this eternal and infinite life and claim his citizenship of this larger kingdom of Heaven. According to these seers, the purpose of education is to make man aware of this larger life and to teach him how to reach it.

They taught: Give up egoistic life; give up narrow consideration and petty thoughts; give up hankering and desiring; develop fellow-feelings; enlarge your sympathies; widen your horizon. In short, shed your narrow “I”. That will open the gates of a deeper “I” where all powers and blessings and fulfilment reside.

These seers were not content in merely formulating a philosophy of education; they developed an appropriate practical discipline to achieve it. They developed what is generally denoted by the word Yoga. Yoga teaches a practical method of going within and even looking out and of exploring new and larger life and worlds.

They found that this more intense and deeper inner life was not a substitute for the ordinary work-a-day life. On the other hand, it provided a vantage-point from which to live the latter life more fully. The Spirit enriched the life of the mind and the body, gave it meaning, comprehension and vista. Without the inner life, the outer life is blind, feeble, empty and self-estranged. Therefore, an education which only deals with man’s secular concerns is self-defeating. That explains much of the emptiness and revolt of the modern youth in Western schools and colleges.

True, a time came in Indian spirituality when Yoga was used for suppressing the life of the mind and the body. But that was not its true and original aim. Self-absorption, though it has its attractions, was a secondary aim, a means to an end, not the end itself. A truer aim was self-unfoldment and self-expression, the expression of our higher Self.

The aim is formulated with utmost brevity in the famous Gayatri Mantra which is daily recited by hundreds of thousands of people all over India. The Mantra prays for arousing, activating, animating and manifesting our mind and understanding. Several Upanishads begin with this prayer: "Make strong my limbs, my speech, my vitals, my eyes, my ears and other senses."

India's education had two aims, both organically linked. One was to strengthen our body and mind, our nerves and vitality. If the Indian teaching on this subject is followed faithfully, it ensures full, vigorous, healthy and long life. Similarly, it ensures health and unimpaired senses and a mind with undiminished powers. According to the Hindu Psychology, a man's mind and senses are powers of the soul. Therefore, they should be strengthened, widened, deepened, purified. "May I see and hear clearly and abundantly", is the repeated prayer in the several Upanishads. Another variant of this prayer is: "May our eyes see the good, our ears hear the good". To see and hear and desire better, purer, finer and deeper is the first aim of Indian education. This means strengthening character, controlling desires and impulses, increasing powers of concentration and will. Not only this opens up our hidden powers, but this is even the basis of any fruitful life at all. If our senses and mind run their unbridled course, uninformed by any higher light, they will lead to self-destruction. But purified in the light of the soul, they become a blessing. This is also the teaching of the Greeks. According to Plato, there is a higher soul and a lower soul. The process of education consists in bringing the lower mind increasingly under the control of the higher.

There was yet another aim of Hindu learning to which we would make a barest reference here. The ancient seers would like to go to the principles of a thing, its source and foundation. They would not be satisfied with half-way houses. For example, in their system of education, their aim

was not to seek or provide bits of information on random subjects, but to form and mould the mind itself which receives, processes and analyses all information. Similarly, in their search for knowledge, their aim was not just external half-knowledge about a stray subject. On the other hand, they sought knowledge by identity, and they sought that source which is the fountain-head of all knowledge and all sciences. They thought and meditated and found that “Mind is the uniting-point of all intentions” (सर्वेषां संकल्पानाम् मन एकायनम्); and similarly they found that the “heart is the uniting-point of all sciences and knowledge” (सर्वासं विद्यानाम् हृदयमेकायनम्). So if mind is the source of all intentions and resolutions, then we could conquer the latter by conquering the former. Similarly if heart is the source of all sciences and knowledge, we could master all sciences by entering into the heart. Many of the sciences came to India through this process, through this churning of the heart-ocean.

The Hindu system of education had its higher aims, but it also included that aim which the modern education would like to achieve but which eludes it: namely a restful mind. The ancient Indian education helped to conquer what are called the *vikshepas* of the mind, like inattention, distraction, confusion, perplexity, lassitude, restlessness. Today even the brightest minds suffer from these infirmities. A man may be very bright and intelligent in certain ways; he may be capable of certain high achievements in certain directions; he may be a good engineer, a good chemist, but his mind remains diffused and scattered, distraught and crazed. The modern mind is restless, distracted, ill-at-ease, in conflict with itself. The whole modern culture tends to be sick at heart and sick in mind. In America, the psychiatrist is doing a roaring business.

But modern education offers no cure for this sickness.

The ancient educators had prescribed *japa* and meditation for overcoming this sickness of the soul and these infirmities of the mind. There can be no healthy mind

without these two aids. This is simply impossible. Any system of education which wants to plan for happiness and mental health must adopt these two aids.

The Hindu seers also believed that fellow-men are brothers, that the world and nature around are friendly. Therefore, they also founded their education on this vision. They taught for happiness, for integrity, for service. They taught harmony with oneself, harmony with our neighbours, and fellowmen, harmony with our environment. Modern education is based on another vision, the vision of man in conflict with himself, with his fellowmen, with his environment. Therefore, modern schools educate young men for competition and conflict. This is inevitable in a society which is based on the creed of maximum personal consumption, and maximum exploitation of our fellow-men, exploitation of the animal world, exploitation of our mother-earth, and exploitation of the elements of Nature. It is a world in which no one has rights except man. No wonder when we sow such ample seeds of conflict and exploitation, we reap a rich harvest of pollution, of neurosis, of crime, of drugs and of insanity.

The ancient educational thinking also emphasized the importance of a certain atmosphere in which alone any worthwhile education is possible. First, there must be a complete rapport between the teacher and the taught. "May we study together. May God protect us both. May we never spite each other", that is the prayer of the teacher and the pupil with which several Upanishads open. There must be an atmosphere of serious inquiry, of hankering for truth for its own sake, of affection, deference, service and respect. Hindus believed that without this environment, no higher education is possible.

Hindus also believed that a serious student should observe simplicity, austerity, chastity and faith. Without these attributes, higher learning could not be imparted. Not that the teacher was withholding anything, but the capacity

of the student seeking pleasure was badly impaired for receiving higher truth. In the *Prasnopnishad*, the sage-teacher tells the pupils who approach him for instruction in *Brahma Vidya* thus: "Dwell with me a year, with austerity, chastity and faith; then ask what question you will".

The spirit of inquiry and the feeling of reverence tend to disappear from modern centres of learning. No doubt, a certain percentage of bright students still manage to do well in their learning, but their attainments remain only intellectual. Their deeper minds remain unprepared.

In the West, rightly famed for its scientific achievements, the atmosphere of learning is suffering a decline. In America, machines are replacing minds, computers are replacing teachers. The best minds go not to teaching but to research supported by big Corporations and the biggest Corporation of all, the Government. In all this there is a certain utility and pragmatism, but no deeper qualities of the mind come into the fore. The students imbibe a certain measure of scientific knowledge and technical competence but lack a broad humane culture. They remain uneducated in the right sense of the term.

The lack of the spirit of reverence has played havoc with the West's educational institutions. To call these institutions centres of learning would be to stretch the meaning of the word. They are degenerating into sanctuaries of all kinds of excesses, drinking, drugs, promiscuity riots. In New York, we are told, teachers teach under the protection of the police. Glass-panes, windows, light-equipments are broken which cost the State millions of dollars every year. Now, we are told, the schools are built inside a blind, solid wall. In the higher centres of learning, in what are called Multiversities, things are no better. Corruption prevails amongst the professors and deans. The students are not for higher standards of learning, but for the right of free sex and free obscene speech. I do not want to emphasize these negative features, but we must become

aware of what we want to import if our means permitted. We must develop our own system of education which is in harmony with our best thoughts.

There were also certain characteristic features in the old Indian system of education to which we would like to make a passing reference. Those features are worthy of imitation by us even now. The old educational system was economical and democratic. It was open to all irrespective of caste, creed or sex. Pupils belonging to widely different conditions shared a common life under a common teacher. Princes rubbed shoulders with plebians. We all know the stories of Krishna and Sudama, and Drupad and Dronacharya of ancient times. But the same is true of times less distant past. Shri Radhakumud Mukherjee in his "Ancient Indian Education," quotes from the Jataka stories and other literary sources to bring out this point. He shows how the teachers at Taxila drew students from all over India. These students belonged to different conditions of life. Princes, nobles, merchants, tailors, all studied together. Education was open to all except perhaps to Chandalas. There is a story in the Jataka according to which a prince of Benares leaves for Taxila with a "pair of one-soled sandals, a sunshade of leaves, and a thousand pieces of money as his teacher's fees, of which not a single piece he could retain for his private use." There is another story of a prince who took away some sweets from a vendor's basket without paying for them. The matter was reported to the teacher. The teacher caused two lads to take the young fellow by the two hands and smote him thrice upon the back with a bamboo stick, bidding him take care not to do it again. The democratic spirit in education continued to prevail till recently. I have seen an old account of a school of the last century in a village of Tamil Nadu by an official of the East India Company. It said that while the teacher was a Brahmin, the scholars belonged to all castes. But now a new stratification is coming, the one based on money. From

the kind of school a boy attends, one could guess his father's income. This is bound to happen in a country where education is becoming increasingly costly. Costs may not improve the quality of education, but they do keep the populace out and give education a class-character.

Now, I think, I should close. I have spoken to you about some of the principles of old Hindu Education and of the vision that supported those principles. I have no doubt that they throw a flood of light on the problems of education of today. I believe that if we kept those principles in mind while planning our education, we shall have a standard to follow however we may deviate from it in practice. I believe that even if a little of these principles are put in practice, that would raise our educational standards and improve the quality of our lives. Above all we should give up the barren path of imitation. We should develop our education according to our own historical development, experience and needs.

At the end, I would like to say a few words to those scholars who have come here from other sister-nations. I welcome them. I hope they will forget what is unpleasant in their experience here and only remember that which is pleasant. For that is the way of good men.

But when I see them, I feel unhappy about one thing: that India has nothing of her own to teach them, that she teaches them whatever is taught in European Universities whether the subject be philosophy, or biology or medicine. This was not so at the time of Nalanda and Taxila. But let me not rub the point too much. We are happy in the simple fact that they are here with us. It is enough that we have the opportunity of being together. What could be more educative than being together, growing together and learning together?