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Swami Vivekananda's Concept of Education and the Vedic Tradition

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Abstract

A brief study on the concept of education from the Eastern and the Western perspectives is attempted in the paper. A special emphasis on the ideas of Swami Vivekananda on education and the influence of the ancient Vedic ideas on education, the school set up, the roles and responsibilities of the teachers and the students on his ideologies is also done.

Key Words: Education, Vedas, Ideologies, Teachers, Responsibilities, Man-making.

The word "education" is derived from the Latin word *educare* ("to educate", "to rear", "to train", "to bring up") which in turn evolved from *e* ("out") and *ducare* ("lead, drawing"). The ultimate meaning of the word is "drawing out."

Education means the process of drawing the latent potential in a person through periodical training. Based on the culture of countries, education seems to take up various meanings. The way it is administered also varies. Countries and cultures have always prided themselves on the importance they have attached to education.

Socrates defined the arising of reason, the highest philosophical action, as the condition of education. The function of right education was to lead one towards a life of non-contradiction because purging of the soul from its contradictions would bring it to knowledge. The tussle between the contradictions in mind weakens it and prevents the dawn of knowledge.

Plato worked with the concept of the original idea and how humans have an inherent knowledge that just needs to be awakened. He also stresses on the concept of reason. The ultimate objective of education is to bring about a revolution in the educand's perception of the role of reason.

Aristotle believed that education was central and that thinking and practice as educators must be infused with a clear philosophy of life. There has to be a deep concern for the ethical and political. It has to be continually asked as to what makes for human flourishing

and that work has to be done for that which is good or “right”, rather than that which is merely “correct.” He looked to both education through reason and education through habit.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously insisted that education should enable the “natural” and “free” development of children. Rousseau prescribed fundamentally distinct education for boys and girls, and in doing so raised issues concerning gender and its place in education that are of central concern today.

Educator Bertrand Russell thought that the welfare of students should be the ultimate aim of education and that it should not be used for any other purpose. Only through education, conscious and superior types of individuals can be created. If the teacher is not affectionate and sympathetic to students their intelligence and character cannot be developed. He had emphasized enlargement of the mind and heart as one of the aims of education. One of the glaring defects of the existing system of education was to give too much emphasis on the acquisition of certain skills. He was against narrow, perverted and virulent nationalism. Hence internationalism should be fostered through education in school.

India, which boasts of a rich cultural history, has had a slightly different definition for education. Being a spiritual nation, India has always associated education with spiritual awakening. Education has come to mean realization of ultimate reality and *Mukthi*, ‘liberation from the sorrow of cycle of birth and death’, according to our ancient scriptures. Contemporary educationists have defined education in a more secular fashion coupling ancient spirituality and social reform. Tagore defines education as assimilation of moral values and creative self-expression. He does not discriminate between arts and science in this regard. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan says education is the balanced growth of the student through the study of science, literature, religion and philosophy. Gandhiji calls education as the harmonious growth of the faculties of the hand, the head and the heart. Sri Aurobindo calls it a means of helping an individual express his physical and vital energies for the total development of the intellectual, emotional and spiritual faculties. J. Krishnamoorthy defines education as the realization of the truth beyond thought. He calls it the attainment of absolute freedom, intelligence and love by which all problems are solved.

Swami Vivekananda, though a religious leader and a social worker at heart, was primarily a teacher. He was one of the philosophers who had expressed definite ideas about the importance of education and the role it plays in the nation making. Education is not accumulation of information according to Swami Vivekananda:

We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library.... If education is identical with information, the libraries would be the greatest sages in the world and encyclopaedias, the rishis. (CW 3: 302)

The aims of education are different and unique. The end and aim of all training is to make the man grow:

We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet. (CW 5: 342)

Swami Vivekananda wanted to produce men of character and strength, men who could face challenges and come out victorious, men who could brave the chances and were ready to encounter sufferings for succeeding in their endeavours. This, he thought, was the purpose of education.

Swami Vivekananda was a man who had personally experienced all the truths about which he spoke. This was especially binding for the ideas he expressed about education. Swami Vivekananda spoke about the past greatness of our country and its educational system in support of his ideals. A parallel study of Vedic ideas and Swami Vivekananda's ideas is presented here.

Gurugriha-vasa system was considered as the ideal system by Swami Vivekananda. He comments on the ancient system thus:

The old system of education in India was very different from the modern system. The students had not to pay. It was thought that knowledge was so sacred that no man ought to sell it; therefore, knowledge should be given freely and without any price. The teachers used to take students without any fees and not only so, most of them gave their students food and clothes. To support these teachers, kings of the realm and the wealthy families made large endowments to them and they, in their turn, had to maintain their students. (CW 4: 162-163)

The institutions were of different sizes, small and large, sometimes consisting of a few hundred students. Many of them consisted of the family of the teachers and the students who lived with them as part of the family. It is known that the disciple used to go to the hermitage of the guru fuel in hand, and the guru, after ascertaining his competence, would teach him the Vedas.

In these seats of learning, there was an admirable balance between thought and deed and theory and practice. The totality of education was achieved in the environment conducive to learning. Ideals of how to live were assimilated by the students. Culture and customs were imbibed along with theoretical classes. The practical implementation of concept of community life was taught. There was no special effort needed for the notion of "giving back to the society." That naturally happened.

The mode of learning was usually in the form of dialogues of the Socratic type. The students were encouraged to ask question and the teacher explained the subjects elaborately. The lectures included illustrations, stories, parables, discussions and assignments. Hence all our modern types of learners like kinesthetic, auditory, visual, intellectual were served

according to their need. Logic was appreciated, encouraged and developed. Introspection and contemplation was emphasized on. Self-study was encouraged.

The teachers used self-experience as a method of teaching. The faculties of concentration and memory were given a lot of importance. Rote memory without understanding was discouraged. Students were encouraged to put in efforts to study, be sincere and to study with continuous application. These were prescribed as the method of acquiring lasting knowledge.

It was not only intellectual capability that was considered important. Certain moral and mental qualities were insisted upon as requirements for good studentship. The qualities like aspiring to learn, receiving the lessons daily, understanding them, retaining them in memory, reflecting on them, exercising judgment or discrimination and love of truth were expected in a student. Only the interest in acquiring knowledge was assessed. No other factor was considered for admission. Once into the school, there was no difference in the way the students were handled, whether they were princes or paupers. Respect was accorded based on the merit of the student and on nothing else.

The pupils had a set of duties to perform. They had to help in the household work like tending to the cattle, gathering fruits and collection of firewood. The duties were common for all. They were expected to wear similar dresses. The spirit of equality and fraternity existed. They learnt to love all creatures. The princes who studied in this manner had interaction with the commoners and hence knew their situation and problems too. This helped in shaping them as considerate and just rulers. Swami Vivekananda was in support of this kind of education.

The Vedas taught sociology through hymns. It was assimilated by the students naturally. The scope of ideas in the Vedas leaves one baffled. It covers all conceivable points pertaining to what education should provide for a country.

One knows the responsibility of a good education system. Being citizens of a free nation, students were made aware of the fact that they shall have to solve national problems and reshape the destiny of their country according to their national ideas, ideals and needs. The process of education stimulated students to get firmly convinced that indigenous problems can never be solved with imported ideologies, especially for a nation which has its own enriched and highly evolved cultural and spiritual heritage.

Students were educated to recognize unity in diversity, for that is a distinctive feature of our motherland which has enabled her to remain integrated in terms of the social, cultural and spiritual aspects of evolution, centuries, ultimately to get metamorphosed into a symphony of diverse traditions. Students were made aware of the fact that the basic hindrance in the path of national progress is people's excessive stress on individual freedom and also on the rights resulting from it, without caring to stress the importance of social responsibility and the duties ensuing. Rights and duties should go hand in hand. True education should aim at

imparting a humanistic attitude and the spirit of service. The Vedas censured the self-centred man whose accomplishments are aimed exclusively at selfish end.

Instead of being jealous of each other, clashing with each other and pulling each other down, true education should enable a person to develop the capacity to cooperate, to live and work as a team. The Vedas urged upon men to assemble on a common platform, to think together, and to work together for achieving a common goal. Education cannot exist independently of the teachers.

The role of a teacher was a very special one in our country's setup in Vedic setup. Teacher was considered as a representation of Divine along with the mother and the father. He was to be held in high respect. Out of this respect came veneration and obedience, without which learning would be impossible. In spite of the insistence on obedience, students were not discouraged from questioning the guru. If the student was not satisfied with the teacher, a change in guru was permitted. It was understood that learning cannot happen without perfect understanding between the teacher and the student.

The teacher was expected to keep himself updated in the subject by learning continuously. It was required that he loves his subject as learning and teaching will be impossible without the love for the subject. The teacher had to anticipate the needs of the students. It was required that the teacher had a good retention, disposition, fortitude, will power, cogent, diplomacy and understanding of the ways of the young. He must practise what he preaches. According to the Upanishads, he was expected to have faith in the inherent potentialities of each and every student, for the Atman (self) is lodged in every creature. At the same time, he should be able to recognize the differences in their capacity of assimilation owing to diverse backgrounds, as has been aptly pointed out. The teacher was expected to teach the students everything he knew. He was entrusted with the responsibility of figuratively leading the student from "darkness of ignorance" to "light of knowledge." He should live up to the lofty ideal. An ideal teacher was supposed to be a friend, philosopher and guide. His intellectual egotism should not lead him to reject or discourage students' opinions altogether. Rather, his loving attitude towards students should motivate them to be interactive in the classroom. He should question his students, stimulate them to think, and animate their minds. The teacher too should learn from the students.

Thus the teacher formed the structure on which the system depended.

According to the Vedas, the rules for students were as stringent as that for teachers. A student was called a brahmachari. The word means a student of Vedas and a celibate. An initiation process was required for an ordinary student to become a brahmachari. He had to undergo lessons in two courses of discipline, physical and spiritual.

Physical disciplining included lessons on life skill. The student had to adhere to simplicity. He had to collect fuel, tend the household fire and beg for food. There had to be absolute obedience and devotion to the teacher.

Spiritual discipline included meditations and prayers, control of senses and practice of austerity. The student had to rise before sunrise, bathe early in the morning, perform his morning devotional rituals without fail, and meditate in a pure and isolated place. The student should be free from sexual desire, anger, envy and covetousness. He must be forgiving, untiring in fulfilling his duties, modest, self-confident and devoid of pride. Lethargy and complacency are the greatest hindrances in the process of learning. It is the duty of a student to move ahead in quest of knowledge. Vedic students were taught to respect their elders, namely, father, mother, teachers and guests. But to respect elders did not mean to imitate them or follow them blindly. They were to respect their elders, but at the same time they were to discriminate the ennobling features of their elders' character from those that were unsophisticated.

Swami Vivekananda's ideas on education are a reflection of Vedic ideas with a few practical ideas included. Swami Vivekananda suggested changes based on the requirements of the times. Summing up his ideas on the role of education in human life is his oft-quoted definition of education: "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man" (CW 4: 358).

Swami Vivekananda's definition shows remarkable acumen. The word "manifestation" explicitly means "something that already exists and is waiting to be expressed." This reiterates the fact that the main focus of education is to make the hidden aptitude of a person exhibit itself. As Swami Vivekananda said, 'What a man "learns" is really what he "discovers", by taking cover off his own soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge.' According to the Vedanta philosophy, knowledge is innate in a human being, like a spark in a piece of flint, and all that is needed is the strike of an awakening spur to bring it out blazing.

Next in importance in Swami Vivekananda's definition of education is the expression "already in man." It is again a known concept of Vedanta that man has a wide range of potentials, abilities and talents, either known or unknown to him.

The word "perfection" in Swami Vivekananda's definition is also very significant. Though the word perfection means completion or something being made whole, it might be assumed to mean the idea of attaining a goal or an end. Thus it might be considered that perfection is attaining the goal of realizing the highest human potential.

Swami Vivekananda was in favour of respectable selfless teachers who would be ready to bring about a revolution in the society. He had listed three primary qualities necessary in a teacher which are based on the Vedic requisites.

The teacher should be a master of scriptures. He must know not only the words for the sake of formality but must know the spirit of it or the crux. It is the deep knowledge that counts.

The teacher must be a pure soul beyond the scope of sins. It is because the students learn more from actions than words. Therefore the argument that the teacher's personal life should be differentiated from his personal life does not carry any weight.

The effect has relevance only with the cause. A money minded person cannot be a good teacher according to Swami Vivekananda. He has to be in the profession with a love for it. Probably this is why it is called a calling and not a job.

Swami Vivekananda qualifies the role of students with certain conditions which are again in vogue with vedic standards. He explains these conditions as selflessness, self-control, endurance, desire for freedom, faith in the teacher and discrimination of the real from the unreal.

Swami Vivekananda says that it is not easy to be a disciple. The first condition is that the student who wants to know the truth must give up all desire for gain. Swami Vivekananda advises the students to know the fickleness of prosperity and happiness and urges them to give these up and seek to know the truth and truth alone. The second condition that Swami Vivekananda lays for a student is that as a disciple he must be able to control the internal and external senses and has to assert his mind against the commands of nature. This comes only by hard practice. Swami Vivekananda advises one to forget one's life and death, pains and pleasures, name and fame, and realise that one is neither body nor mind but the pure spirit. The next condition the disciple must fulfill is to envisage an extreme desire to be free. According to scriptures, desire is never satiated by enjoyment; enjoyment only increases desire as butter fed into fire increases the fire.

Swami Vivekananda gives a solution for this illness that renunciation of the senses and desires is the only way out of this misery. If one wants to be spiritual, one must renounce. He agrees that this is the real test. He entreats one to give up the world — this nonsense of the senses. The desire must be to become spiritual, strong and intense

The next qualification is that the disciple must have faith in the guru because in our country the relationship with the teacher is the greatest in life. The relationship plays a major role in the shaping of the disciple's life. Swami Vivekananda insists on the condition that learning goes hand in hand with understanding. He ridicules rote learning saying that even parrots can learn things by heart and repeat them. Asses can carry whole libraries and so book reading does not matter too. When real light comes, there will be no more learning from books.

The last condition of discipleship is the discrimination of the real from the unreal. There is only one thing that is real God. All the time the mind must be drawn to Him, dedicated to Him. God exists, nothing else exists, everything else comes and goes. Any desire for the world is illusion, because the world is unreal. The soul, says Swami Vivekananda, should be aware of this distinction. More and more the mind must become conscious of God alone, until everything else appears as it really is unreal.

These are the conditions which one aspiring to be a disciple must fulfill; without fulfilling them he will not be able to come in contact with the true guru. With the fulfillment of these conditions, Swami Vivekananda says, the lotus of the disciple's heart will open, and the bee shall come. Then the disciple knows that the guru was within the body, within

himself. He opens out; he realizes. He crosses the ocean of life, goes beyond. He crosses this terrible ocean, and in mercy, without a thought of gain or praise, he in his turn helps others to cross.

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