

The Aim of Higher Education

a monograph

by Dr. Kavita A. Sharma

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INTRODUCTION

The first question that we need to ask ourselves is why should any individual be educated at all. One possible answer could be, for the progress of society. What is progress? It is the constant effort to improve human conditions. The Mother tells us that two tendencies are seen here,

“...which seem to be contrary but which ought to complement each other so that progress may be achieved. The first advocates a collective reorganisation, something which could lead to the effective unity of mankind. The other declares that all progress is made first by the individual and insists that individual should be given the conditions in which he can progress freely. Both are equally true and necessary, and our effort should be directed along both these lines at once. For collective progress and individual progress are interdependent. Before the individual can take a leap forward, at least a little of the preceding progress must have been realised in the collectivity. A way must therefore be found so that these two types of progress may proceed side by side.

It is in answer to this urgent need that Sri Aurobindo conceived the scheme of his international university....”¹

But what is the aim of this progress? Sri Aurobindo points out,

“Modern society has discovered a new principal of survival, progress, but the aim of that progress it has never discovered, – unless the aim is always more knowledge, more equipment, convenience and comfort, more enjoyment, a greater and still greater complexity of the social economy, a more and more cumbrous opulent life. But these things must lead in the end where the old led, for they are only the same things on a larger scale; they lead in a circle, that is to say, nowhere, they do not escape from the cycle of birth, growth, decay and death, they do not really find the secret of self-prolongation by constant

self-renewal which is the principle of immortality, but only seem for a moment to find it by the illusion of a series of experiments of which each ends in disappointment. That so far has been the nature of modern progress. Only in its new turn inwards, towards a greater subjectivity now only beginning is there a better hope; for by that turning it may discover that the real truth of man is to be found in his soul..."²

This is not to bring back the religions of the old societies in a new garb and terminology. For them the individual's quest for salvation was a release from the burden of life on earth. Sri Aurobindo's progress is evolution on earth itself, the possibility of a divine life in a divine body.

"Human society itself never seized on the discovery of the soul as a means for the discovery of the law of its own being or on a knowledge of the soul's true nature and need and its fulfilment as the right way of terrestrial perfection."³

This implies a complete change of outlook for the whole society has to be constructed around the human soul and its need to evolve towards a higher consciousness, thereby the consciousness of the society.

AIM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education then must necessarily have two broad aims: “a collective aspect and an... individual aspect”⁴. The collective aspect requires, as Pavitra (P. B. Saint-Hilaire) points out, that an individual be turned into a good citizen who has harmonious relations with other members of the community, who is useful to society and who fulfils his obligations as a good citizen. The individual aspect demands that through education, he develops a strong and healthy body, builds up his character, attains self-mastery and gets opportunities to discover and develop his natural abilities harmoniously. Both aspirations are justified. The individual and society can grow together helping each other but such harmony has rarely been achieved because the mind, with an imperfect vision of things, always tends to emphasize one over the other.⁵

THE COLLECTIVE ASPECT

The collective aspect of education is the societal aim and, as Pavitra points out, it has overshadowed the individual aim:

“...the problem of education becomes almost exclusively: how to fit the individual to the need of society?

This is evidenced by the change we witness in the education programmes in answer to the growing demand for scientists, engineers and technicians, and by the numerous institutions that are created to satisfy this demand...

By the need of society is meant what society thinks it requires. Temporary necessities may arise (war, new discoveries, geographical or political changes) which may for some time reflect themselves on education. But it is clear that the formulated requirements of any society, as far as education is concerned, depend on the aim of human life as it is conceived largely by the ruling class at the time. It may be general culture and adornment of life – artists of all sorts will be encouraged and become the favourites of the princes. It may be military aggrandizement and adventure – then soldiers and sailors will be needed. It may be industrialization as a means towards material well being – the need will be for engineers and technicians.”⁶

HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

The foundations of higher education in India were laid by Macaulay who had a twofold aim: one, to produce cheap clerical labour to serve the needs of the colonial empire; second, to create a class of people who would perpetuate the legacy of the empire by looking down upon their own cultural values and upholding those of the British ruling class. As Amilcar Cabral points out, the experience of colonial domination shows that the coloniser provokes and develops the cultural alienation of a part of the population by the so-called assimilation of indigenous elites distancing them from the popular masses. As a result, a section of the people assimilate the colonisers' mentality, considers itself culturally superior to its own people and looks down upon their cultural values.⁷

This is the situation of the majority of colonised intellectuals and their position is consolidated by increase in social privileges.

The University system set up by the colonisers for their own ends has ironically been expanded and strengthened rather than being dismantled in independent India. From 20 universities and 500 colleges at the time of independence, there has been over a twentyfold increase in the number of colleges and over twenty-five time increase in student enrollment. As of now there are over 172 universities and about 11,000 colleges. Seven million students are enrolled in these institutions. 88% of all college and university students are in undergraduate course, 9.8% being at the Master's level and a very small proportion, i.e. 0.9% in research. Only 1.4% are enrolled in diploma or certificate courses. 88% of all undergraduate students and 55% of all postgraduate students are in affiliated colleges while the remaining are in the universities and their constituent colleges. In the case of diploma/certificate course, too, university departments and

university colleges have an edge over affiliated colleges. Since the majority of students are in colleges, the foundations of higher education are laid there and their functioning have far reaching implications. Of the undergraduate students, the highest number is pursuing liberal arts and commerce in colleges of uneven standards. The colonial system of education is mechanically churning out unemployable graduates with poor skills and little development of mind or personality.⁸

Why has this happened? Because no sincere thought has been given to what was sought to be achieved through higher education. Even before independence, Sri Aurobindo had voiced the disillusionment and explained its cause:

“All that appears to be almost unanimously agreed on is that the teaching in the existing schools and universities has been bad in kind and in addition denationalizing, degrading and impoverishing to the national mind, soul and character because it is overshadowed by a foreign hand and foreign in aim, method, substance and spirit.”⁹

At the time of independence India lacked every kind of material prosperity. There was an immense desire to catch up with Western standards of living as soon as possible. Factories and dams were hailed as the new temples of India. In the predominance of the external, the internal was neglected. Disregard of individual growth by the education system must inevitably lead to failure even in the collective or societal aims sought to be achieved. As Sri Aurobindo tells us,

“...there are three things which have to be taken into account in a true and living education, the man, the individual in his commonness and in his uniqueness, the nation or people and universal humanity. It follows that that alone will be a true and living education which helps to bring out to full advantage, makes ready for the full purpose and scope of human life all that is in the individual man, and which at the same time helps him to enter into his right relation with the life, mind and soul of the people

to which he belongs and with that great total life, mind and soul of humanity of which he himself is a unit and his people or nation a living, a separate and yet inseparable member.”¹⁰

Thus, the education of the individual is very important because the individual is the building block of society, nation and humanity.

THE INDIVIDUAL ASPECT

The education of an individual is not a matter of stuffing his mind with facts. As Nolini Kanta Gupta points out,

“...the word ‘education’ literally means, “to bring out”. Plato pointed to the same truth when he said that education is remembrance. You remember what is embedded or secreted within, you bring to the light, the light of your physical mind, what you have within, what you already possess in your being and inner consciousness. Acquisition is not education.

True education is growth of consciousness. It is consciousness that carries the light and the power of light.”¹¹

Consciousness is the substratum of all existence. As Sri Aurobindo points out,

“...all that exists or can exist in this or any other universe can be rendered into terms of consciousness; there is nothing that cannot be known. This knowing need not always be a mental knowledge. For the greater part of existence is either above or below the mind, and mind can know only indirectly what is above or what below it. But the one true and complete way of knowing is by direct knowledge.”¹²

Although the mind is usually the chief concern of the educator, since so much knowledge is outside the pale of the mind, all parts of a human being need to be developed in order to experience direct knowledge. Such an education, which takes into account the entire complexity of man’s nature is ‘integral education’. Integral education recognizes the relationship between the individual and the collective as neither can be denied. Sri Aurobindo says,

“In Europe and in India, respectively, the negation of the materialist and the refusal of the ascetic have sought to assert themselves as the sole truth and to dominate the conception of life. In India, if the result has been a great heaping up of the treasurers of the spirit – or of some of them – it has also been a great bankruptcy of life; in Europe, the fullness of riches and the triumphant mastery of this world’s powers and possessions have progressed towards an equal bankruptcy in the things of the spirit. Nor has the intellect, which sought the solution of all problems in the one term of matter, found satisfaction in the answer that it has received.”¹³

Integral education seeks a unity between the two and hence seeks to develop,

“...five principal aspects relating to five principal activities of the human being; the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual. Usually these phases of education succeed each other in a chronological order following the growth of the individual. This, however, does not mean that one should replace the other but that all must continue, completing each other, till the end of life.”¹⁴

Each of these parts has been defined and has its own law of growth and fulfilment. The spirit remains unchanged as it is beyond space and time both as we try to educate the other parts of our being.

“...we shall perceive that the truth we seek is made up of four major aspects: Love, Knowledge, Power and Beauty. These four attributes of the Truth will spontaneously express themselves in our being. The psychic will be the vehicle of true and pure love, the mind that of infallible knowledge, the vital will manifest an invincible power and strength and the body will be the expression of a perfect beauty and a perfect harmony.”¹⁵

EDUCATION OF THE PARTS OF THE BEING

The question then arises, how are these parts of the being to be educated. While detailed guidelines have been given, the underlying process is one of self awareness, of becoming conscious and aspiring to perfection. As Sri Aurobindo points out,

“Consciousness is made up of two elements, awareness of self and things and forces and conscious-power. Awareness is the first thing necessary, you have to be aware of things in the right consciousness, in the right way, seeing them in their truth; but awareness by itself is not enough. There must be a Will and a Force that make the consciousness effective. Somebody may have the full consciousness of what has to be changed, and what has to go and what has to come in its place, but for want of a right awareness may be unable to apply it in the right way at the right time.”¹⁶

Thus two things are essential for true education: Awareness and Will.

“To work for your perfection, the first step is to become conscious of yourself, of the different parts of your being and their respective activities. You must learn to distinguish these different parts one from another, so that you may become clearly aware of the origin of the movements that occur in you, the many impulses, reactions and conflicting wills that drive you to action. It is an assiduous study which demands much perseverance and sincerity. For man’s nature, especially his mental nature, has a spontaneous tendency to give a favourable explanation for everything he thinks, feels, says and does. It is only by observing these movements with great care, by bringing them, as it were, before the tribunal of our highest ideal, with a sincere will to submit to its judgement, that we can hope to form in ourselves a discernment that never errs.”¹⁷

The question arises on how the will is to be developed:

“Once there is honest self-awareness, the will has to be strengthened to make a sustained effort: “the will can be cultivated and developed just as the muscles can by methodical and progressive exercise. You must not shrink from demanding the maximum effort of your will even for a thing that seems of no importance, for it is through effort that its capacity grows, gradually acquiring the power to apply itself even to the most difficult things. What you have decided to do, you must do, whatever the cost, even if you have to renew your effort over and over again any number of times in order to do it. You will be strengthened by the effort and you will only have to choose with discernment the goal to which you will apply it.”¹⁸

Such an approach can be applied to all fields of study. For example, a student of commerce will have to apply his honest awareness to how well he knows his subject or is it only a facile cramming for the examination. If the latter he must use his will to truly understand it no matter how much effort it requires and to make it a part of himself. This he must do even if the cramming would have got him the required marks.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AND THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING

Integral education, then, is really a synthesis of two approaches towards education: the traditional spiritual one and the modern rational one. The teacher in this system does not lay down the law but works as a facilitator. As Sri Aurobindo says,

“...the wise Teacher will not seek to impose himself or his opinions on the passive acceptance of the receptive mind; he will throw in only what is productive and sure as a seed which will grow under the divine fostering within. He will seek to awaken much more than to instruct; he will aim at the growth of the faculties and the experiences by a natural process and free expansion. He will give a method as an aid, as a utilizable device, not as an imperative formula or a fixed routine and he will be on his guard against any turning of the means into a limitation, against the mechanizing process.”¹⁹

Thus a teacher is not an instructor who has to be passively and unquestioningly followed. Teaching becomes in integral education a shared adventure, a participatory process.

This is in keeping with the three principles of teaching enumerated by Sri Aurobindo:

“The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught. The teacher is not an instructor or taskmaster, he is a helper and a guide. His business is to suggest and not to impose. He does not actually train the pupil’s mind, he only shows him how to perfect his instruments of knowledge and helps and encourages him in the process. He does not impart knowledge to him, he

shows him how to acquire knowledge for himself. He does not call forth the knowledge that is within; he only shows him where it lies and how it can be habituated to rise to the surface. ...

“The second principle is that the mind has to be consulted in its own growth. The idea of hammering the child into the shape desired by the parent or teacher is a barbarous and ignorant superstition. It is he himself who must be induced to expand in accordance with his own nature. There can be no greater error than for the parent to arrange beforehand that his son shall develop particular qualities, capacities, ideas, virtues, or be prepared for a prearranged career. To force the nature to abandon its own *dharma* is to do it permanent harm, mutilate its growth and deface its perfection. It is a selfish tyranny over a human soul and a wound to the nation: which loses the benefit of the best that a man could have given it and is forced to accept instead something imperfect and artificial, second-rate, perfunctory and common. Every one has in him something divine, something his own, a chance of perfection and strength in however small a sphere which God offers him to take or refuse. The task is to find it, develop it and use it. The chief aim of education should be to help the growing soul to draw out that in itself which is best and make it perfect for a noble use.

“The third principle of education is to work from the near to the far, from that which is to that which shall be. The basis of a man’s nature is almost always, in addition to his soul’s past, his heredity, his surroundings, his nationality, his country, the soil from which he draws sustenance, the air which he breathes, the sights, sounds, habits to which he is accustomed. They mould him not the less powerfully because insensibly, and from that then we must begin. We must not take up the nature by the roots from the earth in which it must grow or surround the mind with images and ideas of a life which is alien to that in which it must physically move. A free and natural growth is the condition of genuine development. The past is our foundation, the present our material, the future our aim and summit.”²⁰

SETTING UP A CENTRE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The challenge that arises is how these principles of integral education can be translated into structures of an institution of higher education. It is not possible to outline all the contours of such an institution but some indications can be given. The physical structure itself of the institution would have to be aesthetic embodying the aspiration for cleanliness, order and beauty. The pivotal role would be that of the teachers. In addition to academic excellence, they would need to develop some essential qualities, as The Mother says:

“Teachers who are not perfectly calm, who do not have an endurance that never fails, and a quietude which nothing can disturb, who have no self-respect – those who are like that will get nowhere... One must have a perfect attitude to be able to exact a perfect attitude from the students. You cannot ask anyone to do what you don't do yourself. That is a rule.

Those who succeed as teachers here – I don't mean an outer, artificial and superficial success, but becoming truly good teachers – this means that they are capable of making an inner progress of impersonalisation, of eliminating their egoism, controlling their movements, capable of a clear sightedness, an understanding of others and never failing patience.”²¹

Thus, the institution must provide structures to enable both outward and inward growth of teachers.

The teachers must necessarily work with students. The admission of students cannot be done on the basis of marks alone. While academic criteria will have to be

met, they will also have to be tested at the time of admission for qualities of self awareness, reflection, sincerity and aspiration for truth, perfection and excellence, the best that can be achieved through true honesty of purpose and will.

Again, the very study of subjects will have a different orientation. The aim cannot be mere marks but a true understanding of the subject. If the mind has to be consulted in its own progress, the system will allow the student to explore various areas of study before adopting one. Emphasis on project work, written work, experiential techniques will facilitate exploration of the subject and experiential learning. The examination system will need to be flexible in both time and mode to encourage true understanding rather than rote work.

Programmes would need to be developed to teach concentration, positive thinking and values, the simultaneous habit of meticulous observation and analysis combined with the enthusiasm of aspiring to new ideas. Meditation and self-awareness courses would have to become part of a student's training.

The subjects of study in such an institution will of course, have to be determined according to what the institution wishes to specialize in but always remembering the needs of the individual student. It might be useful to examine the various systems of university education prevalent in different countries of the world like U.K., U.S.A., France, Germany, Singapore and China but the system should be evolved keeping the needs of students in India in mind. Any system that is not of "truly national character" will not move towards its highest aspirations. Since the term "national character" is so fraught with controversy, it is worthwhile to see what Sri Aurobindo means by it:

"Man has not been seen by the thought of India as a living body developed by Physical nature which has evolved certain vital propensities, an ego, a mind and a reason, an animal of the genus homo and in our case of the

species homo indicus, whose whole life and education must be turned towards a satisfaction of these propensities under the government of a trained mind and reason and for the best advantage of the personal and the national ego. It has not been either the turn of her mind to regard man pre-eminently as a reasoning animal, or let us say, widening the familiar definition, a thinking, feeling and willing natural existence, a mental son of physical Nature and his education as a culture of the mental capacities, or to define him as a political, social and economic being and his education as a training that will fit him to be an efficient, productive and well disciplined member of the society and the State. All these are no doubt aspects of the human being and she has given them a considerable prominence subject to her large vision, but they are outward things, parts of the instrumentation of his mind, life and action, not the whole of the real man.

India has seen always in man the individual a soul, a portion of the Divinity enwrapped in mind and body, a conscious manifestation in Nature of the universal self and spirit. Always she has distinguished and cultivated in him a mental, an intellectual, an ethical, dynamic and practical, an aesthetic and hedonistic, a vital and physical being, but all these have been seen as powers of a soul that manifests through them and grows with their growth, and yet they are not all the soul, because at the summit of its ascent it arises to something greater than them all, into a spiritual being, and it is in this that she has found the supreme manifestation of the soul of man and his ultimate divine manhood, his *paramartha* and highest *purusartha*. And similarly India has not understood by the nation or people an organised State or an armed and efficient community well prepared for the struggle of life and putting all at the service of the national ego, – that is only the disguise of iron armour which masks and encumbers the national Purusha, – but a great communal soul and life that has appeared in the whole and has manifested a nature of its own and a law of that nature, a Swabhava and Swadharma, and embodied it in its intellectual, aesthetic, ethical, dynamic, social and political forms and culture. And equally then our cultural conception of humanity must be in accordance with her ancient vision of the universal manifesting in the human race, evolving through life and

mind but with a high ultimate spiritual aim, – it must be the idea of the spirit, the soul of humanity advancing through struggle and concert towards oneness, increasing its experience and maintaining a needed diversity through the varied culture and life motives of its many peoples, searching for perfection through the development of the powers of the individual and his progress towards a diviner being and life, but feeling out too though more slowly after a similar perfectibility in the life of the race.”²²

CONCLUSION

Real education then is the working of the spirit in the mind and body of both the individual and the nation. Education must serve collective as well as individual aims but without losing sight of the spiritual movement in both. As P. B. Saint-Hilaire points out,

“Education will embrace all knowledge in its scope, but will make the whole trend and aim and the pervading spirit not merely worldly efficiency, but self-developing and self finding. It will pursue physical and psychical science not in order merely to know the world and nature in her processes and to use them for material human ends, but to know through and in and under and over all things the Divine in the world and the ways of the spirit in its masks and behind them.”²³

- Dr. Kavita Sharma

ENDNOTES

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