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Swami Vivekananda: the Grand Visionary and Educator

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Abstract

With a mission devoted towards the spiritual, intellectual and moral upliftment of mankind, Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of education aimed at realising the goal of creating the total personality of man, essential for a peaceful and harmonious society. Swami Vivekananda's concept of 'Man Making Education' was value based, resting on a balanced co-existence and perfect harmony of healthy body, mind and Atman. Education which creates self-centred, mechanical people, detached from the society akin to islands in the midst of oceans would lead to immense crisis in human civilisation. The purpose of education would be to liberate human mind from all kinds of bondage.

According to him, one of the major reasons for India's degeneration was suppression of women and utter disrespect being displayed for them. Women should be offered the right kind of education to solve their problems in their own way instead of servile dependence on their male counterparts, develop strength of character and manifest their Brahman or spiritual power and potentiality in them.

Swami Vivekananda also stressed on mass education. Education in India is the monopoly of the upper castes. Unless education percolates till the lowest strata of the society, arousing their self-confidence and dignity, the nation cannot progress. Criticising the present system of education, Vivekananda argued that it is divorced from the noble purpose of man making.

This paper humbly aims at reflecting upon Swamiji's vision on system of education in India and his relevance today.

Keywords: *Upliftment, Harmonious, Value-based, Self-centred, Liberate, Bondage, Monopoly.*

Swami Vivekananda was not a mere theoretician or philosopher constructing grand theories but he was a missionary devoted towards the spiritual, intellectual and moral upliftment of mankind through his propagation of Vedantic ideals. He attached immense importance to imparting the right kind of education as is evident from his saying, "education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man". (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 4: 358).

His philosophy of education aimed at realising the goal of creating the total personality of man, essential for a peaceful and harmonious society. However, “education is not acquisition of undigested information but a comprehensive training one receives throughout one’s life so as to ensure life-building, man-making and assimilation of ideas” and to equip them to resolve their own problems of life. “.....If education was identical with information, the libraries would be the greatest sages in the world.....” (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 3: 30). Swamiji believed that India needed strength-giving religion and man-making education. His grand vision was regeneration of India through the eradication of poverty, unemployment and ignorance among the masses through dissemination of man making education so that their lost individuality can be restored.

Thus ideal form of education equips man to confront the struggles in his life, enlivening the latent courage in him and contributes to character building. In Swamiji’s opinion character is the strengthening of the will and will have infinite power. The character of a man is a sum total of his tendencies and dispositions and these tendencies take the form of habit when they are more or less settled. Our mind has a bundle of impressions left in it resulting from our movements, ideas and actions, a sum total of which determines our character. Thus cultivation of good habits over the wrong ones should be a part of our character. True education enables us build our character and thereby cultivate good conduct. “Build up your character and manifest your Real Nature just like striking a matchstick in a dark room that illuminates the room immediately.” (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 2: 357). Life, with all its sufferings and happiness, is the best teacher and conquering evil and suffering through one’s will force plays an essential role in character building.

Swamiji believed that infinite power resides in every human mind. Education can be best acquired not by simply assimilating facts and information unintelligently but through utmost concentration on the matter of study. In fact he emphasised both on concentration on a particular object as well as cultivating the art of detachment which is the ability to withdraw our mind from one object and place it on another. Concentration is the only method for attaining knowledge and to control mental distractions and disturbances, one should practise yoga or meditation which would improve concentration and develop qualities like strength, fearlessness, compassion and the like. Education based on such moral and spiritual values would inculcate the value of brotherhood with his fellow countrymen and provoke the sense of service to humanity.

An essential prerequisite of education is complete faith or *sraddha* in the subject matter of learning as well as faith in one’s own dignity to realise the goal. Faith imposes infinite energy and dignity in man and the primary reason behind degeneration of India is absence of faith, confidence and dignity in the people. (Amiya Kumar Mazumdar 2011: 110). “The one thing that is at the root of all evils in India is the condition of the poor. The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, to develop their lost personality.....Every nation, every man; every woman must work out their own salvation. Give them ideas- that is the only help they require, and then the rest must follow as the effect.” (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 4: 362). Swamiji believed that that true

education or supreme knowledge can be imparted only when the students live in complete harmony or communion with Nature and it is supreme knowledge which helps to destroy spiritual blindness. As Swamiji said, “Let nature be the teacher”. Thus he emphasised on cultivation of aesthetics which would inspire creativity in men.

A very original idea asserted by Vivekananda regarding education is that knowledge is something inherent in man’s mind, an innate treasure of human soul. True education aims at unravelling the knowledge inside. The source of such an idea was the Vedantic tradition which propagates that true knowledge emerges as a result of friction between the innate qualities in man’s mind and ideal education. It is in this respect that Vivekananda’s idea may be compared to that of the Greek political philosopher Plato as it is in stark similarity with the Heuristic method practised in ancient Greece which propagates that a student himself acquires knowledge, the teacher simply assists him. Swamiji often said, “no one can teach anybody.....You can take away the obstacles, but knowledge comes out of its own nature....You cannot do anything else. The rest is the manifestation from within its own nature.” (Swami Nirvedananda 1946: 58-59). The heuristic method aims at evoking a spirit of enquiry among the students and enables them to discover the truth on their own instead of being passive followers of their teachers. Vivekananda explained, “We say Newton discovered gravitation ...It was in his own mind, the time came and he found it out. The external world is simply the suggestion.....The falling of an apple gave the suggestion to Newton, and he studied in his own mind. He arranged all the previous links of thought in his mind and discovered a new link among them which we call the Law of Gravitation....All knowledge is therefore in human mind.” (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 1: 26).

Vivekananda attached immense importance to the personal role and influence of the teachers in enabling the students to discover the inherent knowledge in their minds. This can at best be made possible through “Gurukul” system of education where close association between the teachers and the students would lead to fruitful exchange of ideas. In the ancient Indian Gurukul system, the students were imparted free education by their teachers and being under the direct supervision of their teachers enabled them to acquire a very high standard of discipline and comprehensive education. A true teacher should possess lofty ideals and noble character to impart education without any ulterior motive for money or fame. Swamiji said, “The true teacher is he who can immediately come down to the level of the student, and transfer his soul to the student’s soul and see through and understand through his mind. Such a teacher can teach and none else.” (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 5: 369). Thus to Swamiji, imparting education by the teachers should not be for the sake of profession only, it is a comprehensive process of life building for the students. Vivekananda also stressed on *Brahmacharya* among the students to develop faith and *Sraddha* in them and also to ensure control over their minds and senses. Since education for Swamiji implied a comprehensive concept, he attached great importance to physical strength and training of the people, similar to the Greek tradition which believed, ‘a sound mind resides in a healthy body’. The first important element of Vivekananda’s realistic scheme of education is body. The necessity of physical exercise

cannot be overemphasised in his scheme of education. Just as people take care to protect the sanctity of their place of worship, similarly care should be taken to develop a strong, healthy and beautiful body where the *Atman* or soul resides. Weakness is sin, fearlessness is strength and power and the physically weak are unfit for the realisation of the Self. That is why he said that “heaven is nearer through football than through Gita.” The second important element is of course a healthy, brave, strong and aesthetic mind. Whatever we learn or study is in our mind. To this Vivekananda added a third element, that of *Atman* or spirit. A strong *Atman* or soul requires a healthy mind and body to reside. Swami Vivekananda’s concept of ‘Man Making Education’ was value based resting on a balanced co-existence and perfect harmony of healthy body, mind and *Atman*. It is only through such a scheme of education that a true social consciousness can be developed among the people. Education which creates self-centred, mechanical people, detached from the society akin to islands in the midst of oceans would lead to immense crisis in human civilisation. The purpose of education would be to liberate human mind from all kinds of bondage, to do away with his social and cultural isolation and develop an inquisitive mind. The curriculum of man-making education should include the study of Religion, Science and Technology, Aesthetics, Fine Arts, Classics and Linguistic Science. Great care should be taken to ensure that our scheme of education does not destroy the individuality of man.

To Swamiji, religion and education are identical as both aim at ensuring spiritual development of man. The core of education is religion. But the pertinent question is can religion ensure the basic amenities of life to the starving people of India? The answer would certainly be negative. “Bread! Bread! I do not believe in a God who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven.....India is to be raised, the poor are to be fed, education is to be spread and the evil of priest craft is to be removed.” (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 4: 368). However, the importance of religion cannot be undermined as religion inspires the virtues of fearlessness, charity and selflessness and arouses their dormant conscience. It is this fearlessness which inspires men to resist social evils and unreasonable rituals and thereby creates a sense of righteousness. Thus education based on religion is contributory towards the emancipation of the masses through development of their comprehensive personality. But he rightfully pointed out that offering religious sermons and lessons on metaphysics would tantamount to humiliating the starving masses who are deprived of the basic amenities of life (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 2: 290). In Sister Nivedita’s words, his main concern was “how to impart secular knowledge to the people”.

However, Vivekananda cannot be charged of overemphasising spiritual education at the expense of science and technology. Being a hardcore realist, Vivekananda was aware of the necessity of material progress through scientific and technical education. Swamiji placed science over and above religion in terms of its importance as he was particularly impressed by the exceptionally strong material progress of the West resulting from incredible advancement of science and technology. “Education, education, education alone! Travelling through many cities of Europe and observing in them the comforts and education of even

the poor people, there was brought to my mind the state of our poor people and I used to shed tears. What made the difference? Education was the answer I got. Through education comes faith in one's own Self, and through faith in one's own Self the inherent Brahman is waking up in them, while the Brahman in us is gradually becoming dormant." (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 4: 483). 'Freedom from want' can be ensured for the starving masses only through appropriate application of science and technology. He said, "what we need, you know, is to study, independent of foreign control, different branches of knowledge that is our own, and with it the English language and Western science, we need technical education and all else which may develop industries, so that men, instead of seeking for service, may earn enough to provide for themselves and save something against a rainy day." (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 5: 372). It is only when their basic material requirements are fulfilled that they can focus on religion in a meaningful manner. Vivekananda poignantly emphasised that it is at a stage when their basic demands are met that they should be placed under an appropriate scheme of education based on religion, lest they fall prey to the allurements of consumerism, which would lead to destruction of the glory and heritage of our civilisation. It is precisely for this reason that Swamiji advocated spiritual education. In fact, religion and science are two important pillars of his scheme of education.

Vivekananda believed that a nation's education and culture are integrally related to each other. Though Swamiji favoured imparting education in the mother tongue, he attached importance to the study of the Sanskrit language, the study of the epics, the Bhagavat Gita, Upanishad and the Vedanta, which was a monopoly of the higher castes, to acquaint the people of India with our classics revealing the rich cultural heritage of their country and in turn restore their faith and confidence in themselves. "Intelligence must not remain the monopoly of the cultured few; it will be disseminated from higher to lower classes. Education is coming and compulsory education will follow. The immense power of our people for work must be utilised. India's potentialities are great and will be called forth. (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 5: 199).

This in turn would help to create a spiritual bond between the people and their national culture which is an important determinant of the quality of education. To Swamiji, education which fails to culturally enrich its people is no true education at all. ".....It is culture that withstands shocks, not a mass of knowledge.....There must come culture into the blood.....Teach the masses in the vernaculars.....they will get information, but something more is necessary, give them culture." (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 3: 290). A nation can grow only when it strikes deep roots in its past tradition and culture as well as assimilates culture of lasting value from the other nations.

It is in these ideas that Swamiji is so very much relevant in today's post-colonial era. Two major reasons behind the failure of the system of education in the Afro-Asian countries, including India are, first, Brain Drain resulting in detachment from indigenous culture, of the exceptionally meritorious, who has settled abroad, and secondly, detachment from their indigenous culture of the rising number of educated unemployed. These are two

burning issues that stand in the way of the progress of these developing Third World countries. (Tapan Bandyopadhyay 2006: 181)

Swami Vivekananda also gave immense importance to a scheme of education for women, contributory towards the development of their individuality and dignity. According to him, one of the major reasons for India's degeneration was suppression of women and utter disrespect being displayed for them. Women should be offered the right kind of education to solve their problems in their own way instead of servile dependence on their male counterparts, develop strength of character and manifest their *Brahman* or spiritual power and potentiality in them. With this aim in view, Swamiji wanted to establish a women's math which should have a girl's school attached to it. Apart from the regular curriculum in schools including subjects like Religious Scriptures, Literature, Sanskrit, Grammar and rudimentary English, Swamiji felt that subjects such as sewing, culinary art, domestic science and child care should also be included in the curriculum as women tend to have a special aptitude in studies relating to home and family. Worship and education should also form an indispensable part of the curriculum. Excluding men teachers from such schools, teaching should be the responsibility of the educated widows and *Brahmcharinis*. The girl pupils would observe strict discipline and practise spirituality, self-sacrifice and control. Education should be imparted on national lines, through national methods. In conformity with Swamiji's ideas, The University Education Commission of India (1948-49) recommended subjects such as Home Economics and Home Management, Nursing and Fine Arts for women's education. The Commission opined that, "A well-ordered home helps to make well-ordered men." (Amiya Kumar Mazumdar 2011: 117-119).

Swami Vivekananda also stressed on mass education. Education in India is the monopoly of the upper castes. Unless education percolates till the lowest strata of the society, arousing their self-confidence and dignity, the nation cannot progress. Being a hardcore realist, he comprehended the obstacles in the way of mass education, poverty and lack of awareness being the vital ones. Vivekananda suggested that if the students are not able to attend the school as they need to work to earn their bread, the teachers can play the reverse role of reaching education to the peasants in the fields or to the workers in the factories. Though he preferred that mass education should be imparted in mother tongue, he spoke of a tri -language scheme, giving importance to Sanskrit and English, the study of these being necessary to make them acquainted with the classics. He also emphasised on work culture. As per the teachings of *Karma* in Bhagavat Gita, we should perform our duties towards our fellow beings and the citizen's of the world.

The spiritual or religious education as propagated by Swamiji is not however inconsistent with the secular ideals of our constitution. Fundamentals of religion, in his opinion, enhance conduct and discipline inspiring spiritual illumination and a spirit of enquiry. In fact, he spoke of imparting secular education through religion, arousing their dignity and self-confidence.

Criticising the present system of education, Vivekananda argued that it is divorced from the noble purpose of man making. “Negative education is worse than death.” (Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 3: 301). Remembering the plight of the poor parrot in Tagore’s “Tota Kahini” who could not survive the merciless system of education, Swamiji reiterated that education based too much on theory and overloaded with information would create mechanical humans. Such a system of education is negative in nature and runs against our past culture and traditions. This system thus creates a bunch of lifeless, spineless, negative individuals. He wrote, “By education I do not mean the present system, but something in line with positive thinking. Mere book learning won’t do. 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.” (Swami Vivekananda: 51). Undoubtedly, education today has failed to make a genuine contribution towards glorification of mankind and the objective of a well-balanced society based on universal brotherhood seems to be a far off reality as the present system of education creates isolated and insulated individuals detached from each other and from social responsibilities. It is in this respect that Swamiji’s idea of ‘man making’ education aiming at creating a “New Man” or universal man seems so relevant.

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