

Rethinking Education and Development: A Gandhian View

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I would like to start by sharing a story, which I happened to read in a book of ancient Indian philosophy:

There was a wise man named Aaruni Uddalak. One day, his son, Shwetaketu, returned from his teacher's home, where he had lived for some years for his education. Shwetaketu, when returning from his teacher's house, entered his own home without properly greeting or paying any respect to his father and his father's friends, who were sitting and talking near the entrance of the house. The father was naturally surprised by this behavior of his son. So he called him and asked him to explain how he had become so proud, "Oh my son, if you have really been educated, tell me about that one ultimate secret, having known about which, nothing else requires to be known." Hearing these words from his father, Shwetaketu felt ashamed. He felt very sorry for his misbehavior and asked for his father's pardon and also apologized to his father's friends who were present there. Then he admitted before his father that he was in fact ignorant about that ultimate secret having known about which, nothing else remains to be known. And then he, in all humility, asked his father to tell him about that ultimate secret, having known about which, nothing else remained to be known.

Now, what did the father do? He used many illustrations to explain that ultimate secret of life. But, I shall relate only one illustration that the father used. The father asked his son to bring his mother's golden ornaments. The son did as he was told to do. Now the father asked his son to name the ornaments. The son picked up the necklace and said that it was a necklace. Then he picked up the earring and said that it was an earring. In the same manner he picked up the bangle and said that it was a bangle. Then the father asked his son, "Do you see that, ultimately, all these ornaments are not different from the gold-metal from which they are made by the goldsmith?" To this question, the son agreed that all these ornaments while differing in their shape were ultimately and simply the gold-metal only.

Then the father said to his son that every creation in this universe might look to be different but, ultimately, it was nothing, but the "Brahma" or the one and the only cosmic reality, i.e. God.

But the father did not stop at this statement only. He told his son in a confident tone that his son was himself that ultimate reality, i.e. God. In the Sanskrit language, the words are "Tat-twam-asi" (Thou Art That). And then the father said to his son that nothing remained to be known after knowing that, ultimately, every thing that existed was nothing but the one and the same reality, i.e. God.

Let us pause here to mark the vital difference between the present education system and its educators and the ancient saints and gurus of India. The attitude of our modern teachers and social workers is that the people whom they are going to educate are poor, weak, backward, and inferior and so they must enlighten and empower them. But the ancient saints and gurus believed that the persons whom they were to serve were no less than God, and the purpose of their service was just to bring out their understanding of their own god-hood, talents, power and perfection.

Today our education gives us knowledge and skills of different subjects or activities. Language, Mathematics, History, Geography, Science and some arts and crafts are taught in the name of education, but the study of the student himself — which is the most important subject of deep study — is ignored. In spite of all education, or in spite of the so-called highest degree of university education, the 'educated' person does not know what or who he himself (or she herself) is. In spite of all education imparted in our schools, colleges and universities, we do not know what is the main purpose or the main objective of our life and how we can achieve it. We do not understand our own inner constitution. We are ignorant about our inner tendencies and their mechanism. We are not encouraged to examine our right or wrong relationship with others, with the outer world or with the various elements of Nature and our local environment. We are not allowed to explore the relationship between our inner self or our soul and our body. Is it only the body that is born and dies, or is it our inner self that is born and dies? We do not know. Has development any relationship or relevance to our own inner budding, blooming and blossoming? Or, should development be related only to our luxuries and economic prosperity, without taking into account the suffering of the poorer people or the pollution and degradation of our physical ecology? These are important questions that must be explored if we are to understand what learning societies are and how they are to emerge.

The main difference between humans and other living beings on this earth is that human beings are not satisfied only with the safety of their own life and the preservation of their own species. Unlike other living beings, human beings are constantly engaged in some search. It seems as if the human being is constantly missing something. It seems as if the human being has lost something very personal and can not rest or relax without regaining that intimate article. This feeling of loss — and this drive to search out and regain the lost thing — prompts human beings to explore this earth, to reach the moon, to discover the laws of Nature and to invent new techniques in various fields. This is how ‘development’ has been taking place in human history, as a result of various explorations, expeditions, discoveries and inventions. Thus, today we have ships, trains, cars, trucks, airplanes, satellites, televisions, telephones, computers, fax, e-mail, and so on. We also have electricity to replace the use of human or animal energy to perform all our work without demanding the use of our own body or its limbs. Electricity has provided us numerous facilities and today, our work and our lives are so dependent on electricity that we wonder how humankind could have lived for thousands of years without it.

All these modern facilities — of travel and transport, of communication, of automation, of entertainment, of press and information — are the symbols or indicators of modern human development. Those people who have access to these facilities are called ‘developed’ people and ‘developed’ countries are those countries in which most of the people have access to these modern facilities. This word ‘development’ has also become a synonym of progress, of civilization, of power and of superiority. That is why those people or countries, which are not enjoying the above-mentioned modern facilities on a large scale feel ashamed and inferior and try to achieve this sort of development at all costs. My own country is an example of such an eager aspirant of the same pattern of modern development. And, to my mind, it is rather unfortunate that India has forgotten what Gandhi had expected from free India. Gandhi was a disappointed man even when political power was being transferred to Indians in 1947, and he would have been all the more disappointed if he could witness the direction and outcomes of the development plans of post-independence India.

Gandhi neither hated the Britishers, nor had any animosity or ill-will against them. What actually disturbed him was the modern pattern of development that was being introduced and carried out in India by the Britishers. He envisaged that this pattern of development was harmful not only for India, but also for the whole world. He also felt that ancient Indian sages had visualized wiser concepts of human development and human dignity. So if India could get rid of British subjugation, then such concepts could be worked out at least in India; and other countries could then also consider the ‘Indian vision of development’. Of course, having attained political freedom, India did not proceed according to Gandhi’s expectations.

Hind Swaraj (translated as Indian Freedom), first published in 1909, is the most important book written by Gandhi on this issue. In this book, Gandhi had expressed his opposition to the introduction not only of doctors and lawyers but also of railways in India. When I first read the book, I did not agree with Gandhi’s opposition to railways. But today, I praise Gandhi’s foresight and his wisdom, because the introduction of railways gave new license to man’s craze to trample and loot this earth mercilessly. Railways were a manifestation of human craving for more and more mobility. The result is that today, not only railways, but also trucks, cars, motorcycles, and jeeps are trampling this earth and airplanes are treating the sky in the same manner. Innumerable men and women are travelling many miles every day to reach their place of work from their homes and to reach their homes from their place of work. According to the concept of modern development, this situation is good because they are more mobile. But is unlimited travel and transport good for humanity in the long run? Are we not mercilessly plundering our nourishing Mother Nature and are we not, in this same process, mercilessly polluting the vital elements of Nature?

As I have said above, human life is comprised of search and research. So the search cannot be stopped. But let our education save us from wasteful running about without achieving or arriving at the real and the ultimate goal of life. As was indicated in the story of Shwetaketu, realization of one’s own inner self or god-hood is the ultimate goal of life. For this critical search, wherever one is living, in that very place, God can be realized and can give such inner contentment or inner richness that no other happiness that comes from physical possession can be compared to it. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Lord Krishna has said that gaining self-realization is the highest or the greatest gain in human life. No other gain is higher or worthier than this gain and if one has attained this, even the most serious sorrow or loss would not disturb the peace of one’s mind. Mobility is not to be totally discarded. But, there should be a limit to our mobility. Stability, in fact, is more essential than mobility, if we are committed to the search for the ultimate goal of human life. Human beings can strive to achieve the ultimate goal of their life wherever their abode or residence happens to be. Running about from one place to another cannot lead to man’s search for God. Secondly,

there is no profession or job in our society through which God can not be worshipped and realised. This is what the *Bhagawad-Gita* teaches us. So, to think that some jobs are higher and more respectable than other jobs is also wrong.

Of course, humans have not been asked to stop their search. But they have to be advised about the need to shift their search from the outer world to the inner world. Tourism can be undertaken and enjoyed here as well. That is, we must understand that ultimately only the inward search will be fruitful, and the outward search — without relating it with and without subordinating it to the inner search — will lead us to nowhere but frustration. We have ignored the internal dimension of human development and concentrated our total effort on external development.

This unbalanced or one-legged development has resulted not only in the destruction and pollution of our natural resources, but it has also created disharmony and class-conflicts in our society. This lop-sided and lame development has created a rich, powerful, and cruel class of exploiters that now has no compassion for the common and unprivileged masses. For this rich and powerful class, everything and everyone are just a means to be subordinated to their own pomp and show, to their own consumption and extravagance. The way in which innumerable tribal and aboriginal people have been uprooted from their ancestral home lands for the construction of big dams, as a mark of development in India, is proof of the ugly dehumanization of these rich and powerful educated classes of my own country. Modern development has resulted in not only the pollution of our physical environment, but it has also resulted in the mental pollution of humankind. Man has become insensitive, not only to his physical surroundings but also to his fellow human beings. Today man is so obsessed with his craze for the so-called development, which is gradually leading the human race towards demonization instead of a more divine existence.

In one of the ancient Indian scriptures (*Eeshavasya Upanishad*), it is said that the ultimate reality (God) is pervading not only human beings and other living beings but also the material or physical elements of Nature. Therefore, man should take from this physical Nature only as much as is essentially needed or required for his survival. Nobody has the right to over-exploit Nature, because it has to provide sustenance for all life not only for the present time, but also for the future. But the concept of 'development' today does not head to this advice of the ancient Indian sages. The modern man treats Nature mercilessly. He does not realize that we could not have inherited such a pure and rich Nature, if our ancient forefathers had exploited it without strict limits. So we must also realize our duty towards our future generations. We must remember that the modern man has not purchased this earth from God in any bargain, and therefore he is not its owner nor authorized to exploit and pollute it as he likes.

Ancient Indians gave great respect to Nature and worshipped trees as well as land, water, fire, air and the sun. They also worshipped cows as the best representative of Mother Nature. They comprehended that a cow offered two options to human beings. One, the body of the cow could provide blood and beef if she was killed. The other option was that the cow could give milk to the human beings, and she could also give birth to oxen that could plough fields, drive their carts and lift water from deep wells. Moreover, cows could be fed on locally available fodder and cow-dung could provide good manure for agricultural fields.

Now, if we compare a tractor with a bull or a cow, we will find that a tractor cannot give birth to another tractor before it becomes useless. So a new tractor must always be purchased from outside. Secondly, a tractor cannot eat locally available fodder, and it must be fed on oil purchased for more money. Thirdly, a tractor cannot produce a fertilizer for the farms. But a tractor does add to environmental pollution with the smoke it exhumes.

Besides all these differences between a bullock and a tractor, there is one more that must be taken into account. When we are in the company of a bullock, our feelings of appreciation, of pain and pleasure, of anger and affection, are visible and vital, because a bullock is a living being. But, with a tractor, such feelings are switched off, because it is not a living being. Sensitivity is one main quality shared by human beings. But if a man lives in constant company of machines, he ultimately loses his sensitivity and becomes worse than an animal.

But in spite of all these glaring differences between the use of a bullock and a tractor, today's opinion is that using bullocks is slow and inefficient and the use of tractor is fast and efficient. Even today, the so-called educated, civilized and progressive Indians are supporting tractors and sending cows and bullocks to the slaughterhouses. But those Indians who are 'illiterate' and 'uneducated', who are poor and are described as backward people, are still holding their cows and the oxen as sacred and are treating them as their own family members.

So here we come to the questions of “What is education?” and “Who should be considered an educated human being?” The so-called civilized, developed, prosperous and powerful people declare that whoever is illiterate and has not undergone the process of schooling, is a dark blot on the country’s honor. According to this definition of education, those people who are literate and have undergone the process of schooling shall be called ‘educated’, even if they are corrupt in their dealings and even if they replace bullocks with tractors and send the cows to the slaughter house. But if a person is honest in his dealings, even if he is producing food and milk for the benefit of society, he shall be called ‘uneducated’ because he is illiterate and has not acquired any certificate from a school.

To my mind, the modern world has introduced a most harmful and wrong definition of education. As far as I can see and comprehend, any person who is living in harmony with his society, his natural surroundings and his inner conscience, is an educated person irrespective of his being literate or illiterate or his having or not having a school certificate. And on the other hand, any person who is not behaving in harmony with his natural surroundings and with his own inner conscience is an uneducated person, in spite his being a certified Ph.D., or having a foreign degree in Higher Education.

Let us not consider ourselves to be a parallel or a separate creation from Nature. As a tree or a cow is a part and a creation of Nature, in the same way, we humans too are a creation of and a part of Nature. Thus, our living on this earth must be a harmony with the rest of all creation. Therefore, another purpose of education is to promote this harmony.

If we agree with this concept, we shall find that what is labeled ‘education’ today is proving to be anti-education. Though considered a holy word, ‘education’ is being blatantly misused for de-humanizing society. Let us honestly answer the question as to what is the inner motive of a parent who gets his child admitted in a school or a college. The universal motive of all parents who send their children to the present schools and colleges is to qualify their children to rise above the level of the common people and give them the privilege of exploiting. Education is a process that provides a license to exploit the ordinary people and to become an unbridled consumer of natural resources. Moral integrity, fair dealings and limited consumption are non-subjects in the educational curriculum. All educated people are taught to use whatever means necessary (fair or foul) to achieve their ends and fulfil their ambitions. They are taught that a successful life is a life of leisure.

Thus presently, the educated people have become a great burden on the uneducated people, because the educated people are mere consumers while the uneducated people are the laborers and producers. As a result of the spread of such education, India has become an extremely dependent country. The Indian Government cannot function without the help of unlimited financial indebtedness to the World Bank and IMF. This situation proves that there is something in our educational system which is fundamentally wrong and harmful for our society.

Here again, we return to Gandhi, who had not only helped India to achieve political freedom from the British rule, but had also asked the Indian leaders to re-orient the Indian educational system so that his ideals of *swaraj* (or decentralized local self-governance and decentralized economy) could be achieved in post-independence India. Gandhi had suggested that all Indian children, regardless of their belonging to the elite class or to the common masses, should receive not only academic or bookish knowledge, but should also learn and practice some productive craft for at least half of their time in school. Academic knowledge given to these students should be relevant to and integrated with their craft-work or with their local physical or social surroundings. Secondly, this craft-work should be so skillfully taught and practiced that it yields some profit and becomes an asset for the educational system. And thirdly, the medium of education should be in the local language of the learners.

If we more closely examine these ideas of Gandhi, we shall be able to see that he envisaged diverse processes which would educate a child in an integrated or composite manner so that his hands, his heart and his head developed simultaneously in the following ways:

- * By insisting that knowledge was to be gained not just for the sake of knowledge but it had to be relevant to the child’s work and his local surroundings, Gandhi wanted to ensure that the learner would not be isolated from his own work and his own locality. A child who would be educated in this manner would be able to settle himself in his own local surroundings and thus education would not result in large-scale migrations of the educated

youth from their own localities. Rather, such education would encourage each learner to have a healthy and positive impact on his surroundings.

- * By providing a productive and an earning dimension to the educational process, Gandhi added a dimension of self-support, self-respect and morality to the educational system. Thus, education was to become a real-life process.
- * By focusing on local languages as a medium of education, Gandhi hoped that learners would inherit and appreciate their own local culture.
- * By making this process of education common for both the children of the upper classes as well as of the masses, Gandhi wanted to integrate the whole population of India, so that Indian people would not be so sharply divided into the two different classes of the exploiter and the exploited.
- * By spreading such education, Gandhi hoped to establish the *swaraj* of his dream in India in which the political power and economy of the nation would be so decentralized that the institution of government would become much lighter than what it is today.

Thus, India had been rich in sound ideas regarding human life not only in ancient times but also had received rich and sound ideas regarding human life in the present era. But unfortunately, Gandhi's ideas have remained unattended and ignored in post-independent India. Perhaps, Gandhi seemed to be too outdated to our leaders and our learned elite who have been planning and controlling India's destiny for the last half century.

But the wide range of problems, which we are witnessing today in our society, is convincing us that we have been wrong to ignore Gandhi all these years. So, Gandhi is becoming more relevant than he was during his lifetime. Yet, even now we cannot hope or expect that the present political leaders or the present bureaucracy will allow any Gandhian reform in the prevalent system of Indian education which has become part of their vested interests.

But there still exists one source of hope in the present Indian situation. It is that a very large number of Indians have not yet succumbed to this defective education system, which the Indian Government has been trying to force everyone into. These unschooled Indians do not know what type of education system could be useful for them, but they do know that the education provided by schools cannot be beneficial to them. Most importantly, they still have faith in the ancient Indian values of life and their own ways of living, learning and developing.

They have been educating themselves through their very process of living in their own surroundings. Their process of education has not depended on the monopoly of any school system. According to them, human life is a process of education in itself. In fact, what Gandhiji propagated as his basic education was a somewhat formalized shape to the process of life and the natural process of education which India has been following for ages.

Let us note the fact that whereas the Indian constitution first envisaged that the target of eight years of universal school-education would be achieved within ten years, this has still been largely unachieved for more than half a century. It is because of this 'failure' that the common Indian citizen is still a wise, civilized and responsible voter not only sustaining popular Indian democracy but also the Indian economy. Our leaders and our planners of education do not stop bemoaning the failure of this education system but, in fact, this should be celebrated as the good fortune of our people. Its 'success' would have been a calamity for the future of the country.

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Shri Dayal Chandra Soni (26 Vidya Marg, Dewali, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India 313004) has published nearly 400 articles and 25 books. He has been affiliated with Vidya Bhawan School and Seva Mandir, two prominent institutions in Udaipur, where he had been working on issues of education and Gandhiji's Basic Education, for over 60 years. He currently runs a small flour-grinding mill in his home and, at age 82, is still active in sharing his views on education and development.

