



EDUCATION: FROM VISION TO VENTURE

Dr. Mini Nanda¹

Abstract

This paper looks at education as a meaningful tool to empower the individual and society as a whole. This paper traces the legacy of great thinkers who have helped the institution of education to evolve. It pans the entire educational system across the globe beginning from Maria Montessori to political leaders and thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore to the philosophy and pedagogical thoughts of Paulo Freire.

Education must empower both the individual and society, to deeper growth and higher level of consciousness. Education that stems from an inclusive holistic vision can venture into greater scope for an egalitarian, humane society.

The challenges to this goal are many. Sometimes we lose sight of the path and education gets mired in mere rote, insipid learning, effete and indifferent curriculum and many more pitfalls. T.S. Eliot bemoans this loss, when he says:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to dust.

We have to incorporate our ancient knowledge systems, which include indigenous cultures and aspirations. Our syllabus needs regular upgrading and remoulding, it cannot be static for decades. Knowledge is dynamic, it grows, it has to incorporate the demographic and social compositions, the language and the location. Education has to make our society and the world at large livable, free from inherent biases and prejudices, and tethered to caste and class. All these dehumanize the social system and create a culture of oppression and domination. Milton had rightly sought this vision, when the blind poet said, "Illumine what in me is dark, what is low, raise and support".

Today we have a vast majority of youth, educated but unemployable. According to the National Skill Report 2014, the study which made an assessment of one lac students, found only 34% employable. In early 2006 the state-run National Knowledge Commission had highlighted this silent crisis in higher education.

A report by the UN education agency had said that 250 million children of the world's 650 million children are unable to read, 54 million are not attending school. This global learning crisis is mainly caused by a lack of well trained teachers. In India the employment rate of youth in rural areas is highest in Kerala, Assam and Uttarakhand. For urban India, the highest unemployment rate is in Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala and Assam. As was stated earlier, the challenges are many, but as the British playwright Tom Stoppard has rightly observed, every exit is an entry somewhere else. We have to create conditions, through vision, policy plan and

1. Associate Professor, University of Rajasthan

determination to reverse the situation. Turn this vast force into a productive, creative, skilled one. Political leaders, with visionary insight are already talking about investing from their constituency development fund into the welfare of these young people: training them, paying for their training, equipping them for jobs and consequent better lives.

Remember the American folk musician and activist who died recently—Pete Seeger. He said that the key to the future of the world is finding optimistic stories and letting them be known. Some extraordinary individuals who strove to change the world are Maria Montessori. Maria Montessori, born on 31st August 1870, led a life of such brilliance that it illumined the lives of innumerable children all over the world and continues to do so. In the end of the 19th century, she was the first woman to gain entry into a Medical College in Rome, when such an education was unthinkable for a girl not only in Italy, where she was born, but in the whole of Europe. Overcoming unimaginable odds both at home and in college, she qualified as a medical doctor in 1896. This was not the end but the beginning of a new life for her. Working in Rome's psychiatrist clinic, she saw little children along with adults, kept in prison-like, inhuman conditions, subjected to cruelty and utter neglect. The more Maria studied these mentally challenged children, the more she disagreed with their treatment. She developed new techniques to teach these children to bring them back to the mainstream society, infusing confidence, trust and dignity in them. For this she developed a dedicated team of teachers and trained them. In fact she gave up her medical practice and travelled to London and Paris to study the condition and treatment of such children. From here she cast a wider net and focused on general education for all children. She enrolled as a student yet again in 1901, the beginning of the 20th century, to study Philosophy and Psychology. She observed that a teacher's task is not to test the student but to assist so that mental activities do not tire you, they fulfill you. Her mission was to create a conducive atmosphere for a holistic development of all children, to create compassion and inculcate moral values, self-respect and respect of the others. In 1939 she came to India to train around 300 teachers from the country in Chennai. When the Second World War broke out, she continued with her work and met the Mahatma, Tagore and Nehru here. In 1944 she also travelled to Sri Lanka and trained teachers. The encounter with a simple woman, who almost gave up her medical studies because of ostracism at home, society and college and an infant beggar boy playing in the dirt, happily and unconcerned proved to be a moment of reckoning for her.

All these takes us to the sage words of the Mahatma, who said that real education consists in drawing the best out of oneself and there can be no better book than the book of humanity? Gandhi believed that education can play an effective role in developing a wholesome human personality, capable of resisting war, violence, injustice and oppression and build a social order wherein humans can live in peace and harmony with others. Gandhi set up the Phoenix Settlement in Natal in 1904, inspired by a single reading of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, a work that extolled the virtues of a simple life of love, labour and dignity of human beings. The second experiment in community living was the establishment of the Tolstoy farm between 1908-1914. Both settlements propelled by the energy of the Satyagrah philosophy. It served as a heterogeneous microcosm of men, women and children, which was the training ground for the macrocosm movement in India, which led to the liberation of the motherland and started the legacy of an ideology of Truth and non-violence that continues to inspire and create ripples in political and academic circles in the world today.

The anthems of India and Bangladesh resound in the subcontinent and they too are a micro intercultural legacy of Rabindra Nath Tagore, the poet. While a subcontinental and regional celebration of his contribution to a free India takes on the status of veneration, it is his unique imagination as an artist and educationist that endures in his intercultural relationships, personal and public.

In 1890, Tagore moved from Jorasanko, the heritage mansion at Calcutta to the vast estate in Shialdah, a region now part of Bangladesh. His wife and children joined him in 1895. He travelled by barge throughout the rural region among the Padma River's sandy estuaries, collecting rents from tenants, learning the villagers' ways, working in the rice fields, watching the fishermen with their nest, visiting school children. Tagore had an organic capacity of bridging the gulf between imagination and the workshop where art could be manifested, in a triumph of collective and individual self expression. He established first the school at Shanti Niketan in 1901 and later in 1908 the Vishwa Bharati University and Shri Niketan for self-reliance and other artistic accomplishments.

Martha C. Nussbaum writes eloquently that Tagore, in addition to being a Noble Laureate in 1913, also had world class gifts as a composer, choreographer, visual artist, philosopher and pioneer in education. Tagore did not like any school he attended as he detested rote learning. Tagore's ethos was to attain fullness as human beings. Knowledge makes us powerful, but one attains fullness only by sympathy. The education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but is severely repressed. Tagore's Shanti Niketan School set out to change all that. He described his pedagogy as Socratic. Particularly keen to empower women, he focused on dance as an avenue of expression. Among the most gifted of the student dancers was Amita Sen, Amartya Sen's mother Amartya Sen himself studied there. Amita Sen has written glowingly about the liberating effect Tagore's deeply emotional choreography had on hearts and moods of timid, shy girls. He gave each student not just free education but a life-long lesson in self-reliance and the power of one in his songs "Eklo Cholo Re". "Walk Alone."

If no one says a thing, Oh you unlucky soul,
If faces are turned away if all go on fearing-
Then open up your heart,
You speak up what's on your mind, you speak up alone.

Nussbaum says that within of children growing up on that song, one can see a spirit of dissent and challenge that strengthens the backbone of India's democracy even to the present day. Tagore's university, now run by the state, has become like every other university; the school is rejected by ambitious parents, turning it into a museum of Tagorenama, while now the glory of a parent is the admission of a child to one of the institutes of technology and management. Let us follow Tagore, Nussbaum writes, and open up our hearts, educating not for herdlike conformity, but for sympathy and reasoned argument.

These very qualities of empathy and inclusiveness were learnt by Paulo Freire (1921-1997) the Brazilian educator and philosopher in his early life. Coming from a deprived background, he experienced hunger and poverty which severely affected his ability to learn, not his will or intelligence. His early life of playing football with other poor children shaped his concerns for the underprivileged and helped to construct his critical pedagogy for the significant application of his theories. He got the first opportunity in 1962 when 300 sugarcane workers were taught to read and write in just 45 days. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in Portuguese in 1965 was later published in 1970 in English and Spanish, vastly expanding its reach. In many ways Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* may be read as an extension of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), where Fanon emphasized the need for education which was simultaneously new and modern and anti-colonial. Freire wanted pedagogy to liberate the oppressed and restore their humanity back to them. He said, "The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for redemption".

Freire attacked "The Banking Concept" of education where the student is viewed as an empty account to be filled by the teacher, which he felt controlled thinking and action and inhibited their creative potential. The basic critique was not new, Rousseau's conception of child as an active learner was already a step away from *Tabula Rasa*, basically the same as banking concept.

Thinkers like John Dewey, who in turn could have known about Tagore's initiatives, Dewey was strongly critical of transmission of mere facts as education. Dewey strove for education as a mechanism for social change. Freire upgraded the system to critical pedagogy.

According to Freire, the system of dominant structures creates a culture of silence that instills a negative, suppressed self-image into the oppressed. The learner must develop a critical consciousness in order to recognize that this culture of silence is created to oppress the weak, and eliminate the possibility of developing a language of critique.

Education must give voice back to the silent, create equal opportunity of learning and instill values, which will counter the forces of evil in the world. This vision must be followed by the venture. It is not enough to stare up the stairs, we must also step up the stairs.

Works Cited

Misra, Sanjeeva. *Maria Montessori: Jeevani Evam Shiksha- Darshan*.

Naidu, Vayu. "It's All in the Imagination". *The Hindu*. Sunday. August 11, 2013.

Nussbaum, Martha C. "What We Could Learn from India and Korea". www.newrepublic.com/articles/politics/76997/what-we-could-learn-Inda-and -korea-education-poverty. Web.9.6.13

Thanvi. Ramesh, Churu & Kolkatta: Montessori Bal Shikshan Samiti & Gijubhai Foundation 2008. Print.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *My Life in My Words* Ed. Uma Das Gupta. Penguin India, 2006.