

Liberating Education from the Chains of Imperialism

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The present education system in India is a legacy of the colonial rule that has perpetuated many false notions: that traditional societies have been steeped in ignorance and superstitions for thousands of years; that they are living a life of abject poverty; and that this poverty has been caused by extreme forms of social discrimination and exploitative socio-political systems. And, perhaps most devastatingly, that modern education is the most potent instrument of deliverance from this ignorance, superstition, social injustices and poverty.

We may all differ on the identification and analysis of the problems, but no one can deny that we do have them. And we have not been able to solve them in the last fifty-two years of independence with all the instruments we have been employing - the most critical being modern education. We are an independent country now, under no (visible) external compulsions, and therefore we ought to be able to solve our problems. But creating solutions require two major preconditions to be fulfilled: (1) a clear understanding and analysis of the roots of the problems and (2) an understanding of the historical context within which the problems and problem-solvers are located.

Contrary to the popular understanding among the educated classes of India, and without glorifying the past, we need to appreciate that a large part of the country did have a fairly good system of governance, finance and revenue, and a working education system, as late as even the early 19th century. Awareness of these systems, of the prevailing conditions which supported their sustainability, and of the processes/strategies employed to destroy them, would help us when thinking of new strategies for building a learning society for all.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE BEAUTIFUL TREE

The following findings, drawn from the meticulously researched book “The Beautiful Tree”, written by the eminent Gandhian scholar and historian Shri Dharampal, shed light on the former system of education in India. They suggest that various modes of education (*vidyalayas*, *gurukuls*, *madrassahs*, etc.) were fairly common in India and that, contrary to common understanding, they were not confined to only the upper castes or to only boys:

- William Adam, a former Baptist missionary turned journalist, had observed in his first report (1835) that there seemed to be about 100,000 village schools in Bengal and Bihar alone around the 1830s.
- A few years earlier, in 1821, G.L. Prendergast, Bombay Presidency council member had stated that in the newly extended Presidency of Bombay “there is hardly a village, great or small, throughout our territories, in which there is not at least one school, and in larger villages more.” The Bombay Presidency at that time must have comprised of nearly 1,00,000 villages.
- G. W. Leitner makes a similar estimate about the Punjab area. He mentions a figure of 50,000 schools.
- The number of children doing home schooling in Madras district alone was 26,446, while in the city, 5,523 were going to school. This shows that a large number of students, especially girls and those belonging to higher castes, were perhaps doing home schooling.
- In the Malabar area, between 1822-1825, there were 11,963 boys and 2,190 girls going to school. Of these girls, 1,122 belonged to Muslim families. The number actually deteriorated during the British period, of which there are records.

- In the Tamil-speaking areas of the Madras Presidency, lower caste ‘Sudras’ and ‘Ati Sudras’ comprised 70-80% of all school-going children. Among the Oriya-speaking areas of the same presidency, the percentage of children belonging to these castes was 62%; in Malayalam-speaking areas, it was 54%; in Telugu-speaking areas, it was 35-40%.

If we put all these together, we get a totally different view of education in India before the British. Even so, the full picture is clouded by the British way of looking at learning centers in India in terms of ‘schools’. In order to more fully appreciate the indigenous systems of education, we would need to make a distinction between these learning centers as they existed in India before the British arrived, and the idea of a ‘school’ in the perception of the British. We would also need to understand how these learning centers related to other learning spaces.

Why did this “Beautiful Tree” wither away? The answer to this question also needs to be deeply explored when thinking about strategies of education and the system as a whole. Prior to the arrival of the British, people were allowed to manage and have control over their own systems, and the concept of centralization was almost non-existent. In his book, Dharampal describes that there were “sophisticated fiscal arrangements of the pre-British Indian polity, through which substantial proportions of revenue had long been assigned towards the performance of a multiplicity of public purposes, which made such education possible. It was the collapse of this arrangement through a total centralization of revenue, as well as of the political structure, that led to decay in education, economy and social life.” In pre-British India, revenue as a share of crop (and not fixed in monetized terms as done by the British) was certainly paid to a local authority, but otherwise people were allowed to be on their own.

In order to further understand the issues related to sustainability of the traditional system, we need to make a distinction between disparity in standards (which is on a vertical plane and has more to do with class distinction) and diversity (differences on a horizontal plane, arising out of the needs of a particular region or community). In the traditional system, there was a lot of diversity but little disparity. Different learning materials and different subjects were taught in different regions of the country. There was no uniformity in standards yet there was no disparity. The idea of a standardized entity called ‘school’ was an alien concept. Only when the British, at the invitation of social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, started opening English medium schools, giving them state support and recognition, and thus bringing about a false notion of uniformity did glaring disparities emerge within the education system. The new British schools began the process of breeding an elitist class by alienating them from their culture, country and indigenous value systems, and also by inculcating in them a sense of inferiority towards anything which was their own.

This kind of strategy had far reaching consequences. An alien system — designed to cater to only a small elitist minority, but giving the false impression that it is available to all — which gets state and social recognition and subsidies, serves two purposes. On the one hand, people lose confidence in themselves. On the other hand, they become victims of a myth that the fruits of the new system are available equally to all. This has serious repercussions. They lose the will to sustain their own indigenous systems, as they are perceived to be inferior and, at the same time, find themselves incapable of managing the new system, which is perceived to be superior. This leaves people completely shattered. They get trapped in a vicious circle. They let the old system wither away, in the hopes of being part of the state-recognized and state-supported alien system, whereas the state system is intrinsically designed to keep the large majority at bay. Hence, they end up an alienated lot — having either no system at all or

a poor replica of the elite system which has little relevance to their daily lives. Over the years, our people have even forgotten that they were at one time running and sustaining perfectly sound teaching-learning systems.

EXPLODING THE MYTHS

We need to understand the critical links between the modern concepts of Development, Science and Education, and how each reinforces the other. If we mean to rejuvenate our societies, then we must necessarily explode the myths related to these concepts. In fact, the illusions created by the modern development paradigm are themselves the biggest stumbling block in finding solutions to problems faced by our societies. "We are dazzled by the shining lustre of our chains and look upon them as symbols of our freedom. This state (of mind) bespeaks of slavery of the worst kind," as Gandhiji said in his speech to the students at Agra on November 23, 1920.

Over the past two or three decades, our rural people have once again become very aware of the need to educate their children, particularly the male child. But one must question the factors responsible for this desire. The main reason they have started finding education important is because the aspirations of the community here, as elsewhere, are being influenced by urban middle-class values. The modern development paradigm, with its emphasis on the monetized economy, has contributed a great deal to this way of thinking. Earlier education meant freedom (*mukti*) and building new relationships; now it has come to mean only white-collar jobs and upward mobility in the socio-economic hierarchy (greater disparity). In fact, statistical data substantiate that migration has increased in areas where 'school-education' has spread. People are moving away from their traditional occupations and going in search of desk jobs in the cities. Because the non-monetized economy of the village and its benefits are sidelined, land in villages is lying fallow and the educated youth refuse to work in their fields. Thus, the mindset perpetuated by the present development paradigm is one that measures the worth or value of a human being only in terms of money.

Another myth being perpetuated by the modern development paradigm is that modern education decreases social injustices and inequalities. For instance, it is generally believed that the gender ratio is adverse (in favor of men) in those states where the literacy rate is lower and the gender ratio is more balanced where the literacy rates are higher. This is a completely false interpretation. According to census data the gender ratio in India has steadily fallen from 972 (in the year 1901) to 929 (in 1991), while the literacy rate has been steadily going up from a low of 5.39 per cent in 1901 to a high of 52.21 per cent in 1991. And this is true of most states, even the so-called *BIMARU* (sick) states. Moreover, if we compare the rural and urban areas, we again find the same pattern. Rural areas are less literate but have a better, more balanced gender ratio than urban areas. The harsh truth is that modern education has increased social discrimination instead of eradicating it. The cause of the problems of our society lies not in our people being 'deprived' of modern education but elsewhere. It most likely lies in the fragmentation of Indian society at all levels, which has been happening unabated over the last two hundred years and in which modern education has played a vital role. This needs to be examined very deeply without any prejudices or biases (e.g., modern education is good *per se*) and without any fear of the conclusions one may reach in the process of this examination.

Furthermore, the modern education system has used modern science (and vice versa) to successfully perpetuate many modern myths which both advertise the superiority of the modern development paradigm and devalue rural communities and their knowledge systems,

values and wisdom. For example, many of us have been taught to believe that a person is not 'educated' unless he/she is literate and that children whose parents have never gone to formal school are 'first-generation learners.' Modern science does not value experience and, under the illusion and arrogance of being 'objective', rejects all that is experiential and traditional knowledge under the rubric of 'superstition'. Nor does modern science publicly discuss what it does not understand, even though the greatest scientists of our times admit that "the more we know, the more we come to know with certainty, how much more we do not know." We need to expose the 'superstitions' of modern science. There have been innumerable instances when modern science has had to retract from discoveries and from claims made earlier. But instead of apologising or showing humility for its earlier mistakes, it has always been arrogant about the new discoveries and claims. In fact, the claims of modern science continue to blind and silence the ordinary person to such an extent that s/he stops thinking or questioning as soon as anything is labelled 'scientific'.

It should be clear from the above discussion that as long as we continue to operate within this paradigm of modern development and modern science, even the most genuine efforts in education will not yield serious results.

EXPOSING THE INSTRUMENTS OF CONTROL

This then brings us to a crucial question. Must we, who are concerned about society and education, always listen to the dominant voices, even if deep down within us we feel that the modern concept of development is not correct, is being supported by the wrong kind of education and values, and continues to be perpetuated for the last 200 years? Are we to continue to refrain from critically looking at and challenging the instruments of the Western modern nation-state — parliamentary democracy, modern science, technology, the issue of rights (of every conceivable nature - child, human, women, etc.), participation, development, humanism — just because they have been so deified that they now, more or less, replace all other notions of justice, peace, harmony, etc.?

While trying to understand the impact of modern education upon our society, one needs to be careful in distinguishing between the impact modern education has had on colonized societies like ours and its impact on European societies. The same system may have a different impact on different societies because their cultural roots are different. Therefore, it is at best naïve, and at worst criminal, to try and bring about a uniformity in education system all over the country, leave alone the world, as is being attempted now. It is worth quoting Ananda K. Coomaraswamy here: "The World may be likened to a vast, as yet unordered garden, having diverse soils and aspects ... The different parts of which should be properly tended by different gardeners, having experience of diverse qualities of soil and aspect; but certain ones have seized the plot of others and attempted to replace the plants natural to those plots, with others more acceptable or profitable to themselves."

The West has succeeded in refining the instruments of control to such a high degree that the physical presence of the oppressor is no longer required at the site of exploitation. To understand this, we need to differentiate between values and instruments, ends and means. Ends (or values) like equity, justice, peace and harmony have almost universal validity both over time and space, while the means (or instruments) to achieve these noble goals are both time- and space-specific. Every culture, every religion from time immemorial, has strived for these ends (or values) and will always continue to do so, but the means (or instruments) keep changing both with the times and with different cultures. Today, as the 'world is shrinking' and becoming more and more 'universalised', an attempt is being made to wipe out values

from the collective memories of people by replacing them with a set of instruments, specific to the West. Though, the West has been very successful in this effort, it is dangerous for other cultures, as it ensures the domination of the West over the rest of the world – who continue to live under the illusion that some day they too will enjoy the same privileges that the West seems to be enjoying today.

We can try to understand this phenomenon through the example of organised religion. The saint propagates real values, the essence of *dharma*, whereas the priest or *panda* is only interested in rituals, instead of the essence behind the rituals. That is where the power of the priest lies – in deification and in ritualisation, in replacing values with rituals. Today, the Westernised priests have taken over and deified all instruments of Western society to such an extent that most of us, the educated lot, have started mistaking them for real values. And for the remaining few, the priests have succeeded in keeping them quiet and have prevented them from calling their bluff by making them scared of taking a ‘politically incorrect’ stand. This is the power of rituals, which the West has understood as no one else in the past, not even our *Brahmins*. And the most powerful means employed to sustain this ritualisation is modern education.

WAYS FORWARD

Gandhiji had on several occasions warned us of the danger of modern education, where the gap between the home and the school was ever widening. Classrooms do not acknowledge the immense learning opportunities available at home, within communities and workplaces. Outright rejection of the home also inhibits the development of the critical faculties necessary to examine or correct the weaknesses of our systems and counter feelings of alienation. Instead, a child feels ashamed or embarrassed of what happens at home. So in elite schools we celebrate Christmas, Easter, Mother’s Day, even Valentine’s Day, but not Holi, Eid, Rakshabandhan, Onnam or Baisakhi. We have different dress codes, language, and celebrations for home vs. for the outside world. This creates major problems. The child starts living in two separate worlds, which leads to hypocrisy in public life, and dishonesty, corruption, servility, double standards and a sense of shame permanently seep into his/her character. The stress shifts from ‘being’ (*hona*) to ‘appearing’ (*dikhana*), from practice to preaching. Let me quote Gandhiji once again to illustrate this hypocrisy. Gandhiji, while speaking to the students at Allahabad in 1920, tells them of his conversation with Lord Willingdon: “Lord Willingdon telling me of his experience in Bombay, where he had spent only a few days after his arrival from England, said that, since his coming here, he had not come across a single Hindu or Muslim who had had the courage to say ‘No’. The charge is true even today. We have ‘No’ in the heart, but we cannot say so. We look at the other man’s face to know whether he wants ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ and say what we think he would like us to say.”

We need to reduce this gap and work to restore the confidence of our people in themselves, their systems, their philosophies and lifestyles. This does not mean glorification or acceptance without being critical. It only means not to reject what is our own in an outright manner and to build on our own foundations. In this process, we need to look with an open mind at those spaces where learning outside school takes place — festivals, melas, traditional crafts, traditional social systems, customs, rituals, agricultural practices and other subtle arrangements by which a society operates. We need to understand them and bring them closer to the school, instead of throwing them out of school as we have been doing for a long time now. Education must play a part in bringing the society closer together, instead of fragmenting it. This means that the local community must be involved in teaching, rather than excessively relying on ‘trained and qualified’ teachers.

We need to bring the school closer to the local environment also. Young students must understand the locality — not only its customs, rituals and social relations — but also its natural environment of insects, plants and animals, and its local history and geography. Subjects could be easily taught through the local context by knowledgeable people from the community. After all, textbooks are only one medium through which information is shared; they are not sacred. Meaningful knowledge can be better facilitated through local contexts. This will also go a long way in increasing the self-esteem of students, by bringing the classroom and the outside world closer to each other.

Another very important issue is that of values and philosophy. In the traditional education system in our country, both philosophy and values were intrinsic and vital. Without these components, education was not *shiksha*. They were embedded within the system. As soon as we separate these into subjects to be taught — i.e., philosophy and value education — we are in a different paradigm altogether. We can go into the ‘why’ and ‘what’ of values, but they can not be taught. They can be discussed. They may be emulated. We cannot teach someone how to speak the truth, but we can show it by example and discuss why truth is important in an honest manner. It has to be interwoven within subjects and activities within schools. Philosophy too is considered a subject to be taught and that only at the graduate or post-graduate level. But in India, even the so-called ‘uneducated,’ talk in highly philosophical terms and have complex ways for coping with the sorrows of everyday life. In fact, in our country, philosophy, psychology and spirituality are all interlinked. It is therefore not at all difficult to nurture these, right from a very young age.

Institutions of learning should increase the child’s curiosity, wonder, respect and gratitude towards his body, family, society and nature. A sense of wonder and gratitude can be inculcated by asking the students to reflect on: How do I breathe? Who makes me sleep? Who wakes me up? How do I digest my food? Is there anything truly man-made, or does it all ultimately come from nature? And therefore, can I call anything really my own? Why does the rhythm of my breath change with changes in my emotions? The insistence in modern education to provide precise answers (by teachers/textbooks etc.) to all questions is not only unnecessary but also damaging at times. Rather, it is quite productive to leave questions for children to ponder over and discuss amongst themselves.

In the end, it is worth quoting Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: “Our struggle is part of a wider one, the conflict between the ideals of Imperialism and ideals of Nationalism². Between the two ideals, the world has to choose. Upon that choice depends the salvation of much that is absolutely essential to the future greatness of civilization and the richness of the world’s culture. For Imperialism involves the subordination of many nationalities to one; a subordination not merely political and economic, but also moral and intellectual. ... Every nation has its own part to play in the long tale of human progress, and nations, which are not free to develop their own individuality and own character, are also unable to make the contribution to the sum of human culture, which the world has a right to expect of them.” Education can be used either way. We have been using it for Imperialism; let us start using it for National Idealism.

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