

Education as an Instrument of Social Revolution : Vivekanand, Gandhi and Present Crisis

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In the nineteenth century when Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Gandhi (1869-1948) were born everything in this country was in the melting pot. A hundred year old British rule was instrumental in bringing this magnificent ancient civilization and its glorious culture into contact with the utilitarian and materialistic west. The consequences of this contact were serious cultural confusions. The conflict of ideologies was at its zenith. An idealistic culture came in contact with a realistic culture. The conflict between religion and science, reason and faith, secularism and spiritualism, economic prosperity and asceticism, traditional and modern values vexed people. On the other hand, the native princes were overthrown one by one by the British and there was no peace and security for the masses. The colonial exploitative economic policies of the imperialistic rulers shocked the very foundation of the age old economic system of this country based on flourishing urban handicrafts and isolated and self-sufficient village communities. Results of this chaos were devastating famines, decline of the handicrafts, mass movements of population from the urban to rural areas, leading to increased pressure of population on land and decline of agricultural productivity, accentuating in its turn spreading of poverty all over the land.

In this fast changing scenario India was caught in the currents and cross-currents of devastating tempests on every front – social, economic, political, cultural and religious. Both of the stalwarts Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi born in India, first in the eastern corner and the second in the western corner, had a deep faith in Indian culture, in its values and ideologies. Both of them led India to spiritual and cultural independence to get the goal of total independence. In this paper attempts have been made to analyze the views of the both stalwarts regarding education as a tool to the social revolution. The present crisis in the field of education is also discussed. Attempts are made to clear their views upon the meaning and methods, techniques and medium of education and how they conceived education as a social revolution and also to see the present crisis which occurred in Indian education system and how far their ideas are relevant in solving these crises.

I

Vivekananda clearly explained the meaning and scope of education. He says, "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man. " (1) He boldly rejected the political methods of social revolution. He firmly believed that politics has failed as an agency of human welfare. He believed that the State usually turns to be a pursuit of personal power. Seeing the results of the French Revolution he put himself apart from 'the nonsense of politics'.(2) His line of inspiration was neo-Vedanta, a philosophy that was remodeled by him to include science and every noble thought, which was positive and creative in the modern world.(3) He focused on that every individual, every living being had the same inherent divinity, then they had the same potentiality to be great and good. So the same rights, the same opportunities must be granted to all. This equality would create a classless society. Again we should bear in mind that he, ofcourse, advocated for spiritual socialism, but in this spiritual socialism secular interests were not to be neglected. (4) He struck upon the very root of privileges. He clearly said, 'An ounce of practice is more important than tons of theories.'(5)

He clearly said," 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." (6) At the same time Gandhi also held the idea," Everyone of us has good inherent in the soul, it needs to be drawn out by the teachers, and

only those teachers can perform this sacred function whose own character is unsullied, who are always ready to learn and to grow from perfection to perfection.” (7)

Gandhi said,” Man is neither mere intellect, nor the gross animal body, nor the heart or soul alone. A proper and harmonious combination of all the three is required for the making of the whole man and constitutes the true economics of education.” (8)

Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi both felt the need to reform the existing system of education, which was imposed upon the nation by the alien government. This system was developed by the alien ruler to serve its own administrative requirements. Gandhi’s educational reform was the most radical. He made socially useful activity as the medium of instruction. It must be done meticulously and must have some utility or value. He wanted to combine learning with doing socially useful work. (9) Many educationists before Gandhi conceived the idea of co-relating education with activity in modern times. Gandhi did not believe in mere book-learning but physical works must be combined with literary education.

“Literary education is intended only to quicken our spirit of service. Now that you have the opportunity to render service, pour your soul into it and learn to enjoy it thoroughly. When you serve, do not give yourself up to spiritual pride and say ,’I do it’. The service of the proud is nothing worth. The Gita is there to teach us that we do nothing, that we can do nothing. We are only the instruments of God’s will.’ (10)

Vivekananda and Gandhi both, were all their lives an ardent student of history, especially Indian history revealed to them an alternative to the political method. They felt that in her long history Indian politics was never an active agent of moulding society. It was the social process, which affected politics in India. The alien ruler had forcibly tried to mould the Indian society. This process and efforts of the alien ruler had badly affected the socio-economic structure of India. Vivekananda felt education as an essential tool for the social revolution. He said, “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.” (11) He put stress upon the character building. He felt that, ‘the end of all education, all training should be man-making. The end and aim of all training is to make the man grow.’ (12)

Gandhi also holds this idea, “Education does not mean knowledge of letters but it means character-building, it means knowledge of duty. Our own words literary means training” (13) Again he says,” knowledge of letters is considered essential in order that one might acquire knowledge of these subjects. It is not as if man of knowledge without this equipment does not exist within our experience.” (14) Gandhi explained the merits of a student. He says that,” A student means one who is hungry for learning. Learning is knowledge of what knowing about. The only thing worth knowing about is the ‘Atman’. True knowledge is thus knowledge of self. But in order to attain this knowledge, one has to know literature, history, geography, mathematics, etc... All these are by way means.” (15)

Swami Vivekananda used the term ‘revolution’ for the two religious movements of India – Jainism and Buddhism. He visualized the nature of their impacts on the social life of India. Actually he considered their ‘impacts’ as a revolution. He held the thought that education of the masses was the prime factor for any revolution. According to Vivekananda, ‘art, science and religion are but three different ways of expressing a single truth. (16) His concept of revolution is ‘reason’ based and he considered ‘society’ as a dynamic rather than static equilibrium. The driving force of this dynamism is true education, which liberates people from exploitation, exploitation of priestly class and of privileged class. He always put stress upon the free education. In his opinion education was not for sale. The students had not to pay. In the old system of education knowledge was considered so sacred that no man ought to sell it. Knowledge should be given freely and without any price. (17)

He realized that no good could be done to society by degrading man. If the men were degraded, the purpose of a revolution was defeated. (18) So he put stress upon man-making. He clears that only upgrading the mental status of 'man', the total status of society and lastly of Nation could be uplifted. Again he had no faith in the upper class elites. He saw the upper class elites as more deadly than alive. He was also convinced that these upper class elites would attempt to thrive on the misery of the people and taking advantage of their ignorance, they would capture the power. He had faith in the masses and called them as 'the hope of India'. (19)

Vivekananda considered education as the only tool which could help India in establishing a harmonious society. Therefore he worked out a programme of mass-education. He had not only stated the goals but also the means and the manners of execution of this plan. He fixed his goal as to awaken the mass. His aim was to awaken the mass with the help of Vedanta philosophy, for this purpose he organized the self-sacrificing youth. To achieve his goal he established Ramkrishna Math and Ramkrishna Mission, two organizations. His ardent belief was, 'one must raise oneself by one's own exertion, we help them to help themselves'. He believed that emancipation cannot be achieved as a free gift from the upper classes, it must be self won. (20) 'The only services to be done for our lower classes to give them education, to give them back their lost individuality.' (21)

His emphasis upon the 'restoring the lost individuality of the masses' was a wonderful thought. He emphasized to raise the downtrodden slowly up to equal status. However the basic essence of his thoughts and means of reorganizing the Indian society was religion. For this purpose he laid emphasis on the Vedanta philosophy. His concept of 'religion' was the very core of education. He wanted to take education to every door and to teach the villagers with help of maps, globes and other audio-visual aids. He put stress upon the character building of the general people and to struck off the privileges of Brahmins as regards to monopolize knowledge. The education that does not help the common people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy and the courage of a loin. (22) He was convinced that the enlightened mass, composed of individuals with strong character, courage and manliness will do the rest to revolutionize the society. (23)

II

Before analyzing Gandhi's attitude, aim and programme of education we should go through this paragraph, which will help us to understand Gandhi and his educational reforms.

"Gandhiji was a many splendored personality ; an intensely political person who observed the highest standards of morality in politics, a great political strategist who led a prolonged non-violent mass movement for the overthrow of colonial domination and the capture of state power ; an orthodox religious person, who stood for the social liberation of women and the ending of caste discrimination and caste oppression and, ultimately ; the caste- system itself, and pleaded in general for the application of reason to all aspects of social life ; a person who had the vision of a world in which all conflicts would be settled without use of violence." (24)

Gandhi presented the concept of 'Nai Talim' in 1937. Gandhi himself declared this concept as his best thought and effort for the mankind. Gandhi's concept for an ideal society which he presented in his book 'Hind Swaraj', was possible only through the paradigmatic model of Nai Talim. His concept of Nai Talim was the path breaker of the non-violent social revolution. (25) When Gandhi was in Durban he felt the complications in educating his own children. He felt that physical was the best way to educate any child. When he started his ashram in Phoenix he admitted that the moral education was must for the pupils. Physical labour connected with the production infuses self respect and confidence in anyone. When he established his Tolstoy Ashram in 1911 he adopted production as an essential part of the school education. These ideas guided him to try other experiments in education when he initiated the Styagraha

movement in India in 1921. (26) Thus Gandhi's scheme of Basic Education was the result of years of observation, experiment and experience. (27)

Gandhi's educational reforms were more radical than his predecessors' reforms. He advocated for the socially useful activities as the medium of instruction. He tried to combine learning with doing socially useful works.

Vivekananda and Gandhi both fought for the emancipation of women from the rotten social systems. Both of them concentrated their efforts to develop equality between men and women, between the privileged and underprivileged of all categories in society. Vivekananda supported widely the women education; he clearly asked, "It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women." (28) Women had many and grave problems, but none that could not be solved by that magic word: education. (29) He clearly shows his annoyance on the pity conditions of women. The women had all the time been trained in helplessness and servile dependence on others. In the name of religion, tradition and purity and chastity women were exploited and Swamiji was not happy on their socio-economic conditions. He put his views, "women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way. Our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any in the world." (30) He holds the view, "Female education should be spread with religion as its center. All other trainings should be secondary to religion. Religious training, the formation of character and observance of the vows of celibacy-these should be attended to." (31)

But Gandhi was not as liberal as Vivekananda on women's issue. Gandhi holds the view, "As nature has made men and women different, it is necessary to maintain a difference between the educations of the two. True, they are equals in life, but their functions differ. It is women's right to rule the home. Man is master outside it. Man is the earner, woman saves and spends." (32) He was in favour of women education, but he said the girls should get education for house-keeping, child-care, health and hygiene and so on. Gandhi strictly felt that the women's first duty was to manage the house-holds and to bring-up the children. An efficient and educated mother was the prime need of society. He didn't put pressure upon the higher education of the girls, but it must be also bear in mind that he didn't prevent them to get higher education. Both of the thinkers accepted, "If the women are raised, their children will by their noble actions glorify the name of the country; then will culture, knowledge, power and devotion awaken in the country." (33)

Vivekananda and Gandhi both were in favour of teaching through mother tongue. The ideas must be taught in the language of the people. (34) Both of them put stress upon the vernaculars for the education of the masses. (35) Gandhi says, "Education through a foreign language entails a certain degree of strain, and our boys have to pay dearly for it. To a large extent, they lose the capacity of shouldering any other burden afterwards, for, they became a useless lot who are weak of body, without any zest for work and mere imitators of the West....The school must be an extension of home." (36) Gandhi felt that there would be concordance between the impressions which a child used to gather at home and at school. Education through the medium of strange tongue actually creates some sort of confusion for children. So approximately each every educationists all over the world preferred the mother tongue as the best medium of elementary education. Gandhi also felt, 'the alien type of education has produced a gulf between the educated classes and the masses.' (37)

Meaning of education became English in the British period, it was then our obligation. Any Indian who had to do job in the government, might have fluency in English. Gandhi and many reformers opposed this tendency and they felt that these were signs of Indians' slavery and degradation. But after independence situation didn't change completely. Now in the era of globalization again English as the medium of education became prominent and necessary for the Indian students. Gandhi was not against the study of science or researches in science, but he favoured only those studies and researches which could enhance

the life-style and solve the problems of the poorest of the society. He was in favour of a humanitarian scientific development. He wanted works for millions of hands of villagers, so he always preferred small cottage industries and education and innovations based on physical labour.

III

The purpose of education must be acquiring skills. Education must allow the fullest development of the personality in preparation for living a responsible life in a society. It must encourage freedom of choice. It should create an atmosphere which encourages competency and critical thinking. It is a set principle that any social formation requires for its proper functioning a group of intellectuals who produce ideas for its betterment. A major objective of the educational system of that society is to produce these types of intellectuals. Especially institutions of higher education are the cradle of ideas. A society without ideas or a society that remains parasitic on others for its ideas, none of them can remain free. Therefore the nurturing and development of institutions of higher education in any country is a condition for the freedom of its people.

Again, development of any society depends upon the quality of its education system. So the society must not be indifferent to the existence and nature of any of its education-system. Now, when the government of India had included the 'Right of Education' in the fundamental rights, so it is obligatory to the government to create a sufficient infra-structure to provide education to all its citizens. Here rise a question, at one hand RTE is included in the Constitution and on the other hand gradually education system is opened to the corporate, then what students got the right for only elementary education?

If the education system is an essential to the society building or nation building, then it is also clear that it must be society (nation) owned. At least the elementary and senior school level education necessarily be state owned and must be in an uniform curriculum. Again, as higher education institutions cradle ideas for society, so they must be society oriented not market oriented. A higher education system geared to the task of nation-building necessarily have certain characteristics. Firstly, it must be State-funded. There must have space for charities, philanthropic, initiatives and bequests. (38) Secondly, a higher education system oriented towards nation-building must not only be open to all but also make itself inclusive in a deliberate sense by drawing students and teachers from hitherto excluded and marginalized communities through affirmative action. (39) Lastly, a higher education system oriented towards 'nation-building', must always preserve dissent and democracy within the educational institutions so that it can support the behaviours of the society. (40)

At present, the market driven economy gradually changed the traditional meaning and means of education. Now faculties and administrators started to view themselves as providers and students as consumers. 'Knowledge' is 'commodity'. Social forces that contribute to the support of the system – governments, communities, parents and others, are now emerged as 'stake-holders', who can be expected to demand returns on their investments. (41) Within this framework, the question of accountability became purely a matter of finance. In these neo-liberal framework students as consumers can choose how to earn their degrees in a self – regulating manner. In present condition it appears that the higher education institutions have to fulfill the needs of the students, with the underlying objective of appeasing them. (42) This process converts the students from a learner to a consumer, manager and a commodity. The darkest side of this transformation is at the expense of developing a socially sensitive and concerned citizen which is crucial for nation – building. This pattern is not suitable for the countries like India.

Another emerging factor related with the condition of education is employability. However, it is neither wrong nor unexpected concern. Countries like India, where means of education are limited regarding its huge and poor population, this attitude for education seems not wrong. Actually the problem occurs when

this attitude becomes the sole concern of the education system and the role of education in 'democratic advance' gets related to imparting skills, which is not synonymous with education. (43)

Again one thing we should bear in our minds, education is the only commodity whose quality is produced in the classroom jointly by teachers and students. This happens on behalf of the society. (44) Students are not merely consumers. They should take part actively and contribute their best to the delivery of quality education through their passionate and active participation in the classroom and outside. The level of motivation and commitment of students and teachers matters a lot in achieving excellence at any level of education.

Another concern of education system in a market economy should be to prepare students for changing careers and also to prepare them for flexibility in the labour market. (45) The new government policy paved the way for the corporate sector in a huge and ever growing service industry in education. In this industry with huge global market students constitute resources for profit making. Now the students are consumers, teachers are service providers and the educational institutions organizers. (46) Now the teaching – learning process is no longer for the nation – building but a business for profit making. The basic essence of education- system to cater the demands and needs of society and nation is replaced by the profit making attitude.

As the Central Government in India, itself converted education as a commodity, then the buyers of this commodity can only be those who possess capital for purchasing. Neither the Central Government nor any State Government is ready to speak the truth about the conditions of the poor students. The states like Bihar, the general condition of education is alarming, none of the universities or the colleges, whether technical or general, have required number of teachers. The students are compelled to join private coaching institutes to get education. Now the emerging trend in the field of education is rather quite different than that was conceived by Swami Vivekananda or by Mahatma Gandhi. The new emerging scenario of higher education in India is increasingly being driven by the interests of trade in it rather trade advantage due to it. (47)

Education is considered the key to a holistic as well as sustainable development of any society or the nation. In India the pioneers of Indian Enlightenment and framers of the Indian constitution had demanded universal literacy as a basic of the freedom of all Indians. At present, education is presented as a commodity, where learners are buyers. A general tendency of capitalism and globalization is to commoditize education and the governments (both central and state) shamelessly supporting this new emerging trend. This new trend is destroying the basic thrust of education, 'to open up minds, to encourage questioning and reasoning and lastly to enhance the sole knowledge of individual which promotes his faith that is fundamentally antithetical to the building of a modern, secular, democratic and egalitarian society.' Vivekananda and Gandhi visualized education as a tool to upgrade the humanitarian and harmonious feelings in the Indian society. But the government policies are neglecting the fundamental characteristic of education in the discourse of universalizing education. At one hand the government speaks about the 'Right to Education' as the fundamental right and at the same time it allows the corporate 'to invest' in education and 'to make profit' in the name of quality education. The situation became worse, as neither the government is interested in 'to invest' in the spread of education and nor to enhance the quality of education. The corporate are interested only to invest in those fields of education which are easy saleable and much profit giving. The study of arts, culture, society, history, philosophy and languages are neglected, which is hazardous for any 'living culture' or 'living nation'. The ideas and dreams of Swamiji and Mahatmaji are lost anywhere in the global market.

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